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# FRONTLINE

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INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

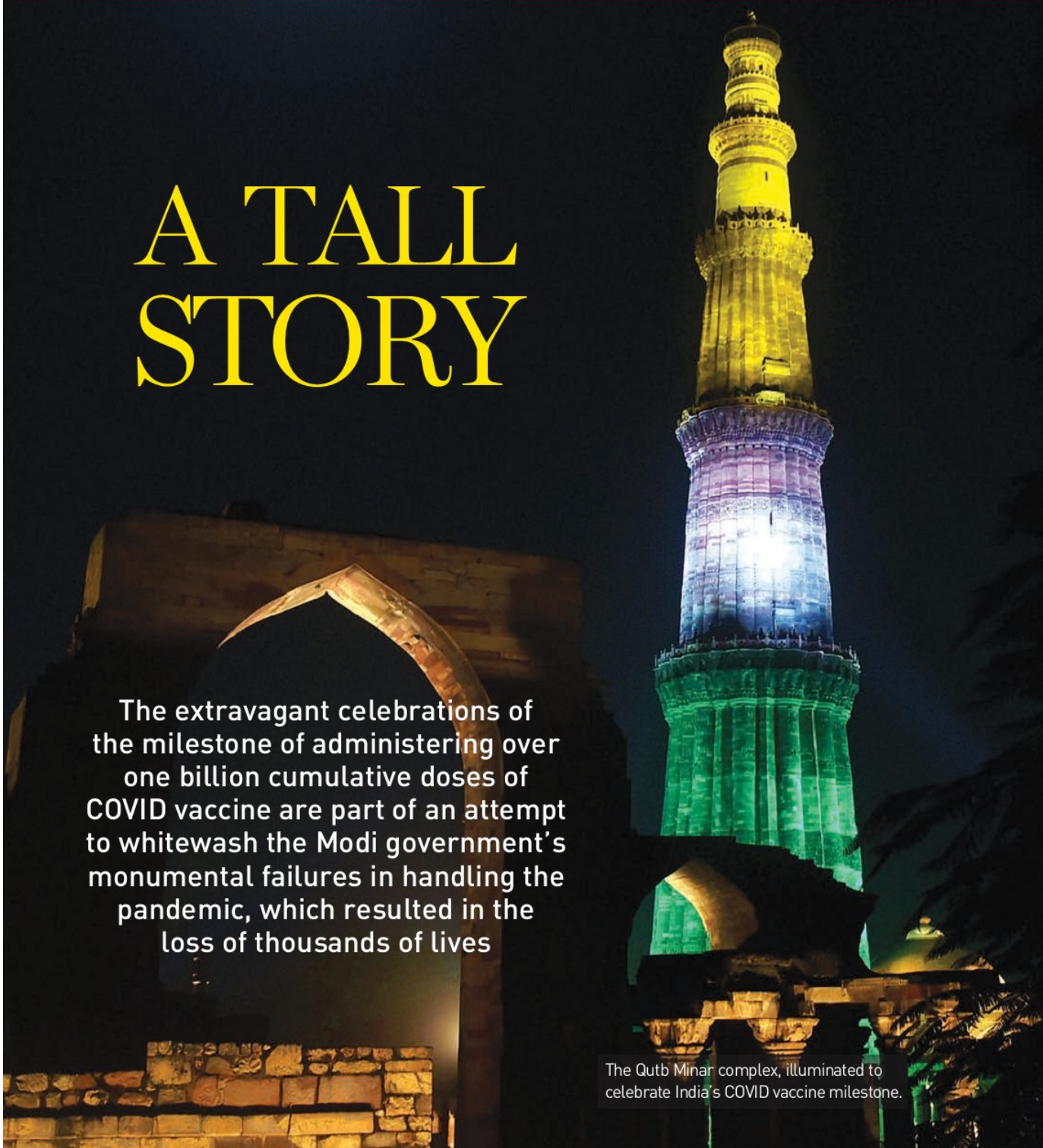
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## A TALL STORY

The extravagant celebrations of the milestone of administering over one billion cumulative doses of COVID vaccine are part of an attempt to whitewash the Modi government's monumental failures in handling the pandemic, which resulted in the loss of thousands of lives

The Qutb Minar complex, illuminated to celebrate India's COVID vaccine milestone.



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## COVER STORY

# GRAND COVER-UP



The Modi government's gloating over administering one billion cumulative doses of the COVID vaccine is designed to erase from public memory its **monumental failures in tackling the second wave** and ensuring a free, universal, equitable vaccination with foresight and better preparedness. BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

ADMINISTERING OVER ONE BILLION cumulative doses of COVID vaccine within nine months since the COVID vaccination campaign began on January 16 is no mean achievement in a country with a population of 1.38 billion and diverse logistical

difficulties. While it should make every citizen proud, the extravagant celebrations in the wake of reaching that landmark figure on October 21 were grossly misplaced and unwarranted. Given the manner in which the government went about it, the attempt obviously was to



# UP



**PEOPLE WEARING FACE MASKS** featuring Prime Minister Narendra Modi to mark the completion of 1 billion vaccine doses, in Ahmedabad on October 24.

use the occasion to launch a blitz campaign that would help to whitewash its monumental failures in the management of COVID-19 in the last 20 months, in particular the vaccination campaign.

As on date, India has reported around 34.2 million confirmed cases, which is next only to the numbers in the United States. The nearly 0.46 million reported COVID-related deaths, many analysts believe, is a gross underestimation. The actual number, according to a recent Canadian study, is six to seven times the official

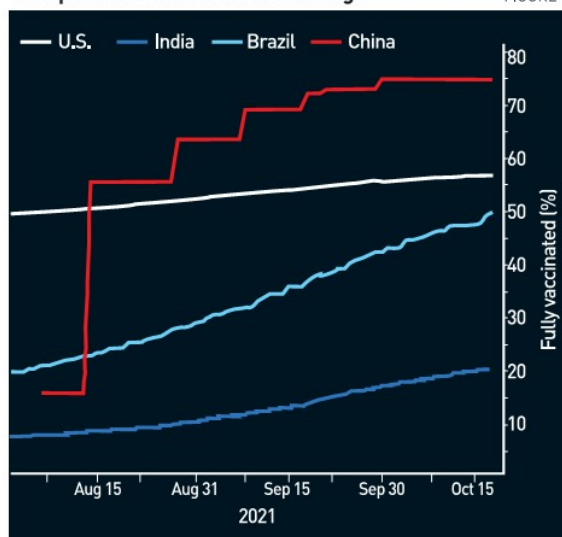
figure. Who, if not the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose praise the ruling party members are singing today, should be held answerable to all those thousands of families who lost their loved ones during the second wave of COVID (March-June) because of oxygen shortage and lack of intensive care unit (ICU) beds? These shortages were the result of the government's lack of foresight and preparedness.

"India scripts history," Modi tweeted on the day of the milestone. "We are witnessing the triumph of Indian science, enterprise and the collective spirit of 130 crore Indians." There was also the op-ed page article in several dailies, ostensibly penned by Modi himself, and the Prime Minister's 10th address to the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the misplaced emphasis on the "Made in India, Make in India" slogan. In none of his utterances, tweets or writings did Modi pause to refer to these unfortunate events that could have been avoided. Yes, the second wave was perhaps inevitable with the highly transmissible Delta variant spreading all over the country. But with better planning and upgrading of the existing health infrastructure and human resources, many of these deaths could have been avoided. No one but the government is to be blamed for this unforgettable countrywide tragedy that unfolded in the wake of the second wave.

Covishield, the Indian brand name for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine (AZD1222) developed by British scientists and manufactured and packaged in India under licence by the Serum Institute of India (SII), constitutes nearly 88 per cent of the vaccine doses distributed and administered in India. Covaxin accounts

**Comparative vaccination coverage**

FIGURE 1



Source: Bloomberg's COVID-19 vaccine tracker (China doesn't regularly report this figure)

for the remaining 12 per cent. To boast about “the triumph of Indian science” is a gross overstatement in this context.

Yes, the SII needs to be applauded for its entrepreneurship in being the first to secure licence and the contract to manufacture the vaccine in India. Without that effort, India’s COVID toll would have been far higher. We will return later to the problems with the development and production of the indigenous Covaxin, which is yet to obtain the Emergency Use Approval (EUA) from the World Health Organisation (WHO) even nine months after its approval by the Indian regulators, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) and the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI).

Not content with the Prime Minister’s own celebratory and self-congratulatory words, the government’s publicity cell worked more like an event management company rather than the public information arm of the administration that it is. Huge billboards and hoardings across many cities carried large images of Modi with “Thank You Modiji” displayed prominently on them.

Leaders and followers of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of various hues, including Union Minister of Power R.K. Singh, claimed wrongly on social media, Twitter in particular, that India was the first country in the world to achieve vaccine coverage of 1 billion and hailed “Modiji” for this stellar achievement. China achieved a total coverage of over 2.2 billion on the day when India reached 1 billion doses. More significantly, with a vaccination rate of over 10 million doses a day on a consistent basis, China has fully vaccinated nearly 80 per cent of its population, whereas India has fully vaccinated only about 21.5 per cent of its population as on date (Fig. 1).

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) released a “vaccine anthem”, a three-minute song by the singer Kailash Kher, along with an audio-visual, as part of the day’s celebration. The Archaeological Survey of India illuminated 100 monuments across the country, including the Red Fort, the Khajuraho complex, the Konark Sun temple and the Qutb Minar. Ships anchored in different ports of the country were made to hoot at a specified time and fully

vaccinated people were given free ropeway rides in Gujarat, Kerala and Uttarakhand. The fact that all this fanfare centred on Modi was orchestrated with an eye on the forthcoming Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh should not be lost on anyone, especially when vaccine allocation to the States in July was remarkably skewed in favour of Uttar Pradesh. The largest allocation (of both Covishield and Covaxin) was made to Uttar Pradesh, which in turn has resulted today in the highest dose administration there among all the States.

But, more pertinently, this excessive bragging by the government detracts from the fact that though nearly three-fourths of the adult population has received at least one dose, only a little over one-third has received both doses of the vaccine. In early May, former Union Minister Prakash Javadekar stated that the government had drawn up a blueprint for administering about 1.88 billion cumulative doses by the end of the year. The milestone figure of 1 billion doses is thus only a little over half of the government’s own target for the year end. This means a mammoth task lies ahead in the forthcoming two months. As we shall discuss later, in all likelihood, many millions will get fully vaccinated only by mid-2022.

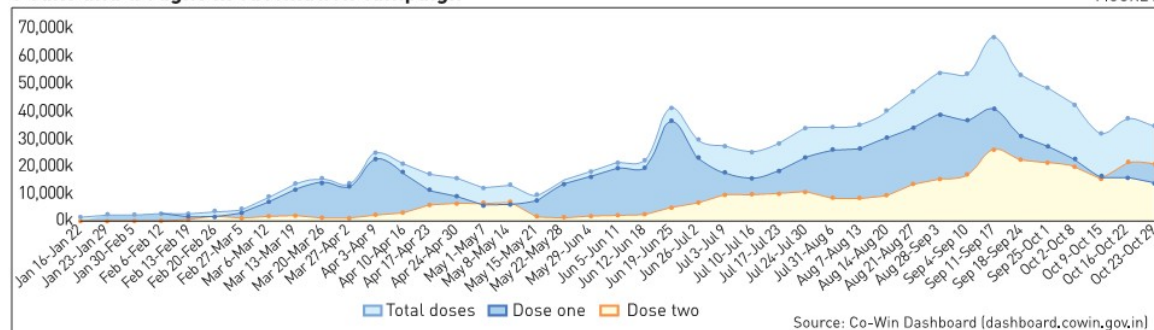
#### VACCINATION TRENDS: PEAKS AND TROUGHS

Figure 2 shows the vaccination trend since the campaign began till date. Peaks in April (the week ending April 9), in June (the week ending June 25) and then in September (the week ending September 17) can be seen. During the peaking week in April, a total of about 25 million doses were administered, giving a per day average of about 3.6 million jabs. But immediately after that, the pace dropped steadily to reach a minimum of about an average of 1.3 million shots a day in the week ending May 21. Then the pace picks up to peak again in the week ending June 25, giving a daily average of about 6 million shots, only to drop to a minimum rate of 3.5 million in the week ending July 16.

The peak in the week ending on September 17 is in part artificial. According to reliable sources, the daily vaccination rate was deliberately suppressed for some days before September 17, which was Prime Minister Modi’s 71st birthday, so that the milestone figure of recording 2 crore (20 million) vaccinations on that day could be announced with fanfare and celebration. This

Peaks and troughs in vaccination campaign

FIGURE 2







PIB/AFP

**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi greeting health workers during his visit to a vaccination centre at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi as India administered its one billionth COVID-19 vaccine dose on October 21.

was duly done. The rate fell immediately after to touch a minimum of about 4.5 million doses a day during the week of October 9-15 and then again increased slowly. Interestingly, during the week when cumulative vaccine doses administered touched the milestone figure of 1 billion doses, the average daily rate was only 5.3 million. In fact, in October the per day average was only 5.5 million jabs.

Had there been no peaks and valleys in the trend, and had there been a consistently increasing trend in the daily vaccination rate, the milestone of one billion could have been reached a few months earlier, say by August, and the drive would probably have been on course to fully vaccinate the nation by the year end. Unless the production is greatly ramped up, and the pace of coverage is increased significantly from the rate of around 6 million doses a day in October end, the gap between total vaccinations and the target for the year end will only grow bigger and bigger.

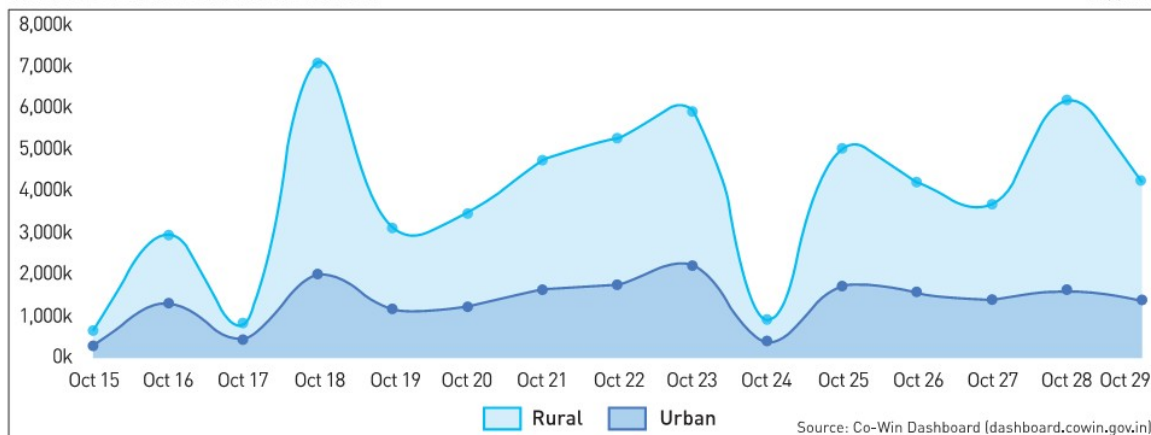
Mismatch between targets for vaccination coverage and availability has been a constant characteristic of the Indian COVID vaccination campaign. The waxing and

waning of the vaccination trend reflect irregular vaccine production and discrimination in doses supplied to the different States. Many States faced an acute shortage of vaccine supply in May. In April, the combined production capacity of the two vaccines produced in India was only about 2.5 million doses a day. It was projected to increase to about 3.8 million by May. Even if this had been attained—which, however, did not happen even until July end—the available doses would have been less than what would be required at the peak average rate reached in April.

But exacerbating the mismatch, the government on May 1 limited its centralised procurement to only half of the vaccine doses produced in the country and asked the States and private hospitals to procure the remaining half directly from the market. Most States lacked funds for direct procurement. The Centre's abrogation of its responsibility of providing vaccine to all was only increasing the already existing disparities in allocation and distribution of vaccines among States. This also contributed significantly to the shortfall in overall coverage. Fortunately, the Centre realised its mistake

Rural vs urban trend in vaccination

FIGURE 3



soon enough and on June 21 returned to centralised procurement of the entire production.

In early August, the government told Parliament that the total production capacity of Covishield was expected to increase from 110 million doses a month to over 120 million doses a month and that of Covaxin from 25 million to 58 million doses a month. In September, the SII claimed that it would be able to supply 220 million doses of Covishield to the government in October. It is not yet clear if the projections for Covaxin have been achieved.

#### BAD PLANNING

This failure to scale up production to meet the increasing demand happened primarily because of the issue of intellectual property rights on the vaccines and exclusive production licences for Covishield and the indigenous Covaxin held by SII and Bharat Biotech India Ltd. (BBIL) respectively. While the rights for Covishield production would have been dictated by the British-Swedish multinational AstraZeneca, the grant of exclusive manufacturing rights for Covaxin to BBIL until July defied logic.

Covaxin was developed by the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR), an arm of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the rights for Covaxin are equally shared by the government and BBIL. Given the scale of the pandemic, BBIL's own manufacturing capacity should have been ramped up right from the start with direct funding from the Centre, and the production should have been augmented by licensing State and Central public sector enterprises (PSEs) with idle capacities to meet the inevitable surge in demand.

This wisdom seems to have dawned on the Modi government only as late as August when it stated

that to augment the domestic COVID vaccine production capacity the government had extended support to BBIL and enabled technology transfer and licence for manufacture to three PSEs (one State and two Central) under "Mission COVID Suraksha". But these three units are yet to start production.

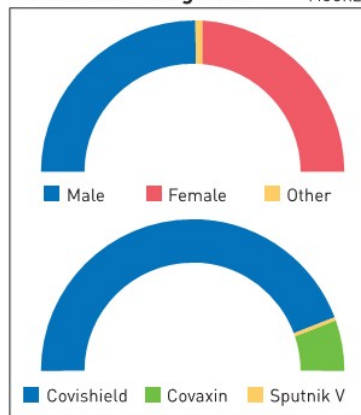
At the start of the phased vaccination campaign on January 16, the target set for Phase-1 was for the priority groups of health care workers (HCWs) and front-line workers (FWs). Even now, however, a substantial number in both the groups are yet to receive the second shot. Even after nine months of the vaccination drive, as of October 20, while 10.3 million HCWs had received their first dose, only 9.1 million had received both doses, a shortfall of 1.2 million.

On March 1, the campaign included the most vulnerable groups—people aged 60 and above and those above 45 with comorbidities. However, given the surge of the second wave and its devastating impact, on April 1 vaccination was thrown open to everyone above 45. According to official vaccination data, as of October 20, of the estimated 210 million in the 45-59 age group, 169 million have got their first dose and only 87.6 million (41 per cent of the total) are fully inoculated. In the most vulnerable group of 60 years and above, of the estimated 143 million, 106 million have had their first shot but only 62 million (43 per cent) have received the second jab as well. Clearly, there are significant shortfalls in both the groups even now.

If the primary aim of the vaccination drive was to minimise the risk of death from COVID, particularly in the wake of the second wave, the vulnerable group of 45 years and above should have been vaccinated fully by August. But this would be attainable only if the vaccination coverage rate of about 4

Vaccination categories

FIGURE 4







MANVENDRA VASHIST/PTI

**A BANNER PUBLICISING** the government's "free" vaccination drive and thanking Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in New Delhi on June 23.

million a day, which was achieved in early April, had been maintained. But as we discussed earlier, the pace slackened, particularly owing to production shortfall.

But even as the number of vaccinated people above 45 was falling below the target, the government on May 1, apparently under pressure from some States and other quarters, widened the vaccination coverage to include everyone above 18. Initially, this far less vulnerable 18-44 age group could get vaccinated only upon payment from the 50 per cent doses that the State governments and private hospitals would procure from the open market. However, from June 21, after the government went back to centralised procurement of all vaccine doses, the 18-44 age group had access to free vaccination at government centres as well.

The move to expand vaccination coverage to everyone aged 18 and above drew criticism from public health experts who argued that the goal of vaccinating all the people above 45 should have been achieved first in a situation where vaccines were in short supply. As we have seen, the more vulnerable above-45 group still remains to be fully vaccinated.

### SOME POSITIVES

A couple of positives have occurred, however, during the ongoing campaign. Vaccination among the rural population had lagged significantly behind the urban in the beginning. But in recent months, the rural population has emerged as the dominant fraction among the vaccinated, accounting for nearly 75 per cent of the coverage (see Figure 3).

Similarly, the gender divide was quite significant early on in the campaign. But now male and female fractions are almost equal: women are only marginally behind the men by about 30 million. As on date, men account for 546 million and women for 510 million doses (see Figure 4).

As we saw earlier, fully vaccinating (with two doses)

the total adult population requires the administration of 1.88 billion doses. A coverage of nearly 1.06 billion was achieved on October 30, showing an increase of 6 million in 10 days after the milestone of 1 billion reached on October 21.

The campaign has still to administer 820 million doses in the following two months, that is 410 million doses per month. This translates to about 14 million doses a day if the goal of fully vaccinating the entire adult population by the year end is to be achieved.

Now this would seem impossible to achieve given the average rate of vaccination at 6 million doses a day towards October end. The current rate suggests that as many as about 125 million adults will remain unvaccinated in January 2022. It is pertinent to also note that, given the recommended inter-dose gap of 12-16 weeks, people who get their first dose of Covishield in early November will have to wait at least until February 2022 for their second dose.

Those who get their first jab in December will have to wait until March-April 2022. The time frame can be reduced if either the rate picks up significantly above the current 6 million mark or if the inter-dose gap is shortened (this should be done only if the underlying science warrants it).

The above discussion, of course, assumes that adequate vaccine doses will be available over the next two months. But that does not seem to be the case as the current production capacity of Covishield is only about half of what is required per month to meet the target. Covaxin's production capacity still appears to be stagnant at around 25 million doses a month. The uptake of Russian Sputnik V, the other vaccine approved by the CDSCO, has so far been only about 1 million doses. The other potential vaccine candidates of Zydus Cadilla and Bio E are yet to get the CDSCO/DCGI nod and go into production.

### APPARENT SURPLUS

Interestingly, however, even though the numbers indicate that there should be a shortage of vaccines even with the current significantly increased rate of production of Covishield, nearly 127.4 million doses remain unutilised with the States and Union Territories, according to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare data. From the days of acute shortage in April and May, today there seems to be a surplus. But this surplus is only an apparent one, given the country's demography, and there is an unmet demand in principle.

So why is there no uptake of these unutilised doses? The bottleneck would seem to be an aspect of the campaign itself which is preventing the coverage from being upped from the current rate. Is it the lack of human resources or is it a delivery chain problem? Is it vaccine hesitancy among the population? The effect of waning COVID-19 incidence? Or is it a problem with the management of the vaccination campaign itself? Only the Health Ministry can possibly answer. □



# A milestone, and miles to go

India must study the mistakes it made in the process of achieving the 100 crore doses milestone and **review the performance of its vaccination drive**, derive lessons and prepare for the period ahead rather than indulge in premature political celebration or commemoration. BY **CHANDRAKANT LAHARIYA**

BY THE END OF OCTOBER, AROUND 700 CRORE COVID-19 vaccine shots had been administered globally, which included 223 crore shots by China and around 105 crore shots in India. As the vaccine doses administered are dependent on the population size of a country, only China and India are expected to administer 100 crore or more shots.

On October 21, India became the second country in the world to administer 100 crore vaccine shots. India's vaccination drive, which started on January 16, has witnessed more challenges than successes. Therefore, the symbolic milestone of 100 crore shots signifies that India crossed the halfway mark of 188 crore doses it had set for itself to be achieved by December. Yet, it is a reminder that the target of full vaccination for all adults is far away as only 31 per cent of the eligible population has received both shots and 45 per cent has received just one shot. At the time of administration of 100 crore shots, approximately 24 per cent of the eligible adult population was yet to receive its first shot.

Milestones are important to celebrate and to acknowledge the efforts and contribution of vaccine scientists, manufacturers, programme managers, health facilities and their staff, vaccinators and female health workers in villages who did door-to-door campaign to motivate people to get vaccinated. However, we should not be waiting for such milestones to appreciate any of them. It is equally important that this milestone is utilised to review the performance of the vaccination drive, derive lessons and prepare for the period ahead.

## HISTORY OF VACCINATION IN INDIA

India has a more than two-century-old history of vaccination. The first shot of smallpox vaccination in India was administered in Bombay on June 14, 1802. In the following years, vaccination efforts increased. In the 1890s, a laboratory in Shillong became the first unit to start pro-



RITU RAJ KONWAR



ducing smallpox vaccine lymph. Some of the early vaccine trials in India started in the 1830s. However, one of the first major trials conducted was on the cholera vaccine in 1893. Clinical trials on other vaccines such as typhoid and rabies were completed successfully by the late 19th and early 20th century. With the plague outbreak in 1896, the world's first plague vaccine was developed in India in 1897, which was also the country's first indigenous vaccine. India's first vaccine research institute was set up at Kasauli (Himachal Pradesh) in 1904/05, followed by the setting up of the Pasteur Institute of India in Coonoor (Tamil Nadu) in 1907, and smaller vaccine institutes in many Indian provinces in the decades between 1910 and 1930. Soon after Independence, the BCG vaccine laboratory was set up at Guindy in Madras. From 1952, many private vaccine-manufacturing units and a few public sector units were set up. These manufacturers started supplying and fulfilling the vaccine requirements of two-thirds of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). India became not

just the pharmacy for high-quality and low-cost medicines but a vaccine production house for many of the LMICs.

There is a long history of mass-scale vaccination for adults and children. In 1951, India started the first mass-scale BCG vaccination, which included the adult age group as well. It conducted smallpox eradication efforts and vaccination drives, which resulted in the country reporting the last case of smallpox in 1977. Fresh from the success of smallpox eradication and newly created vaccination infrastructure and trained vaccinators, India launched the Expanded Programme of Immunisation (EPI) in 1978, which was renamed the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) in 1985. In the past two and half decades, India has regularly conducted mass-scale vaccination drives for polio elimination and against measles and rubella.

Under polio elimination efforts, as part of the National Immunisation Day (NID), India regularly administered about 17 crore polio vaccine shots in seven days,



**HEALTH WORKERS** on their way to conduct COVID-19 vaccination in a remote village in Morigaon district of Assam on August 6.



achieving around 99 per cent coverage of targeted beneficiaries. The polio vaccination drive was conducted at least twice every year for many years and continues to sustain India's polio-free status. In fact, for a few years, around 70 to 100 crore polio vaccine doses used to be administered through two NIDs and a few subnational immunisation days in select States until India became polio free.

Soon after India reported the last case of poliomyelitis on January 13, 2011, building upon the success of the initiatives, the country focussed its efforts on further strengthening adverse events following immunisation (AEFI) surveillance and vaccine cold chain capacity and introduced a number of new vaccines in the UIP.

It is on account of this more than two-century-long history of vaccine research and development, and programme implementation and nearly four decades of EPI and UIP that immunisation is considered one of the better performing government health programmes in the country. Under the UIP, vaccines to protect against a dozen diseases, some in multiple shots, are administered to 2.7 crore children and 3 crore pregnant women by more than 200,000 vaccinators through 90 lakh sessions in a year, reaching around 600,000 villages. These efforts are supported by 30,000-odd cold chain points, community mobilisation, front-line worker participation, and a robust AEFI-reporting system, all of which have been strengthened in the past 15 years. It is no surprise that nearly 90 per cent of all vaccines administered in India are delivered through government health care facilities. The contribution of the private sector in vaccines has been 10-15 per cent.

It is against this backdrop that ever since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and discussion on COVID-19 vaccine development started, India was considered a flag-bearer to deliver vaccines to its population and to the rest of the world.

### COVID-19 VACCINES

By mid-October, India finally achieved more COVID-19 vaccine supply than demand, and vaccination drives seemed to have been stabilised. India also resumed export of COVID-19 vaccines after a gap of around six months. However, India's COVID-19 vaccine journey was not smooth for most of the past 18 months

In mid-2020, India set up technical experts groups to prepare for COVID-19 vaccine roll-out and for prioritisation of vaccine beneficiaries, among other things. The government formed partnerships with vaccine manufacturers for research on indigenous vaccines. The COVID-19 vaccine communication strategy was released by the end of December 2020. However, these efforts courted controversies early on.

In July 2020, a letter from the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), which was interpreted as seeming to insist on completion of vaccine clinical trials in six weeks created a media furor. On January 3, 2021, one of the two COVID-19 vaccines was given emergency use authorisation (EUA) in clinical trial mode, without

phase III clinical trial data. This was questioned by many people, and some even argued that this resulted in hesitancy among health workers to get vaccinated.

The COVID-19 vaccination was rolled out for health workers on January 16. Their initial hesitancy resulted in low uptake. Vaccination was opened in a phased manner to different age groups, which is a right approach, as recommended by a technical expert group. However, the uptake continued to remain low. The Indian government and the vaccine manufacturer, as part of the global commitment and under the 'Vaccine Maitri' initiative, started exporting vaccines. Until March 31, India had exported more vaccine doses than those administered in the country. The vaccines manufactured in India were sent to 80 countries. The first lot of COVID-19 vaccines supplied by COVAX—co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi and the World Health Organisation, along with the key delivery partner UNICEF—was produced in India.

However, by the March end and early April 2021, the demand for vaccines in India increased with the emergence of the second wave of COVID-19. There was not enough supply. Manufacturers were not able to scale up their production capacity as originally indicated. India put vaccine export on hold, yet the queues at vaccination centres were long.

In April, vaccination was opened to health workers, front-line workers and adults older than 45 years. With the number of COVID-19 cases rising every day, the public demand for opening the vaccination to those in the 18-44 age group increased. The technical expert group on immunisation was not supportive of this. But, contrary to the advice of technical experts, the government announced its decision to start vaccination of all adults.

In mid-April, when the target population was around 33 crore and there was a shortage of vaccines for this population, the opening of the vaccination drive to those in the 18-44 age bracket resulted in a threefold increase in the eligible population while the vaccine supply situation remained unchanged. The elegantly named liberalised and accelerated phase III COVID-19 vaccination policy was implemented from May 1. It had a range of provisions, including a differential pricing of COVID-19 vaccines for Central and State governments and for the private sector with eightfold variations. A quarter of the total COVID-19 vaccines produced in India were earmarked for sale to the private sector and they were to be made available on payment. The State governments were also asked to purchase vaccines for the 18-44 years age group directly from the manufacturer, with their own funds.

There was utter chaos. The private sector had access to all vaccines. The State governments had no previous experience of direct purchase of vaccines and had to compete with one another to secure vaccines from the manufacturer. Moreover, the States had not budgeted for such an expenditure. Many State governments were reportedly taken by surprise. The outcome was that the





S.S. KUMAR

**A WOMAN** receiving the shot during the three-day intensive vaccination drive, at her home at Saram in Puducherry on July 30. Vaccinators and female health workers in villages did door-to-door campaigns throughout the country to motivate people to get vaccinated.

limited vaccine supply was distributed sparsely, with many government vaccination centres having to close temporarily. People waiting for their second dose found it difficult to get it. May witnessed a lower daily COVID-19 vaccination rate than April. After a lot of chaos and struggle, the vaccine policy was further revised on June 7, with the Centre taking the responsibility of procuring vaccines on behalf of States. This was implemented from June 21. Although scarcity of vaccine supply and other challenges continued, the situation started improving from August before stabilising in October.

#### TIME TO REFLECT AND LEARN

India celebrated the '100 crore doses' as a high-profile political event. Celebration of any milestone is important, but a premature celebration comes with its own risks. Some of the early proclamations such as 'the pandemic was over' and that 'the country had defeated Corona without vaccines' gave room for complacency and resulted in the ferocious second wave.

Keeping in mind that nearly one-fifth of the adult population is yet to turn up for its first shot, around 83 crore more shots need to be delivered as first and second shot, and since there are some indications of vaccine hesitancy, we need to prepare well, by looking at the mistakes made in the process of achieving the 100 crore doses milestone and learn lessons.

One of the overarching characteristics of India's COVID-19 vaccination drive was disconnect between policy formulation and securing supply and delivery on the ground. India's health policymakers and technical experts spent a lot of time in prioritisation of target

beneficiaries for COVID-19 vaccination, but arguably sufficient attention was not given to secure the vaccine supply. Otherwise, why should it have taken 13 days from vaccine authorisation to actual roll-out? This was because the government started working with manufacturers only after the EUA was given. If there was an emergency for regulatory approval, the emergency approach for procurement should also have been followed. Some of the chaos in the vaccination drive was attributable to political interference in what should have been an entirely technical decision. As an example, contrary to the recommendation of technical experts, as a populist move the government opened COVID-19 vaccination to adults in the 18-44 age group, a decision which can be called a misadventure.

#### MISLEADING CLAIMS

One of the misleading claims in the COVID-19 vaccination in India is that the vaccines were provided for free. The fact is that nearly all countries provide vaccines to their citizens free of cost. India did not. The Indian government allocated a quarter of the limited vaccine supply to the private sector and allowed it to be charged at the four- to eightfold price at which the government procured the vaccine. In doing so, it made three mistakes. One, by allowing manifold price differences for two different purchasers, it tacitly legitimised overcharging. Two, those who could afford it had easier access to vaccines.

Thus, the government policies introduced inequities, which should have been avoided. Third, a quarter of vaccines sold at four- to eightfold higher price could mean that effectively the total cost paid by people would have been far greater than government spending on vaccines. As such, to claim that vaccines were provided free of cost to all is far from the truth. Further, because the earmarked vaccine allocation exceeded their ability to use it, the private sector COVID-19 facilities nearly always had excess supply while government vaccination centres in the same locality remained closed for want of vaccines. This resulted in inefficiency in health service delivery. This should be considered a policy error, never to be repeated.

In the end, despite uninterrupted supply, the private sector contributed 6-7 per cent of the total COVID-19 vaccination. It would be worth pondering for future policy formulation why the share of the private sector in COVID-19 vaccination was low while it contributes to 10-15 per cent of childhood vaccination in India.

The COVID-19 vaccination uses a digital platform for registration and issue of vaccination certificates. However, the availability of vaccination data in the public domain has remained suboptimal. Although, of late, some more data have become available, vaccination data on various stratifiers and by types of AEFI, etc., which could be programmatically useful, are not available. It is time COVID-19 vaccination data were made easily available to researchers. There is an emerging issue of COVID-19 vaccination of children. The decision on that



should entirely be based on a calm assessment of scientific evidence and full set of data from clinical trials.

Experience from the last many months shows that India needs to work upon regulatory approval more transparently and regain credibility, which has been partially dented by some missteps in decision-making.

In the week in which India achieved cumulative 100 crore vaccine shots, of nearly 41 crore adults who had received their first shots, 10 crore individuals were due for their second shot and yet had not returned to vaccination centres. This could be an early indication of challenges and vaccine complacency that might be settling in in the programmes, and the government needs to ensure that each one of them return for their second shot on time. Special communication campaigns and personal contact programmes are needed to target those who are yet to start on COVID-19 vaccination.

Two private sector vaccine manufacturers supplied nearly all COVID-19 vaccines in India. In addition to vaccine manufacturing, the private sector could provide the much-needed capacity augmentation in the area of supply chain and vaccine administration. The syringes used for vaccination drives were provided by the private sector. All these are proof of what can be achieved with effective public-private partnership for a public purpose. More such 'partnership for public purpose' should be explored and formed and the existing one strengthened. However, any public health programme cannot and should not be fully dependent on the private sector. It is time India revived its public sector vaccine-manufacturing units (some of which were closed a few years ago) and built its capacity for vaccine research and development and manufacturing.

In the times ahead, there would be technical decisions on mix and match of COVID-19 vaccines as well as whether (or not), and, if yes, for which population subgroups, the booster doses will be needed. This requires use of global evidence as well as programmatic data. This is another reason the government must use vaccination data more effectively. Make data accessible for analysis by health experts. In addition, the desegregated and stratified vaccination data are used for targeted strategies and focussed programmatic interventions. There are lessons for the future of adult vaccination in India and the government needs to give that serious consideration.

In the vaccination programme, risk communication and community engagement aspects need to be improved. The science communication by the government needs to be handled in a better manner. Some of the challenges and misinformation, such as a third wave will affect children, show that the government's science communication needs strengthening. Science communication is needed to tackle hesitancy and also to address emerging issues such as why all children need not be vaccinated.

As four vaccines for use among children are at different stages of EUA, recommended for EUA and in clinical trials, it is likely that some of these vaccines might be

recommended for use in high-risk children. To optimise the limited roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines in children for future decision-making, AEFI recording, and reporting has to be strengthened at all levels.

India has resumed vaccine exports as part of its 'Vaccine Maitri' programme. The country can do more in the global fight against the pandemic by ensuring vaccines for the rest of the world.

#### LESSONS FOR BROADER HEALTH SYSTEMS

If India is thinking of achieving the humongous task of 188 crore vaccinations, it is because of the decades of investment it made in various aspects of the vaccination programme. India's health systems have been chronically underfunded and promises are unfulfilled. We should learn from the vaccination programme. Government funding for the overall health service system should be increased urgently and sustained for many years to come. That is the only way India can be prepared for future epidemics and pandemics.

It is time to look beyond COVID-19 vaccination and examine whether vaccination efforts have contributed to strengthening the health care system's capacity to deliver routine immunisation of children. It is also time to bring coverage of routine vaccines for infants and children back on track, which, according to field reports, has suffered a setback. The COVID-19 vaccination drive has benefited from the UIP infrastructure, which has evolved over four decades. Yet, only 70 to 80 per cent of India's children are fully vaccinated. In Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand, 95 per cent of the target group of children are vaccinated year after year. More importantly, COVID-19 vaccination efforts should ensure that the coverage of vaccines for children in India reaches 95 per cent and is sustained.

#### THE RIGHT TIME TO CELEBRATE

The success of any vaccination programme should be measured against its objective and predefined parameters. The success of polio eradication was celebrated when India attained the polio-free status. Until then, the focus was on those who were unvaccinated. In its COVID-19 vaccination drive, India should have that kind of approach. Premature political celebration or commemoration can be bad news from the citizens' perspective. With every celebration, the politician extracts mileage out of the initiatives and shifts his gaze to other things. India cannot afford to lose sight of the public cause. It should not settle for anything less than 95 per cent coverage with both shots of COVID-19 vaccines. That will be the day to celebrate. □

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# Doses of propaganda

The reality on the ground shows that the government's promise to vaccinate all Indians by the end of 2021 is **mere rhetoric**. But the propaganda machinery is working overtime to credit Prime Minister Narendra Modi with success. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN AND ZIYA US SALAM**

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS, ESPECIALLY realpolitik concerns, have been integral to the COVID vaccine rollout of governments in almost all countries. Even so, the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-National Democratic Alliance government's brazen and bizarre political propaganda games in this respect are unparalleled. Like all propaganda exercises driven by Modi and his cohorts in the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS)-led Sangh Parivar, the stratagems relating to the vaccine rollout were characterised by bluster; rhetorical self-aggrandisement; appropriation of the suggestions and recommendations of others, including political adversaries; grandstanding through event management; manipulation of facts; and, at times, falsehood. In the midst of all this, there were colossal misjudgments and failures in ensuring vaccines in sufficient quantities for domestic use and deploying them systematically. Confronted with such major crisis situations, the Prime Minister and his key associates adopted deafening silence from time to time.

The latest of these propaganda games unfolded in the second half of October, when India's vaccination drive reportedly reached the 100-crore mark. As in the early stages of the vaccination drive, the public relations machinery of the government and the BJP presented this as a personal achievement of Modi. In an opinion piece in *The Hindu*, Modi wrote: "India has completed vaccination of 100 crore doses on October 21, 2021, in just about nine months since starting vaccination. This has been a tremendous journey in dealing with COVID-19, especially when we recall how things stood in early 2020. Humanity was dealing with such a pandemic after 100 years and no one knew much about the virus. We remember how unpredictable the situation appeared then, as we were faced by an unknown and invisible enemy mutating rapidly. The journey from anxiety to assurance has happened and our nation has emerged stronger, thanks to the world's largest vaccination drive."

The claim about the world's largest vaccination drive was evidently a hyperbole; according to international monitoring agencies, China, with a population of approx-

imately 1.44 billion as of 2020, had given the first dose of vaccination to 82.5 per cent of its population, with 74.8 per cent receiving both doses. In comparison, India, with a population of 1.38 billion, had vaccinated 52.7 per cent of its population with one dose and only 22.6 per cent with both doses.

This disparity could be attributed to several factors, including overall and long-standing deficiencies in India's health infrastructure, especially in the more populous north Indian States. However, one of these factors was a governance misjudgment. The misjudgment, of the ruling coalition's political machinery during the last months of 2020 and early 2021, was that Indians were moving towards herd immunity and that the country could afford to go slow in its vaccination drive.

This presumption, which was avidly promoted within the ruling dispensation, led to the Central government's announcement in the last months of 2020 to vaccinate only 300 million of the country's health and front-line workers and the most vulnerable in the first six to eight months of 2021. By the time this decision was made, India, which has historically been credited as the world's biggest producer of vaccines for polio and diphtheria, had taken huge strides in COVID vaccine production too. Taking a cue from the political establishment, health officials in the Central government and several BJP-ruled States repeatedly stated that there was no need to vaccinate all adults.

## 'VACCINE MAITRI' DIPLOMACY

Along with such assertions came Modi's proclamation of "Vaccine Maitri" [Vaccine Friendship] diplomacy in which he promised to share India's gains in vaccine production with other countries. This project was unravelled in early 2021 even as the first rollout of vaccines was happening domestically. In a matter of four months, 6.6 crore vaccine doses were sent to 95 countries. As many as 1.1 crore of these were as grants and 5.5 crore doses by way of fulfilling commercial commitments. The grants were earmarked for countries designated "very poor" and those with "sizable Indian diaspora" and "neighbouring



countries". In January 2021, speaking at the Davos World Economic Forum's online meet, Modi highlighted these exports and declared that India was among the most successful countries in saving lives.

Once again, the political establishment highlighted this initiative as a result of Modi's "great vision to turn around the negative image that was thrust on his government in the recent past by inimical forces, within the country and outside". As a matter of fact, the negative image stemmed from a series of human rights violations and suppression of democracy and freedom of speech, which were evident in the imposition of a jackboot State in Jammu and Kashmir and the ruthless assault on social activists and mediapersons on issues such as the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests and coverage of sensational cases, including gang rape.

But there were other designs too for Modi's "Vaccine Maitri" diplomacy, as revealed by many Sangh Parivar insiders. According to Giriraj Singh, senior BJP leader and Union Minister from Bihar, India and its supreme leader Modi were being hailed as saviours of the world amidst the pandemic. He also argued that the Prime Minister's detractors were trying to sabotage Modi's chances of winning the Nobel Peace Prize for the global distribution of COVID vaccines (*Frontline*, May 21, 2021). Thus the grandstanding in relation to "poorer nations" and "neighbouring countries" had a hidden agenda too.

#### VACCINE SHORTAGE

Even as all these discussions were taking place within the Sangh Parivar, the second wave of COVID hit India severely, and the country faced a massive vaccine shortage. It became clear that India was exporting vaccines in utter disregard of the severe shortage of vaccines in the States. Talking to *Frontline* at that time, a senior Health Ministry official from Uttar Pradesh pointed out that "no other country in the world other than India was exporting vaccines at a time when the vaccine penetration within the country remained at below 5 per cent of the population". He said "the 'pharmacy of the world' was gifting vaccines to the world, while leaving its own citizens high and dry".

The severe impact of the second wave and the vaccine shortage resulted in widespread public outrage. Autorickshaw drivers in several parts of north India, including the national capital, and students from across the country put up posters condemning vaccine exports. In keeping with its time-tested tactic, the Modi government held the opposition parties responsible for this protests and even alleged that all these were the result of a "toolkit" prepared by the Congress to target Modi.

However, the Sangh Parivar leadership also started getting feedback from the rank and file of the RSS and other associate organisations reflecting the public resentment against the vaccine shortage and the Central government's inadequate performance with regard to the vaccine rollout. Despite this, even as late as the third week of April, the Modi government maintained that



those in the 18-45 age group would not be able to avail themselves of free vaccination at Central government hospitals. Individually, Modi and his closest associate, Home Minister Amit Shah, went into a infamous "crisis-driven silence".

However, there was a growing realisation within the Union government that India would have to rely on foreign vaccines to meet the domestic demand. Even while accepting this need, the Modi government asked States to buy vaccines from domestic manufacturers or import the doses on their own to inoculate adults below 45. Several States floated global tenders to import vaccines but none was successful. This too caused much disquiet, and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal pointed out that the Modi government was forcing State governments to compete against one another internationally for a scarce commodity.

Along with this, the government ignored repeated demands for universal free vaccination by several opposition-run State governments and parties such as the Congress, the Samajwadi Party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and the Left parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). They kept raising this demand throughout May and in early June and followed up with concrete moves, including some administrative forays. Chief Ministers Pinarayi Vijayan, Naveen Patnaik, Mamata Banerjee and Hemant Soren of Kerala, Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand, respectively, raised their voices through resolutions in the Assembly, letters to the Union government and press conferences.

#### SUPREME COURT'S INTERVENTION

The Supreme Court too took cognisance of the alarming social and medical crisis. In an order uploaded on the Supreme Court website on June 1, the apex court asked the Union government for a vaccine road map and called out its policy of not sanctioning free vaccines to those aged 18 to 44 as "arbitrary and irrational". Literally directing the Centre to "undertake a fresh review of its





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**OUTSIDE THE PUBLIC HEALTH CENTRE** at Wilson Garden in Bengaluru on June 30. By October 21, India had vaccinated 52.7 per cent of its population of 1.38 billion with one dose and only 22.6 per cent with both doses.

vaccination policy addressing the concerns raised”, the bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud, L. Nageswara Rao and S. Ravindra Bhat sought detailed information in the form of an affidavit. The court further said that “our Constitution does not envisage courts to be silent spectators when constitutional rights of citizens are infringed by Executive policies”.

Assessments within the Sangh Parivar at this time suggested that the Modi government was facing the worst period of its seven-year rule. Speaking to *Frontline*, a senior RSS activist said: “There was agreement that Modi, in his prime ministership, has never been challenged and cornered in a way as he is now. The second wave of COVID has generated unprecedented popular anger against Indian authorities in general, and the Modi government in particular.” (*Frontline*, July 2, 2021.)

Following all this, on June 7, the government announced a “grand vaccine rollout” campaign, including provision of free vaccines to people aged 18 to 44. According to Sangh Parivar insiders, this policy change came with the rider that Modi would have to once again unleash his “histrionic skills” to save the image of the government and the party. This would also involve all-out political attack on the opposition for the “confusion” in the vaccine policy.

Modi carried out the latter part of the understanding on June 7 itself. Other components of the political histrionics soon followed. Days and events were chosen for special vaccine drives, with the aim of keeping the focus primarily on Modi. Thus, on June 21, International Day of Yoga, as many as 86 lakh doses were administered across the country, highlighting that Modi had given the impetus for this special drive. On September 17, Modi’s

71st birthday, this was repeated at a higher scale with a total of 2.5 crore doses, and the propaganda machinery brazenly terming it as a “gift” to Modi. Clearly, the propaganda machinery is making ardent efforts to etch a so-called historical success story.

#### THE FREE VACCINE MYTH

Yet, several high-pitched claims made as part of this propaganda drive, including the much-touted one on free vaccines, are being questioned repeatedly on the ground. Questions on such issues abound even in the National Capital Region (NCR). Free vaccines were given only twice a week at Noida’s community centre in Sector 56, where a drive began in July. In Khoda, a nearby semi-urban *mohallah*, the free vaccination drive was centred around primary schools. However, serpentine queues and few dosages forced many to go to neighbouring Mayur Vihar in Delhi to get vaccinated.

Ahil Ahmed, a medical caretaker, said: “It is difficult to find free dose for the second vial. I have been trying to book on the Internet for days on end, but wherever I click only paid doses are available. Whenever free doses are available, they finish early in the morning. So, one has to return empty-handed if one goes in the late morning or afternoon.”

At Ram Lal Kundan Hospital in East Delhi only paid doses were available, and there are few takers for that. Things were different for the first dose of vaccination when people came enthusiastically. But their enthusiasm has waned for the second dose.

The renowned Fortis Hospital in Noida, barely a couple of kilometres from Khoda, administered 22,000 doses, a large percentage of which was paid for by consumers. The story was no different at Kailash Hospital, the brainchild of Mahesh Sharma, the BJP Member of Parliament and former Union Minister. At Eye Care Hospital in the vicinity, 20,000 doses of Covishield were given from end January to October 15. However, they were not for free. At Apollo Hospital in New Delhi’s Jasola Vihar, where around 50,000 doses were given until October 21, not a single dose was given free. Likewise, at Max Hospital in Saket in South Delhi, all the 23,000 doses were given on payment.

Apprehensions about the efficacy of the vaccine too linger in the minds of many people. Many others are concerned about the loss of wages from spending almost a day at a government facility for free vaccine. Bhura Khan, a carpenter, who has not had a single dose, said, “So many have fallen ill after taking the vaccine. I work every day. I have not taken any medicine. I am fine. The claims of free vaccine are all for television viewers. If I go and stand in a queue for half a day for free vaccine, I lose my wages for the day. In the past, when the government had a polio vaccine drive, they used to come to our houses to give the drops. Why cannot they do so today?”

Bhura Khan’s words should provide food for thought for a government that claimed in the last week of May and later in June that India’s vaccination would be completed before 2021. □



# 'The idea of herd immunity is not useful as a policy goal'

Interview with **Satyajit Rath**, immunologist and visiting faculty, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

SATYAJIT RATH trained as a physician and a pathologist in Pune and Mumbai in the 1970s and 1980s. He has worked on mechanisms involved in the development and functioning of the immune system in India and overseas, then as a faculty member at the National Institute of Immunology in New Delhi and, since his retirement, in honorary capacities at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research in Pune. Excerpts from an interview he gave *Frontline*.

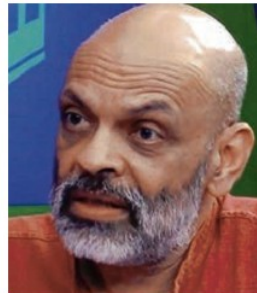
**Several countries that have achieved high vaccination rates are witnessing a large number of COVID-19 cases, reportedly among the unvaccinated. Does this mean that there is no real hope of populations achieving herd immunity even through vaccination?**

The idea of herd immunity is a retrospective one, used as an explanation when a situation arises in which everyone is not vaccinated or infection-experienced for a given infectious disease, yet susceptible people are not getting infected (more correctly, sick). The idea of herd immunity is not particularly useful as a policy goal as COVID-19 policy experiments around the world over the past year and more have sadly shown. Also, we need to be clear about what exactly we are hoping to achieve this herd immunity for. If it is to reduce or halt the occurrence of illness, we may well discover, eventually, that it has happened, more or less. The current trends are, in fact, in that direction. If it is to reduce or halt the occurrence of asymptomatic infection, I do not think we have any real chance of doing that to any major extent.

**It is said that vaccination reduces the chances of COVID-19 infection and tends to reduce its intensity but does not have a similar effect on reducing transmission. Is the evidence on this unambiguous and is this the reason why those who are unvaccinated remain vulnerable even if they are in the minority?**

As I pointed out above, infection is not the same as illness and simply means that the virus has grown in the body. So everyone infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus does not become ill, leave alone severely ill. Transmission is, usually, simply the spread of virus from one body to another, so infection is likely to correlate much more

closely with transmission than it does with illness or disease. Vaccination protects very well against illness and disease. It also reduces the magnitude of virus growth in the body even when it does not quite prevent it completely. So it does reduce the magnitude and duration of infection and, therefore, of transmission. However, it does not do this as potently, so vaccination is not a guarantee of stopping transmission, which means that the unvaccinated do remain at risk of infection from asymptomatically infected vaccinated (and even more from other unvaccinated) people. And, of course, if they are in the high-risk categories, they then run the risk of severe illness.



**Is there any evidence that antibodies acquired through vaccination and those acquired through exposure to infection respond differently in terms of development of immunity and transmission of virus, particularly in the context of emergence of new variants?**

There is some emerging evidence that the exact nature of antibodies generated by vaccination versus infection are different, just as there is some evidence

that the antibodies generated by different vaccines may also be somewhat different. These differences are of magnitude and duration in some instances and related to more subtle binding abilities in others. And the duration of antibodies generated by infection seems somewhat more variable than that of antibodies generated by vaccination. However, all of this is currently uncertain, with independent studies not necessarily showing the same things.

**A large part of the Indian population today falls into one or more of three overlapping categories, each with large numbers: those carrying antibodies because of prior exposure to infection, those who have received a single vaccination dose and those who are fully vaccinated. Does the first category mean that the risks of new major outbreaks are low even though only less than a third of the adult population is fully vaccinated?**

This is the case if we accept the data at face value and define major outbreaks as nationwide "waves". My worry is that the sero-surveys, on which the claim that India has a very large proportion of "those carrying



antibodies because of prior exposure to infection” is based, have all been relatively modest in size, and we are assuming that they do reflect reality accurately. Also, when we say that “X per cent of the population of a city falls in this category”, we tend to assume that this percentage is uniformly seen across the city, for example. Neither of these assumptions may be strong enough for us to think that the risk of a new wave is low. Added to this is the fact that the overlap, as you put it, among these three populations is likely to be very large, and a diverse set of marginalised communities may not fall into any of them. And finally, a single vaccine dose is nowhere near as good as the two-dose schedule, leaving a very large fraction of the population at reduced but still substantial risk. All of these worries are consistent with the fact that we keep seeing small, local outbreaks around the country even now.

**India is still struggling to reach the target of fully vaccinating 80 per cent of its adult population by the year end. Going forward do you think that we have to be prepared for the possibility that vaccination of even children and booster doses may be necessary?**

I certainly think that vaccination of children is advisable and is, in fact, overdue. I worry that we sometimes seem to think of COVID-19 vaccination as some sort of a “risky” matter and almost seem to be wanting to protect children from it rather than wanting to protect them from COVID-19. The vaccination of children will protect them from rare severe COVID-19 illness, and it will reduce the extent of virus transmission in the community. As for booster vaccine doses, I have yet to see strong evidence of major reduction in the protection against severe illness provided (even against current virus variants) by standard vaccine dose schedules, so I do not see any reason to be starting a major large-scale booster vaccination campaign as yet.

However, our knowledge is quite incomplete as yet on a number of counts. How long does the protection by current vaccines (and/or infection) last? What, if any, newer virus variants are arising even as we speak, so to say? And what might be their sensitivity to current vaccines? If they show some vaccine resistance, can that be overcome simply by additional booster doses of current vaccines, or will we need new-generation “variant” vaccines? These questions and emerging answers to them will determine policies and decisions about future vaccination/s as SARS-CoV-2 shifts from the epidemic stage to the endemic situation.

**Looking at the global scenario, how significant are the implications of vaccine inequality for countries like India? Has India underperformed in leveraging its legacy of being a major vaccine manufacturer to contribute to the global vaccination effort, or has it done the best that could be expected of what is still a lower-middle-income developing country?**

This is a complicated question. Firstly, my view is that India’s COVID-19 vaccination campaign has done as well as could be realistically expected of an enormous, messy, largely poor and deeply unequal country. Is it a great achievement? Clearly not; India went from 10 per cent of people fully vaccinated on August 27 to 20 per cent of people fully vaccinated on October 16. So a 10 per cent increase in full vaccination has taken a month and a half; at this pace, achieving the stated goal of full vaccination of about 65 per cent of the population in the next month and a half looks difficult. Further, there is considerable vaccine inequity: our largest rural States, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, currently have less than half the vaccination coverage that Kerala, for example, has. There is every likelihood therefore that more examination will reveal substantial inequities along the expected lines of lack of access to and/or uptake in poor, rural, remote and otherwise marginalised communities.

Has India leveraged its legacy of being a major vaccine manufacturer? I think that it has not, and I think that the fault lies not with the private sector vaccine manufacturers but with us because we have abandoned, over many decades, our “legacy” capabilities of manufacturing vaccines as a major social good in public sector industries. The result has been that the deployment of India’s vaccine-manufacturing capacities for the pandemic has been significantly shaped by considerations of commercial competition. The Union government has played very much of an indirect role in the matter. It is, therefore, not surprising that we have had many occurrences of vaccine confusion: the Covaxin imbroglio, the COVAX supply turnarounds, the lack of early vaccine mix-and-match trials, the lack of systematic large-scale data collection regarding vaccine-mediated protection, and the like. And, finally, all of these limitations have been brought into stark relief, paradoxically, by our apparently extreme need to brag.

**The government celebrated the event of touching the 100-crore vaccination mark as did a section of the media. Would you say the celebration was expected as it was a feat achieved in challenging circumstances or was it a case of going overboard as a good number are yet to be fully vaccinated?**

It is true that the circumstances were and continue to be challenging. As for a 100-crore mark, it will come eventually if you keep vaccinating; in that sense, it is akin to celebrating birthdays. If you live long enough, you will eventually become, say, a *sahasrachandradarshanik* (a person who’s lived 1,000 full moon days). Some amount of feel-good celebration is useful in maintaining morale, I suppose, but when the occasion is used, as you point out, for bragging unrestrained by any connection to the sobering realities on the ground, it is liable to bring dangerous complacency in its wake; witness urban India’s crowded and mask-less festival marketplaces.



# Uneven drive

The government's **obsession with mega events** has resulted in a haphazard policy, leading to a record number of doses on certain days, such as Prime Minister Modi's birthday, and a lack of uniform growth in inoculation across north India. BY **DIVYA TRIVEDI**

CROWDS HAVE THINNED AT HOSPITALS AND oxygen service centres in Delhi and the lockdown has been lifted for most activities except school education. Mala (name changed), a nurse in a South Delhi pathology laboratory, said that she had jabbed so many people this year that it felt like the entire city had been vaccinated. Apart from such anecdotal evidence, the Delhi High Court's move to close cases relating to monitoring of health care facilities in the capital in early October indicates that the worst of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic may be behind us.

The critical task of achieving full vaccination for the adult population is under way. After some hiccups, the vaccination drive in India began in earnest in January

this year. In the first phase of the drive, health care workers were administered their first doses and in February, frontline workers were covered. In March, the second phase was launched targeting senior citizens above 60 years of age and subsequently those above 45 years of age with comorbidities. It was only after July, when the second wave was receding, that the vaccination drive got some momentum with the Centre expanding it to include the eligible adult population.

## HAPHAZARD POLICY

Even then, the drive has not been uniform across north India. The Narendra Modi government's obsession with mega events and projecting India as an achiever in the





vaccine race has reportedly resulted in a haphazard vaccination policy that has led to a record number of doses being administered on particular days, such as Modi's birthday or International Day of Yoga, and fewer doses on others.

On June 21, the International Day of Yoga, 86 lakh doses were administered across the country, which was a record at the time. But data on the CoWIN app showed that the pace of vaccination had slowed in the preceding days, especially in some BJP-ruled States. During the June 21-27 period, the CoWIN portal recorded a daily average of 61.14 lakh doses. Then, during the June 28-July 4 period, the daily average dropped to 41.92 lakh doses, slipping further to 34.32 lakh doses in the July 5-11 period..

Again, on September 17, Modi's birthday, India administered 2.5 crore doses, a new record. Several BJP leaders and government functionaries said this was "gift" to Modi on his birthday. Bihar took credit for administering 33.98 lakh doses on that day. The surge in Bihar on September 17 was just a single-day surge. Data on the CoWIN app showed that on September 16, only 86,253 doses were administered and on September 15, 1,45,593 doses. The single-day surge was not repeated in Bihar in the days following Modi's birthday. The number of doses continued to drop subsequently; on September 21 and 22, the number of doses recorded was 5.26 lakh and 2.36 lakh respectively.

On October 25, India had officially administered over a billion doses, 103 crore to be precise, to become the second highest deliverer of COVID-19 vaccines globally.

But according to media reports, the gap between the proportion of population that has received at least one dose and that which has got two doses is the widest in India. According to Bloomberg Tracker, which maps vaccination trends globally, 52.7 per cent of the population got at least one dose and 22.6 per cent received two doses.

In comparison, in China about 82.5 per cent of the population has received at least one dose and 74.8 per cent two doses. In the United States, home to a large group that is against vaccination, 66.5 per cent of the population has received at least one dose while 57.5 per cent is fully vaccinated.

Even Brazil, which is in the eye of a political storm owing to COVID mismanagement, has succeeded in administering the first dose to 75.5 per cent of its population, while 55.3 per cent is fully vaccinated.

On the same day that India crossed one billion doses, the government announced that Uttar Pradesh had administered the highest number of doses, cumulatively at 12.55 crore. This was followed by Maharashtra at 9.53 crore and West Bengal at 7.21 crore. The Modi government had promised to vaccinate 300 million frontline and health care workers by July 2021 and the entire population by the end of 2021, which seems like an uphill task as of now.

In such a scenario, if there is a third wave of the pandemic, there will be a difficult race against time to fully inoculate the population.

#### VACCINE HESITANCY

Vaccine hesitancy widespread and within the same family there are those who are fully vaccinated and those who refuse to take even the first dose. Some alternative medicine proponents are either suggesting non-allopathic treatments or sowing the seeds of doubt around vaccine efficacy and its side effects.

Speaking in Guwahati in early October, Union Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Rameswar Teli made the unlikely link between the rise in fuel prices and COVID-19 vaccines. According to him, the government had to make money through the fuel price hike to provide free vaccines to the masses. He said: "Our government has aimed to vaccinate 130 crore people of the country at free of cost. The price of each vaccine is around Rs.1,200 and each person will be given two doses. Fuel prices aren't high but the Centre and States have levied taxes on it. You have taken a free vaccine, where will the money for it come from? You haven't paid the money, so this is how it will be collected."

Such statements do nothing to boost the public's confidence in vaccines and only help in muddying the waters around vaccine efficacy. In another instance, Baba Ramdev, the yoga guru and businessman, was

**AT A MEDICAL CAMP** and vaccination drive organised by BJP leaders in Vizianagaram district in Andhra Pradesh on the occasion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday on September 17, 2021.



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES





**RESIDENT** doctors of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) protesting against Baba Ramdev's remarks against allopathic practitioners and medicines, in New Delhi on June 1, 2021.

openly promoting his immunity booster Coronil during the pandemic. Resident doctors' associations in Rishikesh, Patna, Bhubaneswar, Chandigarh, and Meerut, and junior doctors' associations in Telangana and Punjab moved the Delhi High Court against Baba Ramdev for confusing people with regards to COVID-19 treatment and vaccines.

They said that since Baba Ramdev was a well-known person, his statements could influence the public and divert them from choosing modern medical treatment, which is prescribed as the standard form of care by the government.

On October 25, Akhil Sibal, appearing for the doctors' associations, told the court that Baba Ramdev was misleading the public about Coronil tablets being a cure for COVID-19. Justice C. Hari Shankar observed that making profit was neither a public nuisance nor a wrongful act. On a previous hearing, the judge had said, "He may have made some statements against allopathy but that's an opinion. If you go to any allopathy doctor, they may have adverse views about homeopathy. That does not mean homeopathy practitioners will rise up in arms against allopathy."

While the Delhi High Court remarked on Baba Ramdev's right to make profits, on the same day the Supreme Court dismissed a plea to stop the government from administering Covishield and Covaxin doses until all stages of the clinical trials were complete.

The plea in the Supreme Court challenged a Karnataka High Court decision in May that rejected a petition to stop the administering of the two vaccines. While a section of the citizenry is vaccine-hesitant owing to an unscientific worldview, another educated class is pro-vaccine science but hesitant to take these particular vaccines owing to insufficient evidence that they actually work.

While dismissing the special leave petition (SLP), Justice D.Y. Chandrachud said: "We do not want this to be argued at all. The High Court is very right. Let us not cast a doubt on vaccination. It is the key to protecting our population. Even issuing notice on this SLP would subject it to great mischief. We have been through a very critical stage in the history of the pandemic. And India is not the only country in the world where vaccination is happening. Dismissed."

In May, a Division Bench of Chief Justice Abhay Oka and Justice Aravind Kumar of the Karnataka High Court had maintained that the petition was not in public interest and asked counsel, "If we grant this prayer and people will get infected will you take responsibility?"

The case of the petitioners was that permitting the use of vaccine without completing clinical trials was in violation of rules. They said that the components of the vaccine fell under the category of gene therapy product and thus the guidelines issued by the Union government must be followed. Advocate A.M. Nitin, appearing for the petitioners, submitted that administration of Covaxin and Covishield was not only harmful but also illegal.

In its order, the Karnataka High Court Bench noted: "At the outset, we must note that this court is dealing with various issues arising out of first and second wave of COVID-19. This court has dealt with the issue of the right of migrants, food security, non-availability of oxygen, etc. However, litigants and members of the bar are filing multiple petitions dealing with the same issues. This is a fit case to award exemplary cost as the hearing of the petition has consumed 45 minutes which could have been devoted to many other serious matters like non-availability of oxygen, food security, etc." The Bench concluded by levying a fine of Rs.50,000 on two of the petitioners. □



# Rising after revelry

The number of COVID cases has **risen sharply in West Bengal after the Durga puja celebrations** when people threw COVID-safety norms to the winds and the administration went easy on enforcement.

BY SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY

JUST AS THE COVID SITUATION APPEARED TO be under control in West Bengal, the unrestrained merriment by pandal-hopping crowds during the Durga puja has led to a spike in coronavirus cases in the State, particularly in Kolkata. If people exercised exemplary discipline during the festivities last year and the government controlled the situation commendably, this year citizens displayed irresponsible behaviour and the administration seemed to lack interest in enforcing the COVID protocol. In fact, during the four days of festivities, it seemed as if the pandemic was over in West Bengal.

Until before the pujas, the number of daily new cases was below 800. In fact, on October 11, the day the festivities began, the State registered just 606 new cases; but five days after the pujas ended, the number of daily new cases went up sharply over 800, and on several days, almost reached 1,000. On October 28, the number of fresh cases stood at 990.

On October 10, the day before the festivities formally began, the number of active cases was 7,664; and by October 28, the number stood at 8,245. Kolkata recorded the highest number of cases (275), followed by North 24



**CROWDS** thronging a community pandal during the Durga Puja celebrations in Kolkata on October 14.

SWAPAN MAHAPATRA/PTI



Parganas (164), Howrah (83), South 24 Parganas (77) and Hooghly (75).

That cases would rise in Kolkata was inevitable considering the lavish manner in which Durga puja was celebrated, inviting massive crowding in spite of restrictions placed by the Calcutta High Court and appeals by the State government to maintain the COVID protocol. The government lifted night curfew (between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m.) for the period between October 10 and 20, thus encouraging all-night pandal-hopping. Elaborate pandal decorations drew huge crowds and COVID-safety norms were completely ignored in the festive frenzy. Many doctors at the time felt that it was imprudent on the part of the government to not try and encourage a low-key puja this time, given the prevalent pandemic. In some of the more sensational pandals, the rush of the crowd was such that it was almost physically dangerous. A near-stampede at a puja pandal modelled on the Burj Khalifa, the skyscraper in Dubai, at Sribhumi left three people, including a child, injured, and forced the police to shut down the pandal. With cases rising, the government brought back the night curfew soon after the pujas ended, but there is the fear that the damage may already have been done.

Punyabrata Gun, convener of the Joint Platform of Doctors, told *Frontline*: “The spike in the number of cases was expected. From a month before the pujas began, we have been appealing to both the State government and the people of Bengal to hold the festival with the same kind of restraint and discipline shown last year. But nobody listened. Night curfew was lifted and there was massive crowding in puja pandals; and the State government and political leaders added fuel to the enthusiasm of the masses. Today we are seeing the consequences. There may be a further rise in cases in the coming days because of the Kali puja and Diwali celebrations.”

Punyabrata Gun, however, feels that there is a chance that the situation will not become as bad as earlier apprehended. He said: “According to a study by the ICMR, a third wave may not take place in the form of a wave; instead one may witness rise in cases at local levels. Those areas where the second wave has not had much impact and where the number of vaccinated people is less may see a sharp spike.”

According to doctors, the vaccinations have led to people dropping their guard. Kolkata-based physician Tamal Laha told *Frontline*: “People are tired of the lockdown, and they have been encouraged by the fall in the number of deaths. Many have been falsely led to believe that vaccines alone will make them invulnerable, and have not thought it necessary to wear masks and maintain COVID protocol.” In spite of the high rate of vaccination in West Bengal, the COVID cases have been on the rise since Durga puja. In fact, as of October 28, the State ranked third after Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in the number of people vaccinated.

The total vaccination figure on October 28 stood at 7,45,57,337, with 2,05,99,095 having taken both the doses, and 5,39,58,242 having taken the first dose. However, many of those already vaccinated are being hospit-

alised with COVID. A senior management source in a well-known hospital chain in Kolkata told *Frontline* in the last week of October, “Of the 76 COVID patients admitted in our hospital, 19 are in the critical care unit. Of the 19 in critical care, 18 had received both the doses and only one person had received the first dose. In the general wards too most people are doubly vaccinated, or have received one dose of the vaccine.... But because of the vaccinations, the damage is not that much.” Even as the number of cases has been rising, the number of deaths has remained more or less the same. On October 1, 13 people died, and the death count stood at 18,819. On October 28 nine people died and the total death count stood at 19,114.

#### INCREASE IN POSITIVITY RATES

However, the source pointed out that, worryingly, the positivity rate was getting higher and said: “The positivity rate at our hospital is 8-10 per cent.” The positivity rate in the State on October 1 was 1.79 per cent; in just four weeks, it had increased to 2.18 per cent on October 28. Interestingly, many of the new cases have been mostly asymptomatic or displaying mild symptoms.

Even after the pujas ended and the night curfew was restored, the revelry on the streets continued unabated. People continued to move around in crowded places without wearing masks, and eateries tried to stay open well into the curfew hour. It was only when cases began to rise that the police and the administration began to crack down on those violating COVID norms. It must also be kept in mind that for investment-starved West Bengal, the puja season is not just the most important religious and cultural yearly occasion, but also a huge opportunity to revive the economy. The main beneficiaries during this season are small businesses and traditional artists, who have been severely hit by the pandemic. Two consecutive years of low-key celebrations would be disastrous for many of them. A research carried out by Queen Mary University of London and IIT [Indian Institute of Technology] Kharagpur, titled, “Mapping the creative economy around Durga puja, 2019” has estimated the economic worth of the creative industries around the week-long festival at Rs.32,377 crore (excluding sponsorships)—2.58 per cent of the GDP of West Bengal in the fiscal year of 2019-2020.

#### SCHOOLS TO REOPEN

Even as the COVID cases started increasing, the State government announced that schools and colleges would reopen for offline classes on November 16. In Bengal, educational institutions have been shut since March 2020. Making the announcement, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said, “Kali puja is on November 4, Bhaiphonta on November 6, Chhat puja on November 10-11, and Jagaddhatri puja on November 13. Start making arrangements for reopening of schools and colleges after that.” While many have welcomed this decision, there is apprehension among a large section of the people since children have not been vaccinated. □



# A President's 'crime'

Despite a parliamentary report indicting him for **nine crimes relating to his handling of the COVID-19 situation in Brazil**, including “crime against humanity”, President Jair Bolsonaro remains unapologetic and continues to downplay the ongoing threat posed by the pandemic. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

BRAZIL, ALONG WITH INDIA AND THE United States, suffered the worst casualties as the COVID-19 pandemic spread like wildfire across the world last year. However, these three countries were not the exception. Most scientific experts believe that many other governments across the globe grossly mishandled the situation in their countries, especially during the initial stages of the pandemic. While the U.S. and Indian governments have now prioritised the fight against COVID-19, the right-wing Brazilian government under President Jair Bolsonaro continues to downplay the ongoing threat posed by the pandemic.

Bolsonaro, an ideological soulmate of Trump and a close friend of Prime Minister Modi, has been the most cavalier among world leaders in his attitude towards the pandemic, for which the Brazilian public has paid a huge price. Recently, when a journalist asked him about the COVID situation in Brazil, Bolsonaro said that he was

“bored” by the question. He said: “In which country did people not die? Tell me? Look, I did not come here to be bored.” He also claimed recently that the coronavirus vaccine could cause AIDS.

Bolsonaro continues to downplay the severity of the virus despite 6,06,000 deaths so far in Brazil. The U.S. has registered around 7,40,000 deaths, while India’s official death toll is 4,55,000, though most experts believe the actual number is much higher. The Modi government is now busy trying to claim credit for providing vaccines to more than a billion of India’s population, though the majority has only received one dose.

Bolsonaro, like Modi and Trump, remains unapologetic about his criminal negligence in the handling of the pandemic. He stymied the efforts of State governments to restrict business and commercial activities as the pandemic started gaining traction. He insisted that the economy had to keep running despite the obvious existential



EVARISTO SA / AFP



EDILSON RODRIGUES/AFP

**BRAZILIAN PRESIDENT** Jair Bolsonaro. (Right) Senators Omar Aziz (left) and Renan Calheiros, president and rapporteur of the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission that is investigating the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic, during the report reading session in Brasilia on October 20.



threat posed by the pandemic to the population. He kept addressing huge rallies without wearing a mask, and dismissed the coronavirus as nothing more than a “little flu”. He and many of his Cabinet Ministers have refused to get vaccinated. Brazil has a robust health infrastructure that is geared to deal with pandemics. Previous epidemics were effectively dealt with through the vast infrastructure and personnel which is at the call of the country’s Health Ministry.

Since last year, leaders of the centrist and left-wing opposition parties have been calling for the impeachment of the Brazilian President not only for his mishandling of the situation created by the rampant spread of COVID-19 but also for the incidents of corruption that have tainted the government. Brazilians have been taking to the streets in increasing numbers to protest against Bolsonaro’s policies and the growing corruption among his close circle of advisers and family members. Under Bolsonaro’s watch, unemployment, hunger, inflation, interest rates and inequality have all risen sharply. His mishandling of the COVID-19 situation has further exacerbated the problems facing the populace.

After initially scoffing at the efficacy of the vaccines produced to combat the virus, Bolsonaro started indulging in vaccine politics by favouring vaccines produced in a particular country over that of others. Before that, he spent a lot of time, energy and money in procuring the antimalarial hydroxychloroquine drug from India. Bolsonaro and Trump specifically thanked Modi for lifting the restrictions on the export of the drug from India. The Brazilian government also encouraged the use of another unproven drug—ivermectin. The drugs were initially touted by President Donald Trump and U.S. evangelical groups as an effective antidote for the coronavirus. The Brazilian government spent millions of dollars trying to domestically mass-produce these drugs. The Brazilian Army was also mobilised for this purpose.

#### REPORT INDICTING BOLSONARO

On October 26, the Brazilian Senate commission of inquiry (CPI) finally took the landmark decision to present a report to the Speaker of the lower house and the Attorney General, recommending that President Bolsonaro be indicted for nine crimes relating to his handling of the coronavirus pandemic. The list included “crimes against humanity”. The CPI report blamed Bolsonaro of intentionally implementing a criminal policy which allowed the coronavirus to spread unchecked throughout Brazil in order to achieve the goal of “herd immunity” by means of mass infections.

The Senate committee’s indictment of Bolsonaro is 1,300 pages long and took more than six months and 50 hearings to prepare. The congressional committee came to the conclusion that Bolsonaro and members of his

**PROTESTERS** wearing masks depicting Bolsonaro during a protest against his government’s failure to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and the Administrative Reform Bill taken up in the National Congress, on October 20 in Brasilia.

administration discouraged people from wearing masks, ignored offers of vaccines and promoted unproven drugs long after they were proven to be ineffective. The Senate committee report stated that Bolsonaro and his three eldest sons constituted a “command nucleus” that was in charge of manipulating the social media with posts railing against vaccines and social distancing norms. Bolsonaro’s sons are active in politics, with one of them, Flavio Bolsonaro, in the Senate. The report also names 77 individuals and two companies for being complicit in the crimes committed by the Brazilian President.

Among the individuals named was Wilson Lima, the governor of Amazonas State, which witnessed an unprecedented number of coronavirus-related deaths similar, if not in scale, with the deaths witnessed in Uttar Pradesh. The mass graves in the city of Manaus had riveted international attention. Most of the deaths in Amazonas were owing to the lack of oxygen supplies in hospitals. The State government of Amazonas is also under investigation for alleged corruption in the purchase of medical supplies and



ANDRESSA ANHOLETE/GETTY IMAGES



equipment. The country's federal prosecutors have opened an investigation into a contract worth \$320 million with India's Bharat Biotech, the makers of the indigenously developed "Covaxin" coronavirus vaccine. The prosecutor has said that a higher price was negotiated for the purchase of the vaccines, even as companies such as Pfizer and Johnson and Johnson were offering their vaccines at a lower price. Pfizer, it has been revealed, had sent more than 100 emails to the government offering its vaccine, without getting a response, resulting in delays in the final procurement. Brazilian health officials have also been implicated for allegedly demanding kickbacks from Astra-Zeneca and from other vaccine makers. Bolsonaro and his supporters had also sought to cast doubts on the efficacy of Chinese-made vaccines which were ordered by governors of States like Sao Paulo.

Brazil's Supreme Court Justice, Rosa Weber, ordered a separate criminal investigation into Bolsonaro's response to the allegations of malfeasance within the country's Health Ministry in regard to the deal with Bharat Biotech.

Brazilian health officials had also questioned the efficacy of the vaccine, saying that more tests were needed. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has still not fully certified the India-made vaccine. In August, the Brazilian Health Ministry unilaterally cancelled the deal with Bharat Biotech after Covaxin failed to get its regulatory approval.

The congressional committee earlier drafted a report that had recommended that the Brazilian President be indicted on the even more serious charges of "genocide and homicide". The draft congressional report released in third week of October had blamed Bolsonaro for being responsible for half of the country's COVID-19 deaths. The Senate panel, however, decided not to include these charges at the eleventh hour for legal and constitutional reasons. Some Senators on the panel felt that that the move would be too difficult to prove in court and also because it is the first time that a sitting Brazilian President would be charged with crimes of such magnitude.

The rethink among the Senators was prompted by the realisation that it would be difficult for prosecutors to





## Bolsonaro could face a prison term of at least 50 years if convicted of any of the nine charges recommended by the Senate panel.

name individual victims as having died because of the direct involvement of the President. The “genocide” charge which was being mulled was prompted by the uncontrolled spread of the virus and the large number of deaths among Brazil’s endangered indigenous groups. The majority of the Senate members concluded that the genocide charge against the President did not fulfil the criteria laid down by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Articulation of Indigenous People of Brazil (APIB), an indigenous organisation, had already asked the ICC to investigate Bolsonaro for “genocide and ecocide” against native people. Indigenous leaders have accused Bolsonaro of exacerbating the ecological disaster with his policies on the pandemic. After Bolsonaro came to power, the destruction of the Amazonian forest has substantially increased.

Brazil’s Attorney General, Augusto Aras, is a right-wing camp follower of Bolsonaro and has the final authority to decide which of the charges against the President will be acted upon expeditiously. The rapporteur of the report, Senator Renan Calheiros, compared Bolsonaro with the likes of Adolf Hitler and Augusto Pinochet. “The chaos of Bolsonaro’s government will enter history as the lowest level of destitution,” he said. Calheiros, one of Brazil’s longest serving Senators, said that he believed that many of the deaths were preventable. He said that Bolsonaro is personally responsible “for escalating the slaughter”.

Most observers of the Brazilian scene are not hopeful of any meaningful actions being taken against the President before his term ends next year. Also, in the lower house, the majority is still with Bolsonaro. If the lower house does not give its approval, the Senate committee has the option of approaching the Supreme Court or taking the case against Bolsonaro to the ICC in the Hague.

Brazil is due for elections next year and Bolsonaro’s approval ratings are at an all-time low. A recent opinion poll revealed that a majority of Brazilians want the President to be impeached. Bolsonaro could face a prison term of at least 50 years if he is convicted of any of the nine charges recommended by the Senate panel. An increasingly desperate Bolsonaro recently said that there were only three alternatives left to him in the future—“Being arrested, getting killed or victory”.

The laudable actions of the Brazilian legislature and the judiciary have unfortunately not been replicated in countries like the U.S., the United Kingdom and India, where the governments and the ruling classes seriously failed to

protect or provide succour to the people during the pandemic. In the few countries where investigations were held, the governments were largely given the benefit of the doubt. However, in the U.K., a parliamentary committee concluded that the government’s initial response to the pandemic “ranks as one of the most important public health failures the United Kingdom has ever experienced”.

Some governments like those in Australia, New Zealand and China have been successful to a great extent in controlling the spread of the virus by following scientific principles, despite the economic costs involved. China is once again imposing fresh lockdowns as multiple scattered cases of infection have been reported, despite 75 per cent of the country’s population of more than a billion people being fully vaccinated. Lanzhou, a city in the northwest of China with a population of four million, was put under lockdown in the last week of October. Millions of Chinese will now be able to leave their homes only in case of extreme health emergencies.

Meanwhile Russia, Europe’s worst-hit country at present, has ordered the shutting down of non-essential services for 11 days. Despite developing its own vaccines at an early stage, Russia has been unsuccessful in convincing its population about the importance of vaccination. Only 32 per cent of the population has been vaccinated so far. Figures published by the Russian statistical agency, Russtat, suggest that up to 4,00,000 Russians could have died of COVID. In many countries, including Brazil, the government’s handling of the pandemic will have serious political repercussions. Bolsonaro is now talking of not recognising the election process in the country if the Election Commission does not revert to the paper ballot. Bolsonaro claims, without providing any evidence, that the elections are going to be rigged against him. He is evidently taking a page from the playbook of his idol, Donald Trump. Incidentally, Trump was quick to come out in support of Bolsonaro after the Senate committee charged him with “crimes against humanity”, describing him as a very close friend who is doing great things for his country.

Bolsonaro has gone a step further than Trump, openly threatening the country’s Supreme Court. Bolsonaro has the support of a significant section of the armed forces. His government is packed with retired and serving members of the Army. On the orders of the President, the armed forces staged a provocative military parade in front of the Brazilian parliament when the legislators were set to vote on an amendment which if passed would have changed the country’s voting system. The legislators refused to be cowed down by the crude display of force and voted down the amendment.

The Defence Minister, General Walter Braga Netto, is among the Ministers indicted by the Senate. The Senate committee was scared to summon him for questioning, probably afraid that it would prompt the Army to stage a coup again. Bolsonaro and the military top brass are angry with the Supreme Court because it had ordered investigations into the vaccine corruption scandal and the President’s bid to discredit Brazil’s much appreciated voting system. □



# Pandits' alienation

The Modi government continues to claim that its policies have solved the problems in the Union Territory and restored normalcy, but the situation on the ground, including the recent spate of civilian deaths, belies such claims and has ended up **frustrating the Kashmiri Pandits.** BY **ANANDO BHAKTO**

ON October 25, at a well-hyped event at Srinagar's Sher-e-Kashmir convention centre, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had a bullet-proof glass shield removed as he declared his intent to speak to the people directly. "Time has gone when militants would exploit the situation. No one will be allowed to kill civilians...." he said, as he lauded Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha's administration for ushering the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir into an era of development. He then took on mainstream politicians of Jammu and Kashmir in a now identifiable bellicose tone, accusing them of corruption, nepotism and perpetuating anti-India sentiment by calling for dialogue with Pakistan. In Amit Shah's assessment, New Delhi's iron-fist and bureaucratic control of Kashmir has resolved or, at any rate, put an end to the decades-old conflict in a region that has imploded violently time and again since 1990. He said as much: "Today, we have succeeded in replacing guns with pens even in militancy hotbed of Pulwama and other districts of Kashmir."

Nothing could be farther from the truth as the recent spate of civilian killings in Kashmir demonstrates. It is likely that Amit Shah's fallacious self-applauding was meant for audiences in the Indian mainland, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) having reduced Kashmir to a tool to excite people's imagina-



**KASHMIRI PANDITS PROTESTING** against the killing of Hindus in Kashmir, at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on October 9.

tions. But even that did not happen as several developments in Srinagar preceding Amit Shah's arrival there and throughout his stay in the valley ran counter to his claims extensively. In October alone, nine civilians were killed in different pockets of Kashmir. The deceased included two Kashmiri Pandits in what was the first assault on the community since the peak militancy years of the early 1990s. It led to an instant flight of migrant Kashmiri government employees from the heavily guarded camps built especially for them across the Himalayan valley.

On the night of October 24, while Amit Shah was in the Union Territory, the youths of Kashmir spilled onto the streets to celebrate Pakistan's victory over India in a cricket match. According to a senior leader of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), although pro-Pakistan sentiment is not unusual, especially over cricket, the whooping by students, including women, regardless of the consequences, is an indicator of how much ground the Union government has lost in the Union Territory. Amit Shah had no plausible explanation either for these embar-



rassing optics or for the dangerous escalation of violence that has left minorities in Kashmir fretting.

Inside a poorly furnished chamber of a hotel in the Indira Nagar locality of Srinagar, now under the strict vigil of personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), a sarpanch from the Kashmiri Pandit community repudiated everything Amit Shah had taken credit for. The Sarpanch, who spoke on condition of anonymity, denied that the condition of his community had improved in the Modi years. "That is a narrative invented by the BJP and perpetuated by migrant Kashmiri Pandits whose interests are embedded with the BJP's. They have little knowledge of the ground situation. Their raucous support for the BJP's Hindu nationalism on prime time TV debates adds to our predicament and vulnerability," he said, implying that the killing of Hindus in Kashmir could be a fal-lout of India's majoritarian politics.

The Sarpanch's views resonate with most Kashmiri Pandits living in the valley. This reporter managed to enter the heavily fortified Vessu camp in Anantnag, where currently outsiders' entry is barred, and wheedled one resident to speak. Although guarded in his choice of words, the Kashmiri Pandit indicated that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's direct control of Kashmir, the decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's special status and the repression seen in the aftermath of August 5, 2019, when the revocation came into effect, coalesced to create an atmosphere that seems inward-looking, leading to the community's isolation. "The local [people] have been supportive all [the] while, [and] they are still, but something changed with the abrogation of Article 370. What they [New Delhi] are doing is impacting social equations here," he said.

Another resident of the Vessu camp, who works in the Education Department, had a litany of complaints against the BJP. Speaking over the phone, he told *Frontline* that both the United Progressive Alliance government of the past and the incumbent Modi government



**A VIEW OF THE VESSU COLONY** in Anantnag, one of the heavily guarded camps built across the valley especially for Kashmiri Pandit government employees.

failed to give migrant Kashmiri Pandits the promised 6,000 government jobs. "We live in pitiable conditions; successive governments have been largely indifferent. The flats inside the camps are one-room shelters with a kitchen and a bathroom. There is seepage of water, and these structures are in a decrepit condition, some of them built without a plinth," he said.

Promotions have been few and far between, and the Pandits who live in the camps do not have any claim over these accommodations. "There is an undertaking that we will have to vacate the flats once we retire. Why can't we be given permanent residences? How else do we feel a sense of certainty about our future in the valley?" the Education Department employee asked.

Nanajee Wattal, a Kashmiri Pandit who was elected Sarpanch in 2018 from Akin Gram B in South Kashmir's Anantnag district, said that the Lieutenant Governor administration had failed to provide the office-holders from the minority Pandit community with security. "My personal security officer was transferred in 2019. Since then I'm without security. I have no option but to either remain locked in a hotel room in Srinagar provided by the government or spend time in Jammu. There is a provision for incidental security when an office-holder travels to his constituency, but favouritism is rampant. I am unable to visit my constituency because

of the lack of security," Wattal complained.

Sanjay Tikoo, president of Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, agreed that the Modi government's political incursions in Kashmir and its overall repressive handling of Muslims in India had contributed to social unease in the valley. He rued the narratives that successive Indian governments and the think-tankers aligned with them had built over the decades at their expense. "Even before India's Independence, as early as 1931, there was a concerted move to project Kashmiri Pandits as the face of the Indian ethos and Muslims as cheerleaders of Pakistan. Our distinct ethnic identity as Kashmiris was overlooked," Tikoo told *Frontline*.

He traces the genesis of the Kashmir conflict to the cosmetic nature of the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India. He framed it as "an accession [agreement] essentially between [Jawaharlal] Nehru's family and Sheikh Abdullah's family". Unlike what the BJP's well-oiled public relations machinery would have one believe, Tikoo said it was misleading to blame the Congress alone for the present mess, particularly the community's exodus from Kashmir in 1990. "I blame the entire state machinery, be it the intelligence-gathering agencies, the political leadership and the security apparatus. This [killing of Kashmiri Pandits] was happening inside India, and you could not do anything to



prevent it,” he said, somewhat riled.

Tikoo said that the staple of the BJP’s politics, committed as it is to placing the majority’s interest on top, had added to the vulnerability of the 800-plus Kashmiri Pandit families in the valley who had stayed back against all odds. He said that when militancy erupted in 1990, youths who picked up the gun largely believed in Kashmir’s composite culture. The present day is a gloomy contrast, according to him. “There were militants who targeted Kashmiri Pandits then, but there were thousands of Muslim brethren who also saved us. Today I see a lull,” he says, crestfallen.

Historically, there have been competing narratives and choices between Kashmir’s Hindu and Muslim populations. The Muslim refrain is that the well-off Kashmiri Pandits, though much fewer in number, sided with the ruling elite over the centuries and their political and social positions augmented, whereas the majority community lived in abject poverty. The Kashmiri Pandits, on the other hand, are agitated over a “unilateral Muslim narrative” that puts the blame for their exodus in 1990 on Jagmohan, the then Governor of the State. According to the Muslim perception, Jagmohan planned to quell dissenters with an iron hand as the Gawkadal massacre betrayed.

On January 21, 1990, two days after he took charge, the CRPF opened fire on unarmed protesters at the Gawkadal bridge in Srinagar. The Muslims maintain that Jagmohan facilitated the Kashmiri Pandits’ flight to Jammu on the night of January 19, 1990, in order to save them from any retaliation that might take place in reaction to his coercive ways. Kashmir Pandits thoroughly reject that claim. They allege that the National Conference propped up this narrative, and later Rajiv Gandhi perpetuated it since both the N.C. and the Congress had an axe to grind with Jagmohan. Kashmiri Pandits contend that the Muslim narrative ignores the targeted killing of Hindus that had begun as early as March 1989 and continued routinely until May 1990, which left them with no choice but to flee.

A Kashmiri Pandit, who was living in the valley until he recently fled to New Delhi, said: “The message from the mosques was threat-laden. It was clear that an armed section wanted us to leave. Calls were given to either assimilate [convert] or flee, and leave women behind. If there was any doubt, the killings made it clear. It is convenient to blame Jagmohan; it absolves some people’s conscience but to us it is an indicator that any articulation that does not match the majority’s understanding of events will be rebuffed.” He said that much of the Kashmiri Pandits’ support for the BJP is reactionary: they felt betrayed by Rajiv Gandhi’s endorsement of the Muslim narrative of their exodus. He admits that these sentiments had been brushed under the carpet but were resurfacing under the Modi regime.

A case in point is the debate on whether the recent killing of Hindus in the valley was communal in nature. An overwhelming sense prevails among Kashmiri Muslims that militants are targeting people irrespective of their religious identity. The trigger for the killings is a person’s pro-India affiliation, they say, pointing out that of the 28 civilians killed in 2021, only five were Hindus. Kashmiri Pandits not only maintain that they were targeted because of their religion but are saddened that there is blanket acceptance of terrorist explanations that come in the aftermath of Hindu killings.

#### **CROSS-BORDER PROVOCATION?**

Soon after the popular pharmacist Makhan Lal Bindroo was gunned down in Srinagar on October 6, a new extremist group called The Resistance Front (TRF) took responsibility for the killing, accusing Bindroo of covertly working for the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh. Incendiary messages slandering the deceased’s character were circulated over WhatsApp. Kashmiri Pandits said that although their Muslim counterparts mourned Bindroo’s death along with them and there was genuine solidarity, what was worrying was that most of them seemed to believe the TRF’s

description of things without question. While it is not easy to dissect what happens in the mystifying alleys of a conflict region anywhere in the world, an interaction with Kashmir’s mainstream political leadership gives one the sense that Bindroo’s killing was green-flagged from across the border, most likely to create a fear psychosis and thwart the BJP’s perceived project to change the demography in the erstwhile State. Another objective, according to the mainstream leaders, could be to puncture the BJP’s claims of having created normalcy in the valley, as the killing of a Kashmiri Pandit was bound to be covered extensively in the national media.

A senior PDP leader said the killings were Pakistan’s tactical response to the BJP’s attempt to change the demographics of Jammu and Kashmir by stepping up the process of domicile certification of non-local people. “Pakistan knows that the goodwill it enjoys in Kashmir is by virtue of the salient Muslim population living here. It would do all it can to prevent India from flooding Hindus into the [erstwhile] State,” he said. Before the abrogation of Article 370, jobs and land rights were exclusive to the natives of Jammu and Kashmir, who were referred to as “State subjects”. The new domicile rights have ended that exclusivity.

And yet, despite all that complexity, there is a consensus between Kashmir’s Muslims and Pandits that the relaying of communal messages under Modi’s watch has pushed India to the edge of a violent implosion. Sanjay Tikoo warned: “Repression cannot continue forever. The BJP’s treatment of minorities is pushing India towards inevitable armed strife.” Former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah shared this apprehension. Soon after the Manoj Sinha administration booked students and staff of two medical colleges in Srinagar under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for celebrating Pakistan’s cricket victory, Abdullah said: “A volcano is building up even as they [BJP] think they have silenced [the people].” □



# New Hindutva battleground

Pitting Hindus against Sikhs at Lakhimpur Kheri and stirring the communal cauldron may be the BJP's way to counter the attempt to expand the farmers' agitation to eastern Uttar Pradesh. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

LAKHIMPUR KHERI, located in the Terai region of eastern Uttar Pradesh near the Nepal border, has turned into a fresh battleground for Hindutva politics ahead of the election to the State Assembly slated for early next year. The district with a predominant population of post-Partition migrant Sikhs, most of them farmers, is known as 'Mini Punjab'. The farmers' protest against the three Central farm laws, which started almost a year ago, was largely concentrated in western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab. In recent months, however, the agitation spread to this part of the State. This irked some local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders who saw the agitation as a threat to their election campaign.

On October 3, this resentment took an ugly turn in the district. In a single afternoon, many tragedies befell the farming community. While old differences between Sikhs and upper-caste Hindus developed into communal violence, the farmers movement involving Sikh and non-Sikh participants took a decisive turn.

Nachattar Singh (60), Lovepreet Singh (20), Daljeet Singh (35) and Gurvinder Singh (19), all farmers, and four others were killed in a textbook case of hate crime while close to 15 people were severely injured when three SUVs driven by Ashish Mishra,



**ASHISH MISHRA**, son of Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra, being taken from the crime branch office to be produced before magistrate in Lakhimpur Kheri on October 9.

son of Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra, and his associates, allegedly ran over them at Tikunia village.

Ajay Mishra, locally referred to as Teni Maharaj, hails from Banveer-pur village in the district. Several villagers told *Frontline* that before joining politics, he used to be a gangster and a cross-border smuggler of timber and chemicals. He and his son are both respected and feared as *dabangs* (strongmen) who hold kangaroo courts to resolve issues pertaining to the village. Upper-caste Hindus and Muslims of the area defer to their authority, but Sikh farmers, who own large tracts of land, do not attend their *darbar*. In

2000, Ajay Mishra was accused in the murder of the Samajwadi Party (S.P.) leader Prabhat Gupta. A sessions court acquitted him of all charges in 2004. A criminal appeal filed in the matter is pending.

When Ajay Mishra entered politics, he tried hard to whitewash his image, the village residents say. In 2010, he was elected to the post of village Pradhan. In 2012, he was elected to the State Assembly from the Nighasan constituency. In 2014, he became a Member of Parliament and was re-elected in 2019. His induction into the Narendra Modi Cabinet during the reshuffle in July was seen as an attempt to appease the Brahmin constituency of the State ahead of the election.

## BLACK FLAG MARCH

Ajay Mishra was riled by the rise of the farmers protest in the Terai region. In a video that went viral, he was seen issuing a warning to the agitating farmers. According to some of the village residents *Frontline* spoke to, he said if he chose to assert his will, the 'sardars' would be finished. As a mark of protest, the farmers decided to stage a black flag march on October 3 near the venue of the annual wrestling contest organised in Lakhimpur Kheri by Ajay Mishra. They hoped to draw the attention of Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya, who was to





**BKU LEADER RAKESH TIKAIT** addressing the media in Lakhimpur city on October 6. He was instrumental in calming tempers and engineering a peace deal between the administration and the farmers.

be the chief guest of the function.

Ashish Mishra and his associates arrived at the venue of the protest march in a convoy of three cars (a Scorpio, a Thar and a Fortuner), which were rammed into the crowd. "The Scorpio was in front, followed by the Thar," Sukhjeet Singh, a local farm leader, who was present at the march, told *Frontline*. The Thar picked up speed and moved in a zig-zag fashion, targeting as many people as it could, he said. After it rammed some 20 farmers, it lost control and overturned. Nachattar Singh was dragged under the wheels for 20 metres and his body was found split into two, Sukhjeet Singh said. "Everyone knows that the Fortuner is for the personal use of Monu [Ashish]. That vehicle also hit many people. We heard four or five rounds of ammunition being fired by Monu, and he managed to escape when the farmers started getting agitated," he said. The angry farmers later set the Fortuner ablaze.

According to Sukhjeet Singh, Monu probably wanted to target Tajinder Singh Virk, a popular farm leader in the area. Virk had issued a video exhorting people to join the black flag march. After reaching the venue of the protest, he issued another video stating that they had reached the spot. Monu and his associates came right after that, in what is seen as a well-timed move to target

as many people as possible, said Sukhjeet Singh. Virk was grievously injured and was rushed to a super specialty hospital where his condition was stated as critical. In a video issued from his hospital bed, Virk said he was out of danger and alleged that the government had tried to get rid of him.

Four persons in the convoy were killed in the clashes that ensued. Raman Kashyap, a television journalist who was covering the march, was killed. He allegedly succumbed to a bullet wound on his shoulder but some sections of the media stated that he succumbed to injuries suffered when he was beaten up by the mob of farmers. Pawan Kashyap, the deceased journalist's brother, dismissed the contention that Raman was beaten up. "I removed his clothes in the mortuary and there were no marks of any beatings. I request the media to stop spreading such misinformation," he said in a video. The Mumbai Press Club and the Editors Guild of India (EGI) demanded a probe by a Special Investigation Team into the death of the journalist.

The EGI said in a statement: "There are competing versions about Kashyap's death, including a version that claims he died of bullet wounds. What is clear is that Kashyap was reporting on the events of the day when the horrific incident of the con-

voy running through protesting farmers happened, killing some of them. An independent inquiry is therefore needed to establish the cause of Kashyap's death. In what is clearly a terror attack meant to spread fear among the farmers, the killing of Kashyap raises many questions. The Editors Guild demands that the death of Kashyap be separately probed by a court led special investigation team to ascertain the circumstances of his death and also attempt to recover and use the footage of his camera to build the sequence of events leading to his death."

## TENSE SITUATION

The situation became tense in the aftermath of the killing. The State administration ordered deployment of police personnel in and around the district. Two first information reports (FIRs) were lodged at the Tikunia police station. One of them was against Ashish Mishra and 13 others on charges of murder and rioting while the other was against unidentified persons on charges of murder, rioting and death by negligence. Ajay Mishra said his son was not present at the spot when the incident occurred, but eyewitnesses claim to have seen him there.

Internet services were suspended in the area and Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was imposed. As farmers from nearby areas had arrived in thousands, the district was declared out of bounds. Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi, former Chief Minister and S.P. president Akhilesh Yadav, Aam Aadmi Party leader Sanjay Singh, Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi, Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel and Bahujan Samaj Party's national general secretary Satish Chandra Mishra were stopped from visiting the spot. Priyanka Gandhi's arrest at 4 a.m. turned into a high drama. She was released after being kept in detention for more than a day. A video of her sweeping the floor of the room in Sitapur where she was detained, ruled the political optics of the day.



Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said in a tweet: "The BJP and Modi government have no business to not allow political parties to reach victims of the barbarism inflicted on farmers yesterday. Strongly condemn this draconian throttling of democracy."

The Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar said: "Whether it is the government at the Centre or in Uttar Pradesh, they are not sensitive at all. The kind of situation that was created in Jallianwala Bagh, we are witnessing a similar situation in Uttar Pradesh. Today or tomorrow, they will have to pay a heavy price for it."

After the rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Hathras last year, the Lakhimpur Kheri incident has turned the spotlight back on the deterioration of the rule of law in the State. In a rare show of solidarity, the opposition has united over the Lakhimpur Kheri incident. Many politicians, including Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, former Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti's working president K.T. Rama Rao condemned the incident in one voice and demanded accountability from the ruling BJP. The BJP's Pilibhit MP, Varun Gandhi, shared the video of the vehicle ramming the farmers, and tweeted: "this video of vehicles deliberately crushing farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri will shake anyone's soul. Police should take cognizance of the video, identify the owners of these vehicles, their occupants, others involved in the incident and take action against them." He and his mother Maneka Gandhi were summarily dropped from the national executive of the BJP, which was announced soon after.

Political observers predict that if the opposition manages to sustain its unity in the run up to the Assembly election, the BJP may have to put up a tough fight in the election, the outcome of which will determine its political future at the Centre.

While several political leaders

were unable to reach Lakhimpur Kheri, leaders of Rashtriya Lok Dal, the Trinamool Congress and Chandrasekhar Azad of the Bhim Army managed to enter the district. Rakesh Tikait, the national spokesperson of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, was instrumental in calming tempers and engineering a peace deal between the administration and the farmers. He demanded that Ajay Mishra be sacked, his son arrested and Rs.1 crore compensation be given to the family members of the deceased farmers and a government job to one member of each of the murdered farmers' families. The State government announced a compensation of Rs.45 lakh and a government job to one member of the family of each dead person and Rs.10 lakh each to the injured. It also said a retired High Court judge would be appointed to inquire into the incident.

Some sections of the media said Tikait's deal betrayed the farmers' cause. But Sukhjeet Singh told *Frontline* that it was the right thing to do. "What should he have done apart from negotiations? We have all seen what happened to the families of the victims of the Pulwama attack. *Lashon ki rajneeti galat baat hai* [politics on dead bodies is wrong]. The families at this point need all the support they can get. He did the right thing."

The farmers continued with their agitation and organised a massive 'antim ardas', or prayer meet, for the slain farmers.

On October 9, Ashish Mishra, was arrested by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) after 12 hours of questioning and sent to police custody for three days. Fourteen other people have been arrested in the case. On October 24, Ashish Mishra was admitted to the district hospital after he tested positive for dengue. Deputy Inspector General of Police Upendra Kumar Agarwal, who was

#### FARMERS WITH THE DEAD

**BODIES** of some of those who were killed when three SUVs rammed protest marchers at Tikhonia village on October 3.

heading the SIT, was transferred to Devipatan range, 200 km from Lakhimpur Kheri, triggering speculation that the probe was being stymied. But the State administration maintained that the transfer was part of a routine reshuffle of Indian Police Service officers.

The Supreme Court took *suo motu* cognizance of the incident. On October 26, a bench headed by the Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana and comprising Justices Surya Kant and Hima Kohli directed the State government to provide protection to the witnesses of the violence and expressed surprise that only 23 eyewitnesses had been recorded out of a gathering of hundreds and thousands of protesters, by the State's own admission. The bench told Senior Advocate Harish Salve, who was representing the State of Uttar Pradesh, to identify more witnesses.

#### CASTE ATROCITY

Meanwhile, the farmers protests hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons when a Dalit Sikh man's mutilated and bloodied body clothed only in an undergarment was found





hanging from a police barricade at the Singhu border protest site on October 15. The hand of the 35-year-old farm labourer, Lakhbir Singh, was chopped off and his body reportedly had a dozen wounds caused by sharp objects. It was supposed that he must have bled to death. Sarabjit Singh, a member of the Nihangs, a militant sect within the Sikhs, later admitted to committing the horrendous crime and was arrested for the brutal murder along with three others, who said they had no regrets and had punished Lakhbir Singh for desecrating the holy scripture. According to them, he had committed sacrilege by touching the holy book. Lakhbir Singh's estranged wife, Jaspreet Kaur, and his sister Raj Kaur disputed the claim and said that Lakhbir Singh would not desecrate the holy book as he was a devout person.

The caste atrocity was followed by a social boycott of the entire family. Cheema Kalan village in Tarn Taran district of Punjab refused space for the cremation of Lakhbir Singh's body and boycotted the cremation altogether.

Members of the Guru Granth Sahib Satkar Committee prohibited

the family from cremating Lakhbir Singh according to the Sikh ritual, 'rehat maryada'. His sister told the media that the family was living in fear. Around 15 anti-caste organisations submitted a memorandum to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes demanding action against Lakhbir Singh's murderers.

While several netizens demanded justice for the lynching of Lakhbir Singh, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) distanced itself from the Nihang Sikhs involved in the gruesome murder and avoided any comment on the caste fault lines plaguing the Sikh community. Instead of condemning the lynching in an unequivocal manner, the SKM condemned the alleged act of Lakhbir Singh that led to his murder and said that "sacrilege in any religion and faith is not acceptable, and needs to be condemned".

Terming the incident a "dangerous distraction planted in the movement", the SKM appealed to the farmers not to fall prey to such "distractions" and pointed to a conspiracy. In a statement, the SKM said: "Behind this is a conspiracy to give a bad name to the farmers' movement

and to entrap it in violence. SKM demands that Union Ministers Narendra Singh Tomar and Kailash Chaudhary who were documented in pictures to have met the Nihang Sikh leader whose group is involved in the brutal murder should immediately resign. To investigate into the conspiracy and the deep plot to entrap and denigrate farmers, the SKM demands that an investigation by a Supreme Court judge should be instituted. The SKM has already clarified that the morcha has nothing to do with the Nihang Sikhs involved in this incident. The SKM would now like to clarify strongly that there is no space in the Singhu Border morcha or any other morcha for the accused groups and communes in this murder. This is a farmers' movement and not a religious movement."

More than 600 people have lost their lives since the farmers' agitation began almost a year ago. The Lakhimpur Kheri incident is significant because the extent of the farmers protest in eastern Uttar Pradesh could prove catastrophic for the BJP in the upcoming election.

Chief Minister Adityanath knows this, which might explain his alacrity in agreeing to a peace deal with the farmers on the issue and the quick arrests of Ashish Mishra and others in the case. It is no secret that there is a power struggle brewing between Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Centre and Adityanath ever since the latter became Chief Minister in 2017. There is speculation in some sections that the Lakhimpur Kheri incident might have been orchestrated by the Centre to undermine Adityanath, but by agreeing to the demands of the farmers, the Chief Minister outwitted it.

Engineering communal or caste violence as an election strategy is the hallmark of the BJP, and voters have come to expect it one way or another. Lakhimpur Kheri had all the ingredients for stirring the communal cauldron, this time by pitting Hindus against Sikhs. While the ploy may not have succeeded, it surely marks the beginning of a charged political campaign in the election-bound State. □





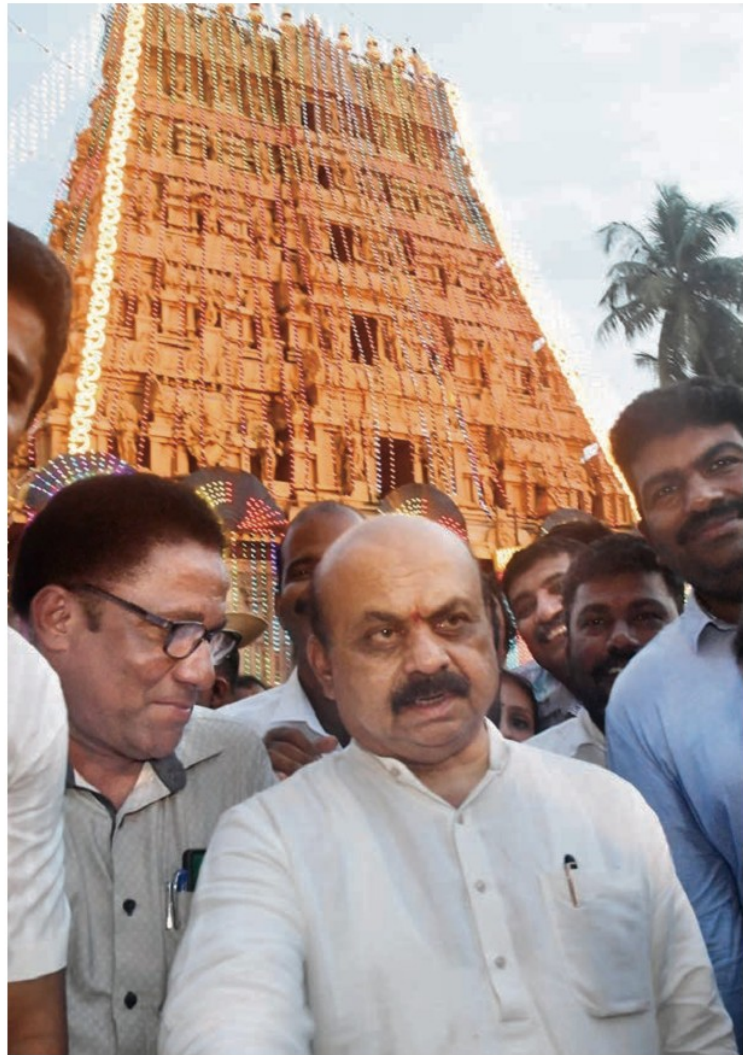
# Devious game plan

Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai's endorsement of the activities of Hindutva's lumpen foot soldiers provides a clue to the direction the BJP is going to take over the next two years before the Assembly election in the State. BY VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED

ON October 21, a protest was held in Bengaluru and in different parts of Karnataka against the recent spike in the activities of right-wing Hindu organisations against religious minorities and Dalits in the State. As many as 500 protesters representing marginalised groups, activists, students and concerned citizens gathered at the Mysore Bank (State Bank of India) Circle in central Bengaluru at around 11 a.m.

Their main demand was that Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai withdraw his statement on 'moral policing' that justified the activities of groups such as the Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Interacting with mediapersons in Mangaluru Airport on October 14, Bommai, in reply to a question on the rising cases of 'moral policing' in coastal Karnataka, stated that when "sentiments are hurt, there will normally be action and reaction".

Speaking to *Frontline* on the sidelines of the protest, Vinay Sreenivasa, an advocate-activist who is part of the Alternative Law Forum, said: "The protest has been organised against the rising attacks on youth for being in love; against attacks on Dalits, Muslims and Christians and against Basavaraj Bommai for his statement encouraging *goondagiri* in Karnataka. Immoral policing is an assault on dignity. It is an attack on the right of women to choose and an attack on the right to life and liberty of reli-



**BASAVARAJ BOMMAI** at the Kudroli Sri Gokarnanatha temple in Mangaluru on October 13. Contrary to expectations, his appointment as Chief Minister seems to have emboldened the Hindu Right in the State.

MANJUNATH H. S.





**PROTEST AGAINST** Basavaraj Bommai's "action-reaction" statement by a coalition of progressive organisations, including Dalits, minorities and women, in Bengaluru on October 21.

gious minorities and we demand that the Chief Minister withdraw his statement."

#### BOMMAI'S LEGACY

When Bommai became the Chief Minister in July, many commentators noted that his father, former Chief Minister S.R. Bommai, was a Socialist and had been a follower of the radical humanist M.N. Roy. Basavaraj Bommai's initiation into political life happened in the company of Janata parivar stalwarts and former Chief Ministers such as Ramakrishna Hegde and J.H. Patel. He is not a homegrown leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and joined the party from the Janata Dal (United) in 2019 when it became clear that the JD(U) did not have a future in Karnataka. Given this legacy, political observers widely agreed that Bommai would, like his predecessor B.S. Yediyurappa, not easily toe the

line of the hard right-wing within the BJP.

Contrary to the expectations though, Bommai's appointment as Chief Minister seems to have emboldened the Hindu Right in the State. His "action-reaction" statement only confirms this, and may be a pointer to the further rightward turn of the Karnataka government.

Writing in the Kannada newspaper *Vartha Bharathi* on October 25, senior Kalaburagi-based journalist and political columnist Sanathkumar Belagali stated, "Hearing these words justifying communal *goondagiri* from Bommai has surprised many people as he had joined the BJP from the Janata Parivar. It is clear that principles and ideology have become irrelevant for him now. It is also possible that he [Bommai] is desperate to save his chair and has to make such utterances endorsing the actions of Hindu right-wing groups that have taken the law into their own hands. His statement was also not uttered

spontaneously and was a well-thought-out enunciation as part of a larger strategy to further consolidate the Hindutva vote bank in the State." The Congress' Siddaramaiah, Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, said the "RSS was controlling Bommai and he is praising the RSS to protect his chair."

A series of events that have taken place in the State recently corroborate the perception that groups such as the VHP, the Bajrang Dal and the Hindu Jagran Vedike (HJV) have suddenly become aggressive in their activities. Different communities have been at the receiving end of their fierce actions. The events vary in scale and space, but they always point to the free hand that has been given to the belligerent upsurge of Hindutva activities in Karnataka.

In September, the Bommai government meekly caved in to the demand of right-wing groups when it passed a Bill in the Legislative Assembly to "protect" illegally con-



structed religious structures in Karnataka. Bommai himself tabled the Karnataka Religious Structures (Protection) Bill on September 20 after an intense backlash following the demolition of a temple in Nanjangud taluk in Mysuru district as part of a 2009 Supreme Court order. Members of the Bajrang Dal and the HJV had organised Statewide protests against the demolition, with one leader of the Hindu Mahasabha in Mangaluru even threatening Bommai with death.

An Urdu media journalist, Safdar Khaizer, who was covering one of these protests in Mysuru on September 16, was mercilessly thrashed in the presence of the police simply for his religious identity.

#### **'LOVE JEHAD'**

The bogey of 'love jihad' that has its roots in Karnataka led to the brutal murder of a 24-year-old Muslim man in Belagavi district on September 28. Ten persons, seven of whom belonged to an extreme Hindutva organisation called the Sri Ram Sena Hindustan, were arrested and charged with the murder of the Muslim youth, Arbaaz Mulla, who was in a relationship with a Hindu girl. Belagavi has also seen an increase in Hindutva activities, with incidents of bullying of members of minority communities being reported over the past month. In the neighbouring district of Bagalkote, two Muslim boys were thrashed on October 12 in the town of Ilkal because they wore skullcaps to their tuition classes.

#### **VIGILANTISM**

Coastal Karnataka, which has been the hub of religious vigilantism in Karnataka for at least two decades, has also seen an escalation of activities by Hindutva groups. An analysis of news reports by Suresh Bhat Bakrabail of the Karnataka Komu Souharda Vedike (Karnataka Communal Harmony Forum) in Mangaluru found that there had been 32 communal incidents (with the aggressors belonging to Hindutva groups) between July and the third week of October. On one

In coastal Karnataka, there were 32 communal incidents between July and October.

occasion, Umanath Kotian, BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly from Moodbidri, was criticised for escorting two persons of a right-wing group who were released on bail from the Moodbidri police station on October 9 after they were detained on the charge of indulging in moral policing.

Other incidents have also kept the communal tension high in the State: for instance, Pramod Muthalik, founder of the Sri Ram Sena, attempted to create a controversy in Gadag in a speech on October 17 when he stated that the Jumma Masjid in that city would be demolished like the Babri Masjid as it was built after the destruction of a temple during Tipu Sultan's reign. In Tumakuru, in south Karnataka, Basavaraj, secretary of the Karnataka State unit of the VHP, is reported to have said in a public speech on October 22 that if Muslims dared to challenge Hindus they would be not be left with any "space to even bury their dead".

#### **ATTACKS ON CHURCHES**

Several churches have also been targeted by Hindutva groups after allegations that they were indulging in "forced religious conversions". On October 18, Bajrang Dal and VHP members barged into a church in Hubballi and sang bhajans. The intelligence department in the State has allegedly been given the bizarre task of surveying and ascertaining the number of churches in Karnataka.

Suresh Bhat Bakrabail said that

there was a "pattern" in the recent spike in attacks on the Christian community all over the State. He added, "All these attacks are being stage-managed by the RSS to build up pressure for the passage of an anti-conversion law in Karnataka on the lines of what we have in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat." The Chief Minister and Home Minister Araga Jnanendra have already indicated that the government is in favour of such a law.

There have also been instances where Muslims were involved in criminal and vigilante activities. A Hindu man who was in a relationship with a Muslim girl is alleged to have been murdered by the family members of the girl on October 21 in a village in Sindgi taluk of Vijayapura district. In two separate instances of moral policing in Belagavi (October 20) and Bengaluru (September 18), Muslim women were shamed after being accosted by gangs of Muslim men because they were travelling with Hindu men. Apart from his swift condemnation of the incident in Bengaluru, Bommai has maintained a careful silence on all other incidents where the aggressors have been Hindu, and the victims belonged to religious minorities.

Bommai is in the middle of hectic campaigning for the byelections in Hangal and Sindgi Assembly constituencies which will be held on October 30. In the midst of this, a local journalist asked him a pointed question on his endorsement of the audacious activities of the Hindu right-wing accompanied by escalating communal tension in Karnataka, but Bommai refused to respond. With elections in Karnataka slated to be held in mid 2023, Bommai's appointment and his subsequent endorsement of the activities of Hindutva's lumpen foot soldiers provide a clue to the direction that the BJP is going to take over the next two years before the Assembly election. With anti-incumbency settling in against the BJP government, it looks like the party is increasingly inching towards raising the communal temperature in the State as a calculated game plan. □



# Stranger than reel life

Shah Rukh Khan's son Aryan gets bail, but the drug-related case has taken on a **new dimension** involving the investigators and raising doubts about a larger conspiracy. **BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

DETAINED for 25 days at Mumbai's Arthur Road jail after being denied bail four times, Aryan Khan, Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan's son, and two friends, Arbaz Merchant and Munmun Dhamecha, were finally granted bail by Justice N.W. Sambre of the Bombay High Court on October 28. The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) had arrested 23-year-old Aryan Khan on October 3 in a raid on a cruise ship on charges of alleged possession and consumption of drugs by those on board. They also accused him of being part of an international drug conspiracy.

Although Anil Singh, Additional Solicitor General representing the NCB, made compelling arguments that Aryan Khan should be charged with "conscious possession and plan to consume" drugs, the formidable defence team consisting of Mukul Rohatgi, former Attorney General of India, and Satish Manishshinde, a well-known lawyer, presented a strong case. They argued that there was ample proof that Aryan Khan had not used drugs or had them in his possession on the night of the raid.

The small quantity of drugs found on his friend Arbaz Merchant was negligible and certainly not enough to make a case of non-bailable offence, they said. In addition, the defence team argued that Aryan Khan's custodial detention was a "direct infringement of constitutional guarantees". Both defence lawyers contended that the arrest memo "did not give true and correct grounds for arrest", as required by



**ARYAN KHAN** being escorted to court by Narcotics Control Bureau officials for a bail plea hearing in Mumbai on October 8.

Section 50 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPc) and thus the arrest was illegal.

## POLITICAL TWIST

The case, which began with the NCB busting a party on a cruise liner just off the coast of Mumbai, quickly escalated into another controversy involving Bollywood, Central agencies, the local police and the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government in Maharashtra. Following Aryan Khan's arrest, rapid developments revealed different angles of the case. One of them involves NCB official Sameer Wankhede, who led the search. His moment of heroism was short-lived

as a couple of witnesses on the cruise accused him of extortion.

Nawab Malik, a senior leader in the Nationalist Congress Party, a constituent of the ruling MVA, lashed out at Wankhede saying he had a history of extortion. He accused the NCB officer of forging documents to prove that he was from a Schedule Caste community to join the force. Malik also accused the Centre of consistently meddling in Maharashtra's affairs in order to discredit the MVA.

Aryan Khan repeatedly denied that he possessed or consumed "charas" as alleged by the police. The NCB's argument was that Aryan Khan

PUNIT PARANJPE/AFP



was an influential person and that he could tamper with evidence if released.

Industry observers say there could be more to the case than what meets the eye. According to them, there could not be a more vindictive way to send a message to Shah Rukh Khan, who has always lived by his own script. He is not from any film family in the industry, and his pure talent, charisma and professionalism were behind his meteoric rise in his career; he is now popularly known as the Badshah of Bollywood and King Khan. The actor, who has a massive fan base, is known for his individualism and has never toed any line, even though the current political climate demands it. A Padma Shri and international award winner who has represented the country on several global platforms, Shah Rukh Khan is paying a heavy price for this, they believe. According to these industry observers, whoever is behind the plan seems to have made their point by hurting his offspring, the weakest spot for a parent.

Another clear message to emerge from this case is that Bollywood may not be in an exalted orbit that it imagines for itself. Some draw a parallel between the cases of Aryan Khan and Sushant Singh Rajput. In the latter, the actor's girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty was targeted and imprisoned. The NCB had foisted charges on her and a few others in connection with the death of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput last year. It also accused her of being part of a drug syndicate. ("The sordid tale surrounding Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide", *Frontline*, October 9, 2020.) The controversy coincided with the Bihar election. Sushant Rajput hailed from Bihar, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) used a "Justice of Sushant" campaign ahead of the Assembly election as part of its strategy.

Similarly, several observers say that the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election looms large somewhere in the middle of the mess involving Aryan Khan. Uttar Pradesh is where the Hindu right wing does what it does best—use muscle power to oppress the minorities. Commentators

warn that if Shah Rukh Khan, probably one of the most influential people in the country, can be hit, lesser mortals should beware.

#### THE CASE

The NCB raided the cruise liner that was hosting a two-day party on October 2-3 apparently on the basis of a tip-off. Aryan Khan was an invitee to the party. According to news reports, Wankhede and his team found a variety of drugs in different rooms on the boat. They arrested 20 people, including Aryan Khan, Merchant and Dhamecha. The most well-known among them was Aryan.

The NCB told a special court that Khan had been named as the prime suspect in what they claim was a conspiracy involving an international drug racket. Investigators allegedly found WhatsApp chats proving his involvement in contraband trafficking. Aryan Khan was charged with offences under several sections of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act. He denied all the charges saying that they were all fabricated.

During the bail hearing in the High Court, the prosecution, led by Anil Singh, said that under the NDPS Act, Aryan Khan did not have to be in possession of drugs to invite charges under the Act but it was enough if he had been dealing with it commercially, which they believed he was doing. Anil Singh said the NCB was convinced that even if Aryan Khan did not have drugs on his person, it had records to prove he was going to consume it. With regard to the contention that the arrest was illegal and that the conspiracy was not mentioned in the arrest memo but invoked later as an afterthought, Anil Singh said the defence team was alerted of the addition within four hours of making the rectification in the remand order.

According to a legal correspondent who was present in the courtroom in the High Court, Rohatgi's response to Anil Singh was: "There was no conspiracy because there was no meeting of minds. There was no discussion that they will meet, that they will get the sub-

stance and smoke. If there are people in a hotel in different rooms and they smoke, are all people in hotel in conspiracy? There is no material for calling it a conspiracy in this case."

As to finding drugs on Merchant, Rohatgi said the petitioner's response was: "It was not in my control what was found in Merchant's shoe.... He is not under my control so there is no conspiracy."

Rohatgi said the WhatsApp chats used by the NCB to prove the conspiracy were invalid as they were from 2018. "None of the chats are from the cruise. The chats will have to be seen in the trial to be proved. The chats have nothing to do with the current scenario and, therefore, to use a general phrase like conspiracy is not right," he said.

#### SAMEER WANKHEDE'S ROLE

Meanwhile, Sameer Wankhede, the NCB's Zonal Director who conducted the raid, is in hot water. From being hailed as a hero for netting a prize catch, Wankhede is in a situation where he faces arrest and possible dismissal. Startling revelations with regard to his actions point to an agenda in going after the young Khan.

To begin with, Kiran Gosavi, a self-styled private detective, was involved in the NCB raid as an independent witness. Gosavi took a selfie with Aryan Khan and shared it on social media where it went viral. When his identity was discovered, Gosavi disappeared. The Pune police nabbed him and on interrogation found that Gosavi had a dubious background and that there were several cheating cases against him. He is also reportedly linked to a senior BJP leader.

However, it was Prabhakar Sail, Gosavi's bodyguard, who was the turning point in the case. Sail told the Mumbai Police that he had overheard Gosavi talking to one Sam D'Souza on the cruise liner about paying Rs.25 crore to get the celebrity kid out of the mess. Of this, reportedly Rs.8 crore would go to Wankhede. Aryan Khan may have got bail, but the case has taken on a dimension that could reveal much more in the coming days. □



# The curious case of Parambir Singh

The former Mumbai Police Commissioner, who is alleged to be complicit in several extortion and corruption cases, has remained untraceable since May. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

PARAMBIR SINGH, former Mumbai Police Commissioner who is facing extortion and alleged homicide charges, seems to have vanished into thin air. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Mumbai Police are unable to locate him. So the question arises: who is protecting him?

Parambir Singh was the Police Commissioner when the “bomb scare” incident outside the industrialist Mukesh Ambani’s house took place on February 25. Assistant Police Inspector Sachin Vaze was arrested on March 13 on the charge of plotting the operation to park an explosives-laden SUV outside Ambani’s residence and for the murder of Mansukh Hiren, the owner of the vehicle. Vaze was dismissed from service and Parambir Singh, to whom Vaze reported, was transferred to the Home Guards as Director General of Police. It had been speculated that Parambir Singh was involved in a cover-up of the case or was even involved in the incident. Following his transfer, Parambir Singh wrote to Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray accusing Home Minister Anil Deshmukh of extortion. He alleged that Deshmukh would set a monthly extortion target of Rs.100 crore, which police officials were told to collect from hoteliers



**PARAMBIR SINGH** talking to media after taking charge as Police Commissioner of Mumbai at the police headquarter on July 28, 2020.

and restaurant owners in Mumbai.

A few weeks after he made this allegation, first information reports (FIRs) were filed against Parambir Singh in cases involving extortion and corruption. At last count, he had five FIRs against him, which includes a case under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and he found himself in the “most wanted” list in Maharashtra. Additionally, the State Anti-Corruption Bureau has initiated two inquiries against him. Clearly, Parambir Singh’s

strategy of taking on the establishment backfired. He claimed that he was being made a scapegoat in a larger plan. He approached the Supreme Court seeking a transfer of all the cases against him to an independent agency outside Maharashtra. But the court did not oblige.

In the first FIR, which was filed in April, Inspector B.R. Ghadge accused Parambir Singh of harassing and falsely implicating him in an extortion case when he refused to comply with his corrupt schemes. Ghadge brought charges under the



S.C./S.T. Act. On July 22, Parambir Singh, five police personnel and two civilians were charged with demanding Rs.15 crore from a Mumbai builder. A day later, another case of extortion was registered against him by the Kopri Police Station in Thane.

On July 30, the Thane Nagar police station registered a third extortion case against Parambir Singh and 27 others on a complaint filed by businessmen Ketan Tanna and Sonu Jalan on July 29. Ketan Tanna alleged that Parambir Singh and his colleague Pradeep Sharma, currently in jail, threatened to frame him in an extortion case and took Rs.1.25 crore from him. Sonu Jalan alleged that he was presented with a similar *fait accompli*. To save himself, he claimed, he had given Parambir Singh and others over Rs.3 crore in recent years. The two businessmen said Parambir Singh led the extortion racket when he was Thane Police Commissioner in 2018. On August 20, a fourth FIR on extortion was filed against Parambir Singh by Bimal Agarwal, a hotelier. The complainant alleged that Parambir Singh took Rs.9 lakh from him to prevent a raid on his bars and restaurants. An additional sum of Rs.2.5 lakh, he said, was extorted to buy smartphones.

#### ON THE RUN?

According to police sources, Parambir Singh took leave of absence from work on May 5 and has not been seen since. Intelligence agents checked his properties in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Chandigarh, but could not trace him. The Thane Police issued a Look Out Notice against Parambir Singh in July. Home Minister Dilip Walse Patil confirmed this in early October. He did not rule out the possibility of Parambir Singh having fled the country. He told mediapersons that there was unconfirmed information that he was in Russia. Every government employee is expected to notify the External Affairs Ministry when he/she leaves the country. A person with a Look Out Notice against him or her cannot pass immigration at any airport. "Even if Parambir Singh managed to



**SACHIN VAZE** arrives at the Police Commissioner's office in Mumbai on March 10. He was arrested on March 13 on the charge of plotting the 'bomb scare operation' outside Mukesh Ambani's residence.



**ANIL DESHMUKH.** He resigned as Home Minister following the extortion allegations made against him by Parambir Singh.

get out before the Thane police issued the notice, the government's stipulation on foreign travel must be complied with," said a police source.

In May, during the hearings in the atrocities case, the Maharashtra government told the Bombay High Court that it would not take coercive action against Parambir Singh. In spite of that assurance, he did not appear in court. In October, following a statement by his lawyer that until the police official was declared legally absconding, the government

would have to uphold its assurance of no coercive action, the State legal team said it would no longer stand by the statement of not taking any coercive action against Parambir Singh, including arrest.

On October 25, the Maharashtra government said it was in the process of legally declaring Parambir Singh an absconder. There are serious consequences when someone is declared legally absconding. The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) provides that "if any court has reason to believe that any person against whom a warrant has been issued by it has absconded to avoid the execution of such warrant, the court may publish a written proclamation for his appearance". Section 83 of the CrPC gives power to the court, at any time after the issue of the proclamation, to order the attachment of any property, movable or immovable or both, belonging to the person who has been proclaimed absconding.

In a twist to the plot, a lawyer called Mahesh Panchal filed an affidavit with the Justice K.U. Chaudhwal Commission, which came to light on October 25, on behalf of Parambir Singh, whose power of attorney he claimed to hold. In the affidavit he said Parambir Singh was facing a "personal difficulty" and was not prepared to be cross-examined. The State government formed the one-member commission in March to probe the Anil Deshmukh-Parambir Singh case. It issued a bailable warrant but Parambir Singh ignored the commission's summons. The sudden appearance of Mahesh Panchal on the scene makes investigators believe that Parambir Singh may still be in the country.

Although the country's top investigating agencies are on his tail, Parambir Singh remains untraceable. The NIA, for instance, in March took over one aspect of the bomb scare case and Parambir Singh's involvement in it when a cyber expert with the Mumbai Police accused Parambir Singh of coercing him to modify a report and create a poster of a militant organisation called the 'Jaish-ul-Hind', who the police said had claimed responsibility for pla-





**NIA OFFICIALS** with Sachin Vaze, accused in the Mansukh Hiren murder case during investigation at the Thane Mumbra creek in Thane on March 25.

cing a car laden with gelatin sticks near the Ambani residence. The poster, along with a statement, was posted on Telegram, a communication application.

Following the extortion allegations made against him by Parambir Singh, Anil Deshmukh was forced to resign as Home Minister. The CBI booked him under sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) relating to criminal conspiracy and under the Prevention of Corruption Act. While, Anil Deshmukh has been available for interrogation, Parambir Singh was unavailable to depose before the agency.

The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar recently commented in the media that the ruling dispensation at the Centre was misusing government agencies to target opposition-ruled States. "This is part of a ruthless pursuit of destabilising the ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi coalition government. It is a matter of great concern that a commissioner level officer is untraceable," he said. Nawab Malik, NCP leader, accused the NIA of shielding Parambir Singh, saying it was impossible that it could not find him.

Meanwhile, in a report to the Chandiwal Commission in early October, the State Criminal Investigation Department (CID) stated: "The team made relentless efforts, but failed to trace Parambir Singh, as a result the bailable warrant could not

be served." In July, the E.D. had summoned Parambir Singh in the extortion case, in which the cop accused Anil Deshmukh of laundering money. At the time, Parambir Singh had asked for more time citing a medical emergency. The Mumbai Police force, which can weed out the wildest criminal, is embarrassingly silent about its efforts to search for Parambir Singh. The police told the court in the extortion case involving Bimal Agarwal that crime branch officers had travelled to Chandigarh and other possible hideouts of Parambir Singh but could not find him. None of his family members too could be reached.

#### POLICE REFORMS

The Parambir Singh case has revived the calls for police reforms. Julio Rebeiro, a retired Director General of Police, said that unless police reforms were implemented in full spirit the rot in the force and the nexus between politicians and police officers would continue. In an opinion piece in Scroll.in, Rebeiro wrote: "The police reforms, mandated by the Dharam Vira Commission, and upheld in the Supreme Court's judgment of 2006 in the Prakash Singh case, has attempted to address the core issue of the politicisation of the police. But no political party in power, at the Centre or in the States, is willing to loosen its stranglehold over the police....These develop-

ments, which have totally demoralised the Mumbai City Police and shamed most retired and most serving officers of the Indian Police Service, are a stark reminder that police reforms cannot be delayed any further."

Among the many reforms suggested was a change in the method of appointing officers. Rebeiro writes: "The power of transfers and appointments of senior Indian Police Service officers and the choice of police leaders at the cutting edge cannot be left to the politicians in power alone. The leader of the opposition and the chief justice of the State should be associated with the selection of the State's Director General of Police and the Mumbai Police Commissioner. If a proper choice had been made for the post of Mumbai's Police Commissioner, all this disgrace could have been avoided."

Ironically, when Parambir Singh, an IPS officer of the 1988 batch, was appointed as Mumbai Police Commissioner many officers felt then that he deserved the posting, police sources said. He had experience in battling the underworld, had worked in the Anti-Corruption Bureau, was reportedly accessible and, therefore, popular with the rank and file. A police source said: "It is not clear when the decline began, but this is the first time an officer of this stature has so much stacked against him and, more importantly, has simply vanished."□



# Withering leaves

The AIADMK, which steps into its 50th year in 2021, is now a **pale shadow** of its former formidable self. The party founded by the charismatic MGR is creaking under the weight of rivalries at the helm even as confusion and disillusionment reign among its cadres. BY **ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

THE All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which has ruled Tamil Nadu for 30 years since the Dravidian movement entered the portals of power in 1967, is celebrating its 50th anniversary, but amid fading hopes and rising frustration within its ranks.

The din and bustle usually associated with any golden jubilee celebration are conspicuously absent. In a situation of hope, the party cadres would have marked the event by garlanding portraits of the party's founder-leader and matinee idol M.G. Ramachandran, popularly known as MGR, and his successor and fellow film star Jayalalithaa, known as 'Amma'; distributing sweets among the public; and blaring evergreen numbers from MGR-Jayalalithaa starrers in all nooks and corners of the State.

Even the party's silver jubilee celebration in 1997, a year after it lost the Assembly elections to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the other Dravidian major, was a carnival. But today, the commemoration has been reduced to a ritual of sorts with little enthusiasm. Disillusionment is widespread and palpable among the grass-roots cadres, who have been the party's mainstay since its inception and are now largely ignored.

Founded by MGR on October 18, 1972, after he was dismissed from the DMK following personal differences

with his long-time friend and former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, the party is today a pale shadow of its glorious former self and seems to be heading for an irreversible fragmentation.

MGR and Jayalalithaa, who were both revered and feared by their followers, ran the party with an iron fist. In fact, the party had a distinct culture of absolute subservience to the leadership, which kept it intact until the death of Jayalalithaa on December 5, 2016, after a prolonged illness. As a result, there was no second line of leadership and her passing not only created a vacuum at the helm but plunged the party into chaos and confusion. It seems to be rudderless under the twin leadership of Edappadi K. Palaniswami and O. Panneerselvam, the co-coordinator and coordinator respectively.

V.K. Sasikala, Jayalalithaa's confidante, picked Palaniswami to lead the party after her political ambitions were dashed following her conviction in a disproportionate wealth case, in which Jayalalithaa was accused No.1. Earlier, whenever Jayalalithaa had to demit office for reasons concerning the case, she made Panneerselvam the interim

**M.G. RAMACHANDRAN** and Jayalalithaa at the Madurai conference of MGR fans' associations in July 1986. Senior AIADMK leader Rm. Veerappan looks on.

Chief Minister. Caught in the choppy power politics of the twin leadership are the party's cadres and functionaries, who remain staunch MGR fans and Amma loyalists. Both the Dravidian majors survived many splits and desertions. The key difference between the two is that while the DMK remains largely rooted in Dravidian ideology, the AIADMK has been dependent on the charisma of its leadership. The party, as such, has no specific ideology, although MGR had claimed that his party's guiding philosophy was 'Annaism', which in his own words was a blend



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES



of capitalism, socialism, communism, and so on.

The top two leaders who are running the party now are known only for their commitment to Jayalalithaa and not to whatever little ideology that was left in the party. Under their leadership, the party failed to win the 2021 Assembly elections after ruling the State for 10 years. Battered by a slew of corruption charges and facing a plethora of legal issues, the party is also creaking under the weight of the rivalries at its helm.

#### **MGR AND THE DMK**

The AIADMK, known only as the ADMK in its early days, was the first party to come to power in any State within just five years of formation. And perhaps no leader other than MGR could have achieved such a phenomenal ride to success in the political history of any State. (A few years after MGR's ascent, the Telugu film star N.T. Rama Rao followed in his footsteps by floating the Telugu Desam Party in 1982 and winning the Assembly elections the next year.)

To achieve this stupendous feat, MGR carefully constructed his image on the silver screen and patiently waited on the sidelines of politics from 1952, before emerging as a leader. The incidents that preceded

and followed his ouster from the DMK and the birth of the ADMK were dramatic.

After he joined the DMK in the early 1950s, MGR adopted C.N. Annadurai, the party's founder who would later become Chief Minister, as his political mentor. Since then, both the DMK and MGR were mutually beneficial to each other: the party used his celluloid fame to propagate its ideas and he exploited the party to nurture his political ambitions and develop a strong base of fans.

Those who have closely watched his cinematic and political careers are well aware of the symbiotic relationship he forged with the Tamil people, primarily through cinema. His clean image, both on and off screen, has not waned to a large extent. Through his films, MGR reached out to the subaltern classes, who saw in him their messiah, and those who were averse to the DMK's radical social reforms, which they feared would erode their conservative cultural and religious order.

The DMK's success story itself was, among other socio-political factors, the result of its leaders' handling of the media and cultural platforms. Both Annadurai and his 'younger brother' M. Karunanidhi were great orators, writers, journal-

ists and playwrights from their schooldays. That made their transition to the newly emerging medium of cinema smooth. It was through their new tool that they propagated their fiery political messages.

And MGR's screen persona was the icing on the cake.

The Dravidian leaders succeeded in generating a sense of Tamil identity and nationalism among the people, taking Tamil Nadu politics in a new, unique direction. In the 1967 Assembly elections, Annadurai exploited MGR's popularity to the hilt to boost the electoral prospects of the DMK, which was already on the upswing thanks to the anti-Hindi agitation and rising popular resentment against inflation and the Congress' rule. The party ran an aggressive campaign and in the midst of it, a shocking incident took place. On January 12, 1967, MGR was shot by fellow actor M.R. Radha at his residence following a dispute with regard to a film project and admitted to hospital.

The DMK used this personal spat between the two actors as campaign material through hundreds of posters that carried pictures of a wounded MGR in hospital with a heavy bandage around his neck. The party won a landslide victory and MGR won his Assembly seat from his hospital bed without campaigning directly.

S. Semmalai, organising secretary of the AIADMK and five-time member of the Legislative Assembly, told *Frontline* that the poster featuring MGR was instrumental in the DMK's victory. He said: "It was MGR who took the DMK to the grass-roots. His films took the party and its ideology to the masses by showing the DMK flag and symbol. He even acted in a film where his character was called Udhayasooriyan (rising sun, which is the DMK's symbol)."

The Congress, which had been in power since Independence, was dethroned despite presenting before the people a line-up of tall leaders such as K. Kamaraj.

Annadurai became Chief Minister on March 6, 1967, but died of





oesophageal cancer on February 3, 1969. The DMK had already cultivated a strong second rung of leadership in V.R. Nedunchezhiyan, who was named by Annadurai as his successor; Karunanidhi; MGR; and a few others. Annadurai's sudden demise triggered a power struggle between Nedunchezhiyan and Karunanidhi, which the latter won with MGR's strong support. MGR was subsequently made party treasurer.

Having become the DMK treasurer, which positioned him just behind Nedunchezhiyan, who was general secretary, MGR emerged as an indispensable power centre within the party. It is to be noted that MGR did not support the candidate his political mentor had identified as his successor (Nedunchezhiyan). The DMK easily won the 1971 Assembly elections, which were advanced at Karunanidhi's instance as he wanted a public referendum on his leadership and governance.

#### RIFT WITH KARUNANIDHI

Soon, the first sign of fissures between the two friends, who were equally powerful and influential, surfaced. MGR thought he was being sidelined in the party, while Karunanidhi was worried that MGR was becoming too dominant. As treasurer, MGR had demanded that the election expenditure accounts of the party and the contestants should be submitted to him. But they were submitted to the party executive committee.

Semmalai, a staunch MGR loyalist from 1972 and former Minister in Jayalalithaa's Cabinet, said that Karunanidhi was "jealous" of MGR's growing popularity, although it was "MGR who had made him Chief Minister".

Another factor that caused a rift in their relationship was Karunanidhi's attempt to launch his son M.K. Muthu in films. MGR was unhappy and thought it was being done to counter his popularity in cinema, even though he actually launched Muthu's entry by clapping the board during the shooting of his first film, *Pillaiyo Pillai*.

Minor and major irritants

widened the rift and the growing mutual suspicion snowballed into a crisis within the party.

An ambitious MGR did not want to remain just a MLA in a party which he believed had won the elections because of his charisma. At the same time, he did not want to quit on his own. From mid-1972, he started building up a case within the party. In public meetings he did not conceal his disenchantment with the party leadership and accused senior Ministers of corruption.

On October 8, 1972, MGR addressed two public meetings—one at Thirukazhukundram and another at Loyds Road in Chennai, then Madras—in which he openly criticised Karunanidhi for allowing corruption and lifting prohibition. He said: "It is against the principles Anna taught us." Political historians claim that there was more to these unsavoury developments than met the eye. Within the party, a few seniors who nursed personal grievances against MGR reportedly wanted him out. It was believed that Nedunchezhiyan was one of them, as he was unhappy with MGR for supporting Karunanidhi in the battle for the Chief Ministerial berth after Annadurai's death. Sensing trouble, K. Anbazhagan, a senior leader, wanted the issue to be sorted out by Karunanidhi, and a majority of the functionaries endorsed this suggestion.

At a meeting of district secretaries on October 9, 1972, the party decided to suspend MGR from the party. It issued a show-cause notice to him seeking his explanation and regret. Leaders such as Murasoli Maran, K. Rajaram, P.U. Shanmugam, Anbil Dharmalingam and Rm. Veerappan, who wanted to prevent a split, met MGR at his residence and held talks. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, the patriarch of the Dravidian movement, who was asked to mediate, requested MGR to opt for a truce and asked him to express regret for his accusations against the party and its leaders. He reportedly said that it could be a win-win situation for both MGR and Karunanidhi. But MGR politely refused and told him that the issue

was not in his hands any longer.

As there was no response from him, the disciplinary proceedings were referred to the executive council, which, on October 12, endorsed them. As conciliatory talks also collapsed and MGR stubbornly refused to express regret, the general council on October 14, 1972, expelled him from the party. All 277 council members who attended the meeting, out of the total of 310, unanimously endorsed the decision. Later, at a public meeting, Karunanidhi termed the decision as 'painful'. On October 16, Sathyavani Muthu, a DMK Minister, accused MGR of "attempting to convert the DMK into an MGR fan club".

#### BIRTH OF ADMK

MGR founded the ADMK on October 18, 1972. P. Kannan, a former Member of Parliament representing Salem and close associate of Jayalalithaa, once told *Frontline* that the issue could have been easily sorted out had MGR and Karunanidhi met and discussed it. He said: "Those who were to be gain from their differences did the damage. Karunanidhi grossly underestimated him." When MGR founded the ADMK, only a few leaders joined the party. Initial membership records of the ADMK showed just a handful of recognisable names, such as K.A. Krishnaswamy, who was expelled from the DMK along with MGR, Kalimuthu, Munu Adhi, Musiri Puthan, and S.D. Somasundaram. Later, senior DMK leader Nanjil Manoharan joined it.

Initially, Karunanidhi was able to retain almost all senior colleagues and managed to keep the party intact. But the ADMK's historic win in the Dindigul Parliamentary byelection in 1972—where Maya Thevar won with a difference of more than 1.14 lakh votes, pushing the DMK to the third spot behind the Congress—and its victory in the Coimbatore West Assembly byelection, swelled the new party's political fortunes, leading to a significant erosion in the DMK's rank and file.

MGR continued his blistering campaign against the DMK and Karunanidhi for another four years, and the defining moment for which he



had assiduously worked came when the Assembly elections were held in Tamil Nadu on June 10, 1977, more than a year after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had dismissed the government of Karunanidhi, who had staunchly opposed the Emergency (which MGR supported).

In the bitter battle of ballots between the friends-turned-foes, MGR won and became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

Despite gross inadequacies in administration and his political compromises, such as aligning with the Congress led by Indira Gandhi, MGR remained in power until his death in 1987. His iconic image was intact and his successor Jayalalithaa capitalised on it to become Chief Minister in 1991, 2001, 2011 and 2016. (After MGR's death, Jayalalithaa and his widow Janaki Ramachandran, who was Chief Minister for 23 days, fought over the succession issue, which Jayalalithaa won.)

MGR was a shrewd politician. Whenever the need arose, he showed no qualms in compromising on the ideologies he claimed to have imbibed from the Dravidian school of Periyar and Annadurai for his political exigencies. His political perspectives, despite his stint in the Dravidian school, did not have clarity. His centre-right orientation in

politics and some of his administrative decisions he took were in sharp contrast to the image he had projected on screen.

Unlike Karunanidhi and Annadurai, whose governance revolved around the self-respect and social reforms movement, MGR carefully distanced his governance from any debatable issues that sought to usher in radical changes in the rigid and existing social order. He confined himself to welfare schemes, such as the noon meal scheme, and strengthened the public distribution system, which he believed would free the poor from hunger.

His first stint was relatively corruption-free but saw poor administration and little infrastructural development. His primary goal upon taking office was not to take forward the long-term development programmes initiated by his predecessors, though he maintained the ecosystem Karunanidhi had created in the administration. In 1980, MGR enacted a law fixing an income limit for backward classes to get reservation benefits, which boomeranged. He abrogated it after his party got a drubbing in the 1980 Parliamentary election.

His regime also saw heavy-handed police action against protesters, which led to several deaths. Un-

der the ruse of curbing naxal operations, many youths were killed in villages in the northern districts. Eight farmers were shot dead during farmers' protests organised by the Narayanasamy Naidu-led Tamilaga Vivasayigal Sangam, seeking reduction in electricity tariff. The police shot and killed a few fisherfolk in Chennai when they protested against a government scheme.

#### CONNECT WITH PEOPLE

MGR's connect with the Tamil masses was unprecedented, and its reasons are yet to be explored in detail. He achieved the difficult task of changing the perception of politics despite his quixotic ways. (On one occasion he asked his fans to carry a knife for their safety. On another, he told them to tattoo his party name and symbol on their forearms.)

He won elections from hospital beds with ease: first when he was shot by M.R. Radha and later when he was admitted to a hospital in the United States for a kidney transplant.

MGR's impact within his party was also enormous. He was so confident that he would be the party chief forever that he had framed a by-law, since amended, which enabled all card-holding members to elect the party leadership. No other political party has such a clause that grants the cadres the privilege of electing their leader. Jayalalithaa retained the clause but the present twin leadership amended it.

Semmalai said that while MGR was a phenomenon, Jayalalithaa was a bold leader who had the party under her thumb.

He said: "The disadvantage of twin leadership is its delay in taking a collective decision on vital issues. One cannot dismiss the popular perception that in the prevailing political scenario, the party needs to be aggressive, for which a strong, single leadership is inherently essential. If at all such a concept of having a single leadership is to evolve tangibly, it must happen only through consensus."

The lingering shadow of MGR's legacy is still being sold to the new



**EDAPPADI** K. Palaniswami and O. Panneerselvam, the co-coordinator and coordinator of AIADMK respectively, during an election campaign in Theni district of Tamil Nadu on March 27, 2021.



generation, keeping up the hopes that the party he founded will remain intact. Despite the AIADMK's recent rightist leanings, the existence of this offshoot of the Dravidian school of politics is seen by progressive sections as vital for Tamil Nadu so that the State continues to resolutely resist the pernicious influence of right-wing ideologies.

#### JAYALALITHAA'S RISE

Jayalalithaa's takeover of the party after MGR's demise added a new element of authoritarianism to the organisation, which saw her demand complete subservience from her cadres. She encouraged sycophancy and brazen displays of servility, and her leadership was characterised by whimsical and impulsive decisions. In contrast, MGR had a strong lineup of senior leaders who were treated with respect and decorum, while Jayalalithaa preferred non-entities who readily prostrated before her.

MGR did not name Jayalalithaa as his successor although he made her the party's propaganda secretary. However, he removed her from that post once after learning that she had been responsible for some disturbing developments within the party, and nominated her to the Rajya Sabha just to keep her away from the State unit of the party. Even after he took ill and spent time in the U.S. for treatment, he avoided meeting her.

As co-stars, MGR and Jayalalithaa had a love-hate relationship. In fact, after she took over the party, she aggressively marketed her own image and tried to eclipse MGR's legacy. During the 1996 election campaign, the AIADMK put up life-size cut-outs and giant-size posters of her all over the State, while MGR's image was virtually absent. The party received a heavy drubbing in the election, after which she was forced to project his image in subsequent campaigns.

When MGR died, she staked a claim to the party leadership with support from some junior Ministers in MGR's Cabinet like S. Tirunavukkarasu and a few MLAs. However, senior leaders such as P.U. Shanmugam, C. Ponnaiyan,

Muthuswami and Rm. Veerappan fiercely resisted her attempt and asked Janaki Ramachandran to take over the mantle. Kannan, who was once suspended from the party by MGR for floating the Jayalalithaa Peravai, said: "For those seniors, it was preposterous to even think of a Brahmin woman and one-time heroine to head a Dravidian party."

It became a fight between Janaki Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa, who backed the candidature of Nedunchezhiyan for Chief Minister. Janaki Ramachandran was asked by the then Governor to form the government, but it could survive for just 23 days.



**V.K. SASIKALA**, Jayalalithaa's confidante, at MGR Memorial House in Chennai on October 17.

When a confidence motion was moved in the Assembly on January 28, 1988, there was bedlam. The violence resulted in the dismissal of the Janaki government, and the AIADMK split into the Jayalalithaa and Janaki factions.

The State went to the polls in 1989, which the DMK won. The Jaya faction fared well while the Janaki group was routed, following which the latter withdrew from politics. In February 1989, the two factions merged and Jayalalithaa became the party's general secretary. The two leaves symbol, which had been frozen, was restored to the party.

#### THE SASIKALA FACTOR

In January 1991, the DMK government was dismissed on unsubstantiated charges. In the Assembly elections held in May in the wake of

Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, Jayalalithaa scored a landslide victory and became the Chief Minister.

But contrary to expectations, her government was corrupt and she was charge-sheeted later along with Sasikala in a case relating to acquisition of wealth using state power.

Political observers blame Sasikala and her family, who had occupied Jayalalithaa's Poes Garden residence since the mid-1980s, for all her political misfortunes. They said that Sasikala's family virtually controlled her residence and the party and emerged as a 'shadow power centre' within the party. After Jayalalithaa's death, Sasikala was elected as interim general secretary on December 29, 2016.

But on February 7, 2017, the then caretaker Chief Minister Panneerselvam launched a 'dharma yuddham' (dharmic war) against Sasikala. It marked the beginning of yet another faction feud within the AIADMK.

Even as Sasikala was getting ready to take over as Chief Minister, the Supreme Court on February 14, 2017, upheld her conviction in the wealth case and sent her to prison for four years. Before going to prison, she made Palaniswami the Chief Minister, kicking off yet another internal feud.

The party characterised by ideological bankruptcy and hero (and heroine) worship plunged into an existential crisis with the departure of Jayalalithaa from the scene. In Jayalalithaa the party had a strong leader, a factor which kept it intact. Now, under the twin leadership of Palaniswami and Panneerselvam, who lack the kind of charisma enjoyed by MGR and Jayalalithaa, the party is on shaky ground.

In the absence of Jayalalithaa, who always kept a distance from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the two leaders are seen as dancing to the tunes of the BJP and the Centre, a historic irony for a State that saw a regional force challenging the authority of the Centre and emerging as one of the pillars of federalism over five decades ago. □



## CIVIL AVIATION



AN AIR INDIA aircraft takes off from Ahmedabad on July 7, 2017.

# Sold for a song

REUTERS

The government bends over backwards in the Air India sale, handing over **an array of assets** to the Tata group, but years of mismanagement and a host of internal issues imply an extended period of turbulence ahead for the acquirer. **BY RAVI SHARMA**

LEGEND has it that when J.R.D. Tata, the illustrious industrialist, pioneering aviator, and India's first licensed pilot, heard the news on radio in 1978 that the government had sacked him as chairman of Air India, the airline he had founded in 1932 and dexterously managed without remuneration even after it was nationalised in 1953, he remarked: "I feel as you would feel if your favourite child was taken away."

In a letter to Prime Minister Morarji Desai, who was heading a Janata Party government, J.R.D. Tata wrote: "I hope you will not consider it presumptuous of me to have expected that when the government decided to terminate my services and my forty-five years' association with Indian civil aviation, I would be informed of their decision directly, and

if possible, in advance of the public...." Some 43 years after what was the "saddest day of his life", India's flag carrier is all set to return to the Tata fold. The return comes 68 years after Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru nationalised nine airlines through the Air Corporations Act, 1953, including Air India, in which the Tatas held a 25 per cent stake.

On October 8, 2021, the Narendra Modi government announced that Talace Pvt. Ltd, a fully owned special purpose vehicle (SPV) floated by Tata Sons Pvt. Ltd, the principal holding company of the Tata group, had won the bid to acquire a 100 per cent stake in the debt-laden Air India. The move came after 20 years of fits and starts, which saw successive governments dither over whether the government should retain a re-

sidual stake/control in the national carrier and what the winning sale price should be.

### DETAILS OF THE DEAL

With its bid of Rs.18,000 crore (\$2.4 billion), which was above the Rs.12,906-crore (\$1.72 billion) reserve price set by the government, Talace defeated the only other competitor—Ajay Singh, the promoter of SpiceJet, the heavily indebted low-cost airline. Ajay Singh's bid was Rs.15,100 crore. Of the Rs.18,000 crore, Rs.15,300 crore (\$2.04 billion), or 85 per cent, will go towards servicing Air India's accumulated debt, which as of August 31 stood at Rs.61,562 crore (\$8.21 billion). The government will receive the remaining Rs.2,700 crore (\$360 million) in cash for its equity stake. The transac-



tion, subject to the successful bidder and the government satisfying all statutory requirements, and Competition Commission of India and third-party approvals, is expected to be sewed up by end December. Until then the government will continue to bear Air India's operational losses of around Rs.20 crore (\$2.6 million) every day.

The deal also secures for the Tatas a 100 per cent stake in Air India's AI Express Ltd and 50 per cent in the ground handling entity Air India SATS Airport Services Private Ltd, a 50:50 joint venture company between Air India and Singapore Airport Terminal Services (SATS Ltd). However, it does not give the Tatas control over Alliance Air, a wholly owned subsidiary of Air India that operates air services to 47 domestic destinations with a fleet of 18 ATR 72-600 (70-72-seater) aircraft as part of the government's Regional Connectivity Scheme.

Air India's non-core assets such as parcels of prime land, buildings, a famed collection of more than 40,000 pieces of art and collectibles, including an ashtray designed and gifted by the Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali, and other holdings are also not part of the deal. The assets, which are valued at Rs.14,718 crore (\$1.96 billion), will initially be transferred to a government-owned SPV called Air India Assets Holding Ltd (AIAHL) and hived off later.

#### LOSSES FOR THE TAXPAYER

Announcing the decision to accept the Tatas' bid, Tuhin Kanta Pandey, Secretary, Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM), said that since 2009-10 the taxpayer had funded Air India to the tune of Rs.1,10,276 crore (\$14.70 billion)—Rs.54,584 crore (\$7.27 billion) by way of cash support and Rs.55,692 crore (\$7.42 billion) in sovereign loan guarantees.

Of Air India's accumulated debt of Rs.61,562 crore, 94 per cent is sovereign, or guaranteed by the government. The portion of this debt that is not covered even after the Tatas' bid and the sale of Air India's non-core assets is approximately Rs.32,000

crore. This will be transferred to AIAHL and the government will have to service it.

The Air India sale was a case of third time lucky for the government. Two previous bids, both during the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regimes (one in 2001 and another in 2017-18), were not fruitful. This time round, the government bent over backwards to sweeten the deal by offering management control and 100 per cent equity share capital and lowering the quantum of debt to be taken over by the bidder. The government will absorb 75 per cent of the airline's debt.

The government is also viewing the sale as a phenomenal boost to its disinvestment drive and hopes that it will set in motion the process of privatisation of Neelachal Ispat Nigam Ltd and Central Electronics during the current quarter and the strategic sale of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), IDBI Bank and BEML Ltd before the end of the current fiscal, followed by the proposed initial public offer of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC).

In order to protect the interests of Air India's 12,085 employees, of whom 8,084 are permanent and 4,001 are contractual, and Air India Express' 1,434 employees, the new owners of Air India are prohibited from inflicting any redundancies during the first 12 months of operations, and even after that, employee disengagement can only be through a voluntary retirement scheme. The government has, however, agreed to foot the bill for expenses incurred on medical benefits for retired employees.

Central unions strongly criticised the government's sale of Air India. Ten Central trade unions wrote to Prime Minister Modi demanding that the sale be stopped and that the government roll back what they said was the "policy of selling national assets".

In a letter, they said: "By selling Air India by hook or by crook (because it is slowly emerging that it has

been sold for a song), the government has tried to cover up its misdeeds."

According to industry experts, the Tatas would need to pump in \$1 billion to get the airline out of the rut it is in. The group already owns a majority holding in two smaller airlines: an 84 per cent stake in the budget carrier AirAsia India (an affiliate of a Malaysian carrier) and a 51 per cent stake in the full-service Vistara (a joint venture with Singapore Airlines Ltd). These two airlines account for only a tiny portion of the overall revenues of the Tata group, a \$113 billion business empire that comprises over a hundred companies.

In October 2016, commenting on the AirAsia India joint venture, Cyrus Mistry, who succeeded Ratan Tata as chairman of the Tata group but was unceremoniously ousted, wrote a scathing letter to the directors of Tata Sons Ltd, in which he stated that his "pushback was hard but futile" since Ratan Tata had already "concluded negotiations to partner with AirAsia and wanted the proposal tabled at the forthcoming Tata Sons board meeting".

The Tata group has always looked to play a large part in the aviation sector, including 'coveting' Air India. In 1994, just a few years after India had opened its doors to private airlines, the Tatas toyed with the idea of launching an airline in partnership with Singapore Airlines. But they had to abandon the proposal because the government was not willing to allow the entry of a foreign player.

When the NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee first talked of disinvestment of Air India, at the turn of the millennium, the Tatas once again indicated their desire to gain control over the airline. Their plan was stymied but the Tatas retained their abiding interest in India's airline business.

#### LIABILITIES GALORE

Given Air India's relatively ageing fleet, unionised and difficult-to-manage workforce, a plummeting on-time performance record, and





**OCTOBER 15, 1962:** J.R.D. Tata with the 'Leopard Moth' which he flew to commemorate the 30th anniversary of his historic Karachi-Bombay flight.

operating costs that far exceed the industry average, the Tatas' move to acquire the airline hardly looks like a pragmatic decision. Speaking to *Frontline*, Captain Amit Singh, an aviator with over 30 years of experience in the commercial air transport industry, including in senior management positions at IndiGo and AirAsia India, said that although the Tatas "may have been the progenitor of aviation" in India and of Air India, "the companies stand cultures apart".

Highlighting the dichotomy in corporate culture between the two entities, a senior pilot said: "The Tatas have to take a call when it comes to absorbing some of the pilots from Air India. Both Vistara and AirAsia have a tough policy regarding pilots who fail the mandatory breath analyser test for alcohol detection, terminating pilots who fail the test for a second time. In Air India, there are some pilots who have failed it twice and, in some cases, thrice. Some have managed to retain their jobs arguing that the DGCA [Directorate General of Civil Aviation] rule pertaining to the test was not in place when they failed the test the first time."

Amit Singh said: "Tata's tie-up with AirAsia Berhad seems to be crumbling primarily due to the marked difference in the ideology of the two groups. While AirAsia is a high-risk, profit-driven and ruthless organisation, the Tata culture is more benevolent and is invested in its employees. Research has shown

that 30 per cent of mergers fail due to work culture issues."

#### ASSETS IN FAVOUR

In its favour, Air India has some attractive assets, including lucrative landing and parking rights at London's Heathrow airport and in New York, both of which will help Vistara attract business travellers with the promise of non-stop flights to destinations in Europe and the United States. In contrast, foreign hub carriers such as Emirates and Etihad Airways can only compete with one-stop options. Overall, the Tatas, in one stroke, will acquire control of 4,400 domestic and 1,800 international landing and parking slots at Indian airports, as well as 900 slots at airports overseas.

Air India, together with its low-cost entity, Air India Express, which primarily ferries Indian workers to and from the Persian Gulf, currently operates a 141-aircraft fleet: 49 wide-body long-haul jets, with the remaining being narrow-body aircraft for shorter flights. Before the pandemic, the two airlines operated 180-185 domestic flights every day, flying to 85 domestic and 40 international destinations. Air India is also a member of the 26-airline Star Alliance.

Four airlines in the Tata hangar—Air India, Air India Express, Vistara and Air Asia—will also mean significant scale-ups and synergies, including unequalled worldwide reach among Indian carriers and an enviably strong position to bargain with aircraft manufacturers

such as Boeing and Airbus, and lessors, engine constructors, oil companies, suppliers, and airport operators. Of course, this hinges on Air India and Air India Express fitting together like a jigsaw with the existing Tata airlines.

Statistics from the DGCA showed that in August this year, Air India and Air India Express had a market share of 11.03 and 2.17 per cent, respectively, of all domestic air traffic. During the same month, Vistara and Air Asia cornered 7.56 and 6.31 per cent, respectively, of the domestic traffic pie.

With its latest acquisition, the Tata group will now enjoy 27.07 per cent domestic market share. It is still far below the market leader, IndiGo, which enjoys a humongous 53.8 per cent share of domestic air traffic.

#### OLIGOPOLY FEARS

Interestingly, now the top two players in the domestic aviation air passenger market will together have a market share totalling over 80 per cent, a fact that the Central unions have highlighted. They said: "This sale of Air India to Tatas facilitates an oligopoly. The combined revenues of Air India, Vistara and Air Asia amounted to Rs.40,500 crore in 2020, out of the total revenues of the entire industry amounting to Rs.95,700 crore, i.e. 42.32 per cent, whereas IndiGo has a market share of 37.41 per cent. By any account, this would mean that privatisation of Air India has resulted in one of the most concentrated markets in India."

When it comes to international traffic to and from India, foreign airlines rule the roost, dwarfing Indian carriers. DGCA statistics showed that in the October-December 2019 quarter, the last quarter before the pandemic hit, Indian carriers accounted for only 39.2 per cent of all passengers flying in and out of the country. Air India (11.5 per cent) and Air India Express (7.3 per cent) accounted for 18.8 per cent of passengers, and IndiGo 12.8 per cent.

The Tatas could also benefit from tax concessions while servicing the Rs.15,300-crore debt. And naturally, any tax 'concessions' will amount to a



corresponding loss of revenue to the public exchequer. Although details of the terms of the purchase agreement have still not been spelt out, it would be safe to assume that with the revocation of the sovereign guarantee, the Tatas would be keen to renegotiate the debt with the financial institutions concerned.

Industry watchers said that three decades ago, Air India, with its lavishly decorated aircraft and 'royal' service that spelt panache, was one of the world's premier airlines. But several quixotic decisions by successive governments in the past 25 years, aggravated by the advent of private carriers in the 1990s and the burst of 'low-cost, no-frills' airlines in the mid-2000s, coupled with mistrust between the unions and the management and falling standards in the airline, devastated the national carrier.

#### HOW AIR INDIA WAS DESTROYED

Instead of stemming the rot, successive governments worsened the situation, especially when running a full-service airline in the face of cut-throat competition from low-cost no-frills airlines in a price-sensitive market had become impossible. Several decisions by the Ministry of Civil Aviation lacked planning and foresight and flew in the face of common sense: for instance, acquiring and utilising long-haul aircraft on routes that had traditionally been making losses.

Further, the Ministry refused to undertake fleet acquisition when it was badly needed, enabling private players to capture marketshare from Air India and Indian Airlines in a rapidly expanding sector. And ironically, when aircraft were finally ordered, it was done allegedly more for extraneous reasons and less to meet the operational requirements of the two stressed airlines.

Between 2005 and 2006, in a

series of inexplicable decisions that unarguably caused the greatest damage to the two state carriers, the Ministry under Praful Patel placed orders to acquire 111 aircraft at a cost of Rs.46,549 crore (68 Boeings and 43 Airbus planes), financed almost entirely through debt. The next step, which was even more baffling, came in 2007 when it decided to merge both the carriers. The move was a disaster, proving yet again that cultural and operational synergies are crucial to a merger's success.

In 2013, amid mounting losses, Ajit Singh, the then Minister for Civil Aviation, averred that privatisation was imperative for Air India's survival. In 2017, the government approved the sale of the airline and a



**TUHIN** Kanta Pandey, Secretary, Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM).

committee was set up to begin the process. But the government's dilly-dallying caused Air India to slide deeper into the red.

The two national carriers were also badly hurt by the 'open skies' policy aggressively pursued by successive governments and the liberalised bilateral agreements that followed, which allowed foreign carriers to go beyond the major airports and operate from the interior as well.

Foreign airlines were

also able to utilise the 'Sixth Freedom of The Air', which allows a carrier operating between two foreign locations to halt within its own country, which is usually their aviation hub, to garner passengers, especially on lucrative routes such as West Asia.

Commenting on the challenges before the Tatas, senior pilots with Air India told *Frontline* that it was a fallacy that one of the core strengths of the airline was its workforce, particularly the pilots.

A senior captain said: "The number of accidents, and incidents which may not have been classified as serious incidents but still warranted investigations by the regulatory authority, indicate the indiscipline

and unprofessionalism that has crept in. Many pilots in Air India Express originally belong to Air India and are on deputation to Air India Express. The top management positions in Air India Express have been occupied by executives of Air India most of the time. So, while Air India Express took all the blame, Air India got away with it."

In addition to bureaucratic interference and bungling, Air India's management took some seemingly strange decisions.

A prime example was Air India's inability to transfer crew to bases from where they are required to operate flights. A captain said: "The Boeing 787 flights originate from Delhi or Mumbai. But pilots on the Boeing 787 fleet who are 'based' at stations like Chennai, Calicut (Kozhikode), Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Kolkata are flown to Delhi or Mumbai as 'staff on duty' on business class seats and provided accommodation at hotels before and after their flights, and then flown back to their respective bases. This is a sheer waste of money. Similarly, Airbus fleet pilots who are based at Trivandrum and Calicut are flown and accommodated at stations from where they are required to operate flights."

He added: "Air India undertakes a similar exercise with cabin crew: in a bid to equalise their international flights that makes them eligible to earn U.S. dollars as outstation allowance, several of them are flown from one base to another. It will make more sense for the airline just to pay them the dollars rather than transport them from place to place and accommodate them in hotels."

Senior pilots also mentioned the decision taken by the executive director (operations) to depute a disproportionately large number of pilots from the Airbus fleet as commanders to the Boeing 787 fleet, resulting in several 787 flights flying with a complement of two captains instead of the usual complement of one captain and a co-pilot, resulting in an unnecessary financial outflow as captains get substantially higher flying allowances than co-pilots. □



# The widening gap

The cumulative effect of the Modi government's flawed policies and the unfair tax burden have sent millions into unemployment, truncated the small and medium industry, and sapped vitality out of India's working classes. BY KABEER SHRIVASTAVA

THERE seems to be no let-up in the bad news emerging from India's real economy. The latest National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data reveal that the economy grew by 20.1 per cent in the first quarter of 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. This is still a -9.2 per cent contraction from the pre-pandemic level of 2019. In simpler terms, if you take Rs.100 as the size of the economy in March-June 2019, we are today at about 91. Earlier, an analysis of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Quarterly Bulletin (July 2020-September 2020) revealed that for the first time since poverty estimates began in India, the number of absolute poor had risen by about 70 million.

Yet, despite a battered real economy, India's stock markets are soaring. Recently, the benchmark index of its largest stock exchange NSE's Nifty 50 closed at an all-time high of 16,250 points; up about 45 per cent from a year ago, but only 87 per cent up from five years ago, meaning that more than 60 per cent growth has occurred during the pandemic year alone. India's second wealthiest person, Gautam Adani, has seen his wealth soar by an astronomical 500 per cent in this period.

While these figures are striking, they are not global outliers. America's Dow Jones has given 28 per cent returns in the same period, and the wealth of billionaires such as Elon Musk has seen a 540 per cent jump since January 2020. Economic the-

orists explain the K-shaped response to the pandemic—the rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer—as a result of cheap money fuelled by low interest rates and the appetite of the rich to buy cheap assets during downturns. *The Guardian* estimates that the world's current super-rich holds the greatest concentration of wealth since the Gilded Age in the United States at the turn of the 20th century.

## WORKING CLASSES

COVID has bled government treasuries globally. COVID-19 relief packages have been financed through various models, most commonly through debt monetisation. In developed economies such as the U.S., low-income and middle-class families benefited from direct stimulus cheques and pay cheque protection plans. In India, while rural and poor households received a marginal increase in direct cash transfers as part of an existing employment guarantee scheme, and organised businesses in affected sectors received a government-backed line of credit, the average working classes—the middle and upper-middle class Indians—were left to fend for themselves.

With economies now reopening, ballooning fiscal deficit demands attention. In the U.S., clarion calls are being given to reintroduce the wealth tax; in the United Kingdom too, there is talk of taxing the rich. The United Nations Secretary-General has urged governments to reduce in-

come inequalities by taxing those who profited from the pandemic. The International Monetary Fund has echoed those views.

In India, the Narendra Modi government is implementing a fiscal policy that is just the opposite of this worldwide concern: it is effectively forcing the working classes to fund the deficit. In the 2021 annual Budget, the government has set about Rs.1,98,000 crore as the target for additional excise cess collection on transport fuel, an increase of nearly 300 per cent over the pre-



B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

**AT A CONSTRUCTION SITE** in Chennai. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey says that for the first time since poverty estimates began in India, the number of absolute poor has risen by about 70 million.



pandemic collection in 2019-20. This is when crude oil prices have hovered in the \$60 range from April 2019 to April 2021, going to about \$20 in April 2020, a historic low. Runaway oil prices are causing retail inflation to cross the Reserve Bank of India's upper tolerance for consecutive quarters, hurting the working classes. Some staple food items such as mustard oil have seen their prices nearly double in one year.

Expected revenues from corporate taxes have been significantly reduced, but revenues from personal income taxes have been increased by over 11 per cent. More than half of the personal taxpayers are salaried classes, who are unable to claim any profit-linked tax deductions. In Modi's first Budget of 2014-15, the total corporate tax collection was about 76 per cent higher than the collection from other direct taxes, the vast majority of which was personal income tax. Seven years down the line, this difference has been reduced to less than 5 per cent.

Those with profits of over Rs.500 crore pay an effective tax of 25 per cent, 3 per cent lower than the average tax paid by corporates having profits between Rs.100-and Rs.500 crore, yet both are substantially lower than the average statutory rate of 34 per cent. The Budget documents note that "larger companies avail themselves of higher deduction and incentives as compared to smaller companies". And yet, policy remains unresponsive to such a glaring economic inequity.

India's Receipts Budget further reveals that Special Economic Zones and power generation and distribution claimed Rs.23,261 crore and Rs.15,513.02 crore, respectively, as various tax deductions, constituting the lion's share (40 per cent) of tax incentives available across industries in 2018-19. Coal mining paid an effective tax rate of 23.90 per cent and petrochemical refining paid 21.22 per cent, both substantially lower than the statutory rate. These industries are minting money on Dalal Street, and their doyens happen to be two of Asia's wealthiest men—Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

In Budget 2018, on the pretext of spurring economic growth, corporate tax rates for companies having profits less than Rs.250 crore were reduced to a maximum of 25 per cent. Newer companies in certain sectors could avail themselves of rates as low as 15 per cent. With these concessions, while the treasury booked hundreds of billions in foregone revenue, the Indian economy stuttered, going into a technical recession in Q2 of 2020. All this while, the maximum marginal tax on personal income stayed one of the highest in the world, around 42 per cent. Expected revenues from the Securities Transaction Tax (levied on transactions in listed securities undertaken on stock exchanges and in units of mutual funds) has also been kept at the same level of about Rs.12,000 crore for three years, despite the growth in the share markets.

#### CUMULATIVE EFFECT

The Modi government is beholden to the economic philosophy of the "trickle-down approach", despite evidence of it lacking efficacy and a clear constitutional mandate against it. It took policy shape most conspicuously with demonetisation in November 2016, was swiftly followed with the Goods and Services Tax in 2017 and finally topped off with the grossly underprepared lockdown in early 2020.

The cumulative effect of these three policies, read with the destructively unfair tax burden, has sent millions into unemployment, truncated the small and medium industry, and sapped vitality out of India's working classes by denuding them of the constitutionally guaranteed right to economic justice.

According to an analysis by the Pew Research Centre, owing to the pandemic-induced downturn, India's middle class has shrunk by a third to 66 million, accounting for a 60 per cent of the global retreat in the number of people from that income tier.

In *Papiah vs State of Karnataka*, the Supreme Court held that "economic justice is a facet of liberty without which equality of status and

dignity of person are teasing illusions". Apart from that guarantee enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution, Article 38 enjoins the government to minimise inequality of income and status; Article 39 directs it to distribute material resources of the community to best subserve the common good and to ensure that the operation of the economic system does not result in concentration of wealth and means of production.

In practice, the government's economic policies are drawing us to the opposing spectrum of the mandate of our founding fathers. Indian economy's dream run from 2003-2011 saw unprecedented upward social mobility of millions moving out of poverty, and the lower-middle class moving to the middle class, and so on. That created a powerful political identity for the working classes, as evidenced by the India Against Corruption movement, and the sweeping protests after the brutal gang rape and murder of Nirbhaya. But since 2014, that story of politically empowered working classes has no shining exposition. Today, India is ranked 76 out of 82 nations in the Social Mobility Report, 2020, of the World Economic Forum; this implies that it is least likely for a family in today's India to move up from their economic class.

India's tax and economic policies are systematically and unjustly purging India's working classes. Jean-Baptiste Colbert's seminal trick, "the art of taxation consists of so plucking the goose as to obtain the largest amount of feathers with the smallest amount of hissing", has run its course. The government scantily realises that the prescription from 17th century imperial Europe should not be emulated in 21st century India. The working-class goose has been stripped off its feathers. It is time for wealthier Indians to bear their fair share in the egalitarian demands of India's democracy. The government has a singular place to look: the stock markets. But would it? For, "a government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always count on the support of Paul". □

*Kabeer Shrivastava is an advocate.*



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COLUMN

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ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES



C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

# A neoliberal crisis

The so-called coal shortage in India was **the result of botched policy initiatives** that involved curbing public sector mining and getting the private sector to fill the gap as part of the neoliberal agenda. When the private sector failed to step up, and imports, which were seen as a solution, turned expensive, the country was left to face a coal crisis.

**I**N recent weeks the media have featured stories bordering on the alarmist about a coal shortage in India. Coal inventories with thermal power plants had fallen to levels at which major country-wide power outages seemed inevitable. Fortunately, that has not (as yet) materialised, but it is indeed true that coal inventories with the power producers did collapse from the equivalent of around 30 days' requirement to that for a couple of days or more in the case of many plants.

According to data from the 135 plants with over 165 gigawatts (GW) of installed generation capacity monitored by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), 70 were down to less than four days of fuel on October 10, as compared to 64 a week earlier. Which raises the question: why should this situation arise in a country with the fifth largest coal reserves in the world and long years of experience in mining coal?

Explanations provided by different sources have included sharp in-

creases in demand for power, and therefore coal, as the economy revives from the shock of the COVID pandemic, and unseasonal rain that has affected mining and transportation. But these fail to convince. Neither is the recovery robust nor is demand likely to exceed pre-COVID levels which the existing supply system had been consistently servicing. And India's coal industry is acclimatised enough to the vagaries of the monsoon to keep production going when confronted by changes in the intensity and timing of rainfall.

Focussing on such explanations perhaps serves only one purpose: that of running down Coal India Ltd (CIL), the public sector behemoth that has, since the nationalisation of coal mines in 1973, almost single-handedly shouldered the burden of meeting India's rising coal demand. The state-owned leviathan is constantly attacked for being inefficient and unequal to the task of sustaining coal supply.

However, for some time now, the

government has been working to reduce the relative role of CIL in the country's coal supply chain. Successive administrations over the last couple of decades have attempted to get the private sector, domestic and foreign, to invest in coal mining by diverting coal blocks to potential investors, even if not always successfully.

## PRIVATISATION OF COAL PRODUCTION

In 1993, the Coal Mines (Nationalisation) Act, 1973, was amended to allow private sector participation in coal mining activities for captive purposes in industries such as steel, power and cement. By 2010, more than 200 coal blocks with around 30 billion tonnes of reserves were allocated to user units for captive mining by a high-powered committee chaired by the Secretary, Ministry of Coal. Challenged in the Supreme Court, following an assessment by the Comptroller and Auditor General that the high-powered commit-



tee had not followed a transparent method of allocation, the allocations were cancelled in 2014, except for a few that were allocated through auction or to Central government undertakings.

An examination of what occurred in the period between 1993 and the cancellation does not present the private sector in a good light, since little coal was produced through investment in the captive coal blocks. But this failure of the private sector to augment production is discounted by attributing it to the fact that privatisation of coal production was through the captive mining route, and that too through an allocation that was not transparent. So, in 2015, the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015, was enacted to permit the sale of coal blocks earlier reserved for captive mining to domestic and foreign bidders through an auction process.

As of 2018, those investors who win such blocks through auctions are allowed to undertake commercial mining with no restrictions on the sale or utilisation of the resulting production. Mining to market rather than use has been legalised. But all this is yet to make much difference to the source of domestic coal supply. Production outside of the two public sector majors, CIL and Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), touched a maximum of 68.75 million tonnes in 2020-21.

Meanwhile, the task of stripping CIL of its ostensibly inefficient monopoly has been under way in other forms. To start with, the government has been facilitating coal imports, resorted to by power producers when cheap sources of global coal supply could be identified. As per the present import policy, coal can be freely imported (under Open General Licence) by the consumers if they prefer that source of supply.

#### RISE IN COAL IMPORTS

India's coal imports rose from 190.95 million tonnes in 2016-17 to 248.53 million tonnes in 2019-20, when production rose from 645.98 million tonnes to 706.77 million tonnes. Imports in 2020-21 are estimated at a

lower 215.9 million tonnes because of a COVID-induced fall in demand and excess stocks in the system. Production that year was also down to 690.89 million tonnes. Any increase in demand because of a post-COVID recovery should have been easy to meet, partly with increased production and the running down of inventories and partly through imports.

Imports did rise in April-August 2021, touching 92.49 million tonnes as compared to 51.23 million tonnes in the corresponding period of the previous year. But there was one hitch. The prices at which imports could be accessed were rising rapidly. The import price of Indonesian coal, for example, rose from \$60 a tonne in March to \$200 a tonne by October. The result was that coal users were unwilling to lift the imported coal because that would raise costs of production to levels which could possibly not be neutralised with increases in tariffs. As a result, they all turned to the market for domestic coal, resulting in a spike in demand.

This occurred in a context in which signals had been sent out for some time that CIL's role as a producer was to be cut back by limiting investment. The government was not only unwilling to give it substantial funds for new investment to expand mining capacity, but also decided to treat the public sector as a cash cow to finance its Budget which had been starved of revenues from taxation. CIL's dividend payout ratio reportedly increased from 22.7 per cent of earnings in 2010-11 to a peak of 145.5 per cent of earnings in 2017-18 (*Indian Express*, October 19, 2021).

Meanwhile, power generators were defaulting on their payments for coal purchased, with producers in States such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu accumulating large arrears. Receivables on the accounts of CIL rose from Rs.6,258 crore in 2017-18 to Rs.19,623 crore in 2020-21.

With the government signalling a new era in coal mining that would see a reduced role for CIL and a will-

ingness to permit meeting supply shortfalls with imports, despite the availability of domestic reserves, investment in expanding mining capacity was a casualty. That, in turn, meant that the flexibility to raise production in the face of a sudden increase in demand for domestic coal would have been constrained. Moreover, offtake from the public sector was not growing fast and inventories were not being transported out at a pace that encouraged increased production. To expect the public sector in those circumstances to accumulate inventories to be held as a strategic reserve to meet contingencies of the kind reflected in the spurt in demand in recent months is completely unwarranted.

Finally, despite the government's stated position that the share of installed capacity and power supply from non-fossil fuel sources is rising fast and that India is achieving more than it committed through the nationally determined contribution submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as required by the Paris Agreement, the share of coal-based power generation reportedly increased from 61.91 per cent in pre-COVID year 2019 to 66.35 per cent in 2021. As a result, coal consumption during August-September 2021 was 18 per cent higher than in the corresponding months of 2019. India's green energy thrust does not appear to be giving coal a reprieve.

In sum, India's coal crisis is the result of botched policy initiatives resulting from its adherence to a neo-liberal agenda in which the public sector's role was to shrink and the private sector was offered new avenues for profit. Unfortunately, in this case, while one aspect of that transition, which involved curbing public sector growth, worked, the other, which is to get the private sector to fill the gap, was a failure. Imports served to fill the resulting gap in supply. But when prices of imported coal spiked, that option was not viable anymore. A country with abundant coal reserves and long experience with coal production was left to face a coal crisis. □



# Hungry nation

Although the government has reacted angrily to the GHI report of 2021, which has ranked India lower than its South Asian neighbours, the report has in all probability erred on the side of underestimation of the levels of hunger and deprivation in India. **BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

THE Narendra Modi government has rubbished a global report on hunger that describes India's level of hunger as "serious" and rates the country, at 101, below its South Asian neighbours in the global rankings. The scores are categorised as low, moderate, serious, alarming and extremely alarming. From 38.8 in 2000, 37.4 in 2006, and 28.8 in 2012, India's score has declined to 27.5 in 2021.

The Global Hunger Index report, published by two humanitarian and private aid organisations, Concern Worldwide and Welt Hunger Hilfe, came into existence in 2000. There are four parameters for the rankings and scores—prevalence of undernourishment in the general population, child mortality, child wasting (low weight for height among children under five denoting acute malnutrition) and child stunting, which

includes children under five with a low height for their age denoting chronic undernutrition. The 2021 report says 15.3 per cent of the Indian population is undernourished, 34.7 per cent of children under five are stunted and 3.4 per cent die before their fifth birthday. The report accessed data for 135 countries but could find sufficient data for only 116 of them. For 19 countries, individual scores could not be calculated and



SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA/THE HINDU

**INDIA FALLS TO 101** from 94 among 116 countries in the Global Hunger Index. In this photograph, needy people eat lunch distributed by volunteers near Kashmiri Gate area in New Delhi on October 15.





PRASHANT NAKWE



**A VOLUNTEER** of Shramjeevi Sanghatana performing the weight check test for a malnourished child at Bhospada, a remote village in Maharashtra's Palghar district, in September 2016. A total of 208 deaths were reported in Palghar district between April and August that year. The government swung into action only in September, rushing severely malnourished children to hospitals in Jowhar and Mokhada towns.

ranks could not be determined because of lack of data.

India's rank of 101 places it behind Pakistan (92), Sri Lanka (65), and Bangladesh and Nepal (76 each). War-torn Iraq has fared better at 86. China and Cuba are among the first 18 countries, among whom the differences in score are minimal. At 17.3 per cent (up from 17.1 per cent in 1998-99), India has the highest rate of wasting. The report states that the ranking is based on the Prevalence of Undernourishment (PoU) data between 2018 and 2020 and not anything that has happened in 2021. Data were drawn from the United Nations and other multilateral agencies to compute scores and a uniform standard was applied to ensure comparability.

In order to track a country's performance over time, the report carries the data for three reference years for each country. India's score in 2021, therefore, can be directly compared with its GHI scores for 2000, 2006 and 2012.

#### **FAULTY METHODOLOGY: INDIA**

The Indian government has claimed that the report uses faulty methodology and inaccurate rankings based

on inaccurate data. (No other country, incidentally, has found fault with the GHI methodology and rankings). India says the rankings are based on a Gallup survey, a claim that the report's authors have refuted. The government also complains that its efforts to mitigate hunger levels have not been acknowledged. The GHI report, however, makes it clear that acknowledging the efforts of individual governments is not its mandate.

A day after the GHI findings were published in the media, a statement from the Women and Child Development Ministry said that it was shocked to find that "the Global Hunger Report 2021 has lowered the rank of India on the basis of FAO [Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations] estimate on proportion of undernourished population, which is found to be devoid of ground reality and facts and suffers from serious methodological issues". It accused the Concern Worldwide and Welt Hunger Hilfe of not doing due diligence before releasing the report. It said the methodology used by the FAO was unscientific as it based its assessment on the results of a "four question" opinion poll that was

conducted telephonically by Gallup and that the "scientific measurement of undernourishment would require measurement of weight and height, whereas the methodology involved here is based on Gallup poll based on pure telephonic estimate of the population". The Ministry also said that the GHI report "completely disregards government's massive effort to ensure food security of the entire population during the COVID period, verifiable data on which are available. The opinion poll does not have a single question on whether the respondent received any food support from the government or other sources. The representativeness of even this opinion poll is doubtful for India and other countries."

It expressed surprise that going by the FAO report "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021", Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka did not appear to have been affected at all by the "COVID-19 pandemic induced loss of job/business and reduction in income levels, rather they were found to have improved their position on the indicator 'proportion of undernourished population' by 4.3, 3.3, 1.3





NOAH SEELAM/AFP

**AT A SLUM** in Hyderabad, a file photograph. The absence of proper sanitation and child care practices often complicate problems caused by inadequate nourishment.

and 0.8 percentage points respectively during the period 2018-20 over 2017-19". (The PoU data on the FAO website did show that hunger had risen in all South Asian countries, though it was highest in India and lowest in Nepal and Bangladesh.)

The Ministry's statement asserted that the GHI 2021 and the FAO's report on food security had "completely ignored" facts available in the public domain pertaining to the various schemes of foodgrain distribution in 2020 and 2021. The government highlighted the allocation of 5kg of foodgrain per person per month and pulses at 1 kg per household under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) for targeted beneficiaries. (This, incidentally, is what the government is mandated to do under the NFSA anyway.) The statement also highlighted how under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Scheme, 5kg of foodgrain per person per month, and also *chana* (gram), for two months (May and June 2020) was allocated to migrants not covered under the NFSA or State Public Distribution System. It detailed the various ameliorative measures in 2020—the increase in wages

by Rs.20 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme; release of the first instalment of Rs.2000 under the PM Kisan Yojana; grant of Rs.500 to women account holders under the Jan Dhan Yojana for three months from April to June 2020; and the grant of a one-time support of Rs.1,000 to 3 crore widows and differently abled persons to tide over the crisis.

But these ameliorative measures were limited to a specific period and gave only foodgrain to targeted populations. They did not measure up to anything substantial in the prolonged crisis faced by unorganised sector workers, migrant workers and other vulnerable sections in 2020 and also 2021. The disbursement of 5 kg of foodgrain alone for a limited period was not enough to address the deficiencies caused by undernourishment. Inadequate intake of food is known to cause undernutrition, which can also lead to poor utilisation of available nutrients. The situation becomes complicated in the absence of health care and sanitation. Inadequate maternal health and child care practices can cause further complications.

#### GHI RESPONSE

In an e-mail response to *Frontline*, Miriam Wiemers, Advisor to the GHI (Policy and External Relations), explained that "the concerns of the Indian government on the working of the Global Hunger Index have been considered very carefully and we strive to ensure that the GHI continues to improve and remains a useful reference tool in collective efforts to end hunger. We highly appreciate the engagement of the WCD and we value the quality of data and analysis available to us. We welcome the recent debate and are at disposal to jointly seek further clarity on the parameters of the GHI."

She clarified that the GHI report was peer-reviewed by external experts and that the methodology used was long established and tested. It uses four indicators to reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of hunger, drawing on data

from the U.N. and other multilateral agencies. Together, the indicators reflect deficiencies in calories and micronutrients. She wrote that the international community, including India, had agreed upon Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the GHI used indicators that were part of the internationally recognised indicator set to measure progress in meeting these goals.

She also emphasised that the GHI report did not use the FAO's telephone-based indicator that includes information from a poll taken by Gallup—the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). "Of the suite of indicators produced by FAO, GHI uses only PoU, which is a measure of proportion of population facing chronic deficiency of dietary energy intake. Prevalence of Undernourishment takes into account average per capita availability of food supply as obtained through carefully constructed food balance sheets. Food balance sheets are primarily based on data officially reported by member countries including India. PoU also takes into account distribution of calorie intake in the population (as estimated through official consumption surveys conducted by governments including India), as well as calorie requirement of the population (based on data on age distribution for men and women, distribution of heights and other key determinants of dietary energy requirements). All data compiled by FAO—including data officially reported by the member countries, data available from other public sources, and estimates made by FAO—are made public by FAO with detailed documentation of how these are obtained," Wiemers wrote.

She clarified that GHI was best suited to compare hunger levels over time (reported within each report) and between countries and regions. But, she said, it was not designed to assess and reflect individual measures taken by governments. "It is important to differentiate between policy interventions and their outcomes, so that effectiveness of government programmes and other interventions in improving out-



comes can be evaluated. We welcome a scholarly debate to improve the Index and strive to ensure that the GHI remains a useful reference tool and is permanently enhanced to serve the collective efforts to end hunger. Not only India, but the world as a whole is facing tremendous challenges posed by COVID-19, conflicts, and climate change. And this is reflected in worrying GHI trends in many countries across the world. Multiple crises exacerbate existing inequalities and other challenges that are underlying causes for hunger and undernutrition," Wiemers wrote. She added that "the questions and concerns of the government have been considered very carefully" and GHI was in contact with the government to jointly seek further clarity on the parameters of the GHI.

#### HOW POU WORKS

The GHI is a measure of development of outcomes in the domain of hunger. It is a tool to measure and track hunger comparatively at the global, regional and national levels. The idea behind it is to raise awareness and compare inter-regional and international hunger levels in order to draw attention to areas that need additional resources to eliminate hunger. The report includes a section on the progress that India has made. It says that the proportion of the undernourished in the population and the "under 5" mortality levels are relatively low. It also says, however, that the incidence of child stunting remains high in spite of a significant decrease from 54.2 per cent in 1998-99 to 34.7 per cent in 2016-18.

For computing India's 2021 GHI score, the report relied on undernourishment data from the FAO's Food Security Indicators (published in July 2021). It used the FAO's PoU indicator, which is based on the FAO's assessment of each country's Food Balance Sheet, which measures the proportion of the population with adequate access to calories on the basis of food supply data. The FAO has been using the PoU as an indicator of food security since the 1960s; the PoU is said to have been developed by P.V. Sukhatme, an

award-winning Indian statistician, during his stint with the FAO in Rome.

The PoU is an estimate of that proportion of the population whose habitual dietary intake is less than the minimum dietary requirement for normal, active, healthy living. It factors in the average per capita availability of food supply obtained through food balance sheets which are themselves based on data officially reported by member countries. The PoU also takes into account the distribution of calorie intake (based on official consumption surveys conducted by governments) as well as the calorie requirement of the population.

The child stunting and wasting data are from the 2021 edition of the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef); the World Health Organisation and the World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates (published in April 2021); and India's own Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) of 2016-2018, published in 2019. The under-five mortality rates were taken from the United Nations IGME (Inter Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation) Child Mortality Estimates.

#### PROOF GALORE OF HUNGER

There is enough evidence of hunger and deprivation independent of the GHI report. It is reflected in indices of malnutrition, undernutrition, stunting, wasting and under-five mortality in the National Family Health Surveys and the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (2016-18) measuring the nutritional status of children of the 10-19 age group. The CNNS report stated that only 6 per cent of children in the "6 to 23 months" age group received a minimum acceptable diet, 21 per cent ate an adequately diverse diet and only 57 per cent of children were breastfed within one hour of birth. Timely complementary feeding was initiated for only 53 per cent infants in the six-to-eight-month age cohort.

Other studies have also shown that there might be significant underestimations of hunger and nutrition levels. In an article in *Economic*

*and Political Weekly* (April 13, 2019) titled "Prevalence of Under nourishment in Indian states—Explorations based on NSS' 68th Round Data", the authors Vikas Rawal, Vaishali Bansal and Prachi Bansal argued that it was difficult to estimate the proportion of people who were undernourished as energy requirements varied according to age, sex, physical activity and body size. It is therefore incorrect to compare the dietary intake of an individual with an average dietary requirement. This means that the PoU may well provide an underestimation and the problem of undernourishment was is perhaps more severe than what the GHI report suggests.

Arun Gupta, the central co-ordinator of the Breastfeeding Promotion Network in India, feels that in 2024 the success of the Narendra Modi government will be judged against numbers of the India's darkest distended underbelly—its millions of malnourished children. He said the government had responded to the GHI to counter the 'shame' induced by it but the reaction also betrayed an illusion that it was doing enough for feeding infants and young children.

He said that for the first time in the 30 years early breastfeeding rates had shown a decline, while underweight, stunting, wasting prevalence had shown an increasing trend. "This is worrying and calls for re-framing of nutrition programs in India," he said. Both NFHS 4 (2025) and 5 (2020) were stark reminders of the support that women and children need for their nutrition, growth and development. The NFHS-5-phase-1 (Data from 22 States/UTs) revealed that while 88 per cent women delivered in hospitals, 51 per cent were able to begin breastfeeding within an hour of birth, 61.9 per cent breastfed exclusively during 0-6 months, 56 per cent received timely complementary feeds at 6-8 months and only 16.1 per cent received adequate diet during 6-23 months. "Obviously 26.9 per cent children were underweight, 31.9 stunted, 18.1 wasted and 5.5 obese. This means India is suffering both





V.V. KRISHNAN

#### MALNOURISHED CHILDREN

with no access to clean drinking water and proper food in Lakhimpur Kheri in Uttar Pradesh, a file photograph.

from undernourishment and over-nourishment,” he said.

#### CASE OF UNDERESTIMATION

The economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram, who has worked at senior positions at the FAO, convened the second International Conference on Nutrition in 2014. Talking to *Frontline* in the context of the controversy stirred up by the GHI report, he said that there might have been underestimates of dietary energy from the outset. With uneven development in the world and variations like less or more mechanisation and sedentary lifestyles, it was difficult to arrive at a uniform calorie intake for the world over. He pointed out that it was a given that “whether one was well nourished or not made a world of a difference to life expectancy, cognitive development and physical development”.

The basic methodology, the former U.N. official said, had been problematic to begin with but it improved over time. The major assumption was that incidence of undernourishment was understood as calorific undernourishment and little else. Factors like a sedentary lifestyle that required fewer energy requirements and urban eating habits was not factored in while calculating PoU. “We know that most poor people do a lot of manual labour. I was concerned that we were underestimating their undernourishment by using that methodology. A single yardstick could not be applied for the whole world,” he said.

“The main defence one can make of the FAO numbers is that they purport to be something which continues to be relevant over time. I would be among the first to qualify my support, but it reminds one that our poverty numbers also might not be what we think them to be. All governments want to look good and they want to think that growth is being equally distributed. To find fault with the measure is not difficult. Yet to do any kind of international comparison is very difficult. Some countries have serious data reporting issues. The PoU tells one whether people have enough dietary energy to live; it doesn’t say whether one is living healthy or well. The underestimation has been happening since the outset as everyone was looking at calories and calories of people with a sedentary lifestyle. Life has changed and measures need to change. I think there are greater underestimates today. One is generalising across 200 countries, with many having patchy data. The numbers are based on what the Indian statistical office gives Rome. Unless there is a conspiracy by the Indian Statistical office to underestimate something,” he said, referring to the Indian government’s objections to the GHI methodology to calculate PoU based on FAO data.

#### BOOST FOR PHARMA?

There is an opinion that the GHI scores might be used to push interventions driven by pharma and big business in nutrition and food secur-

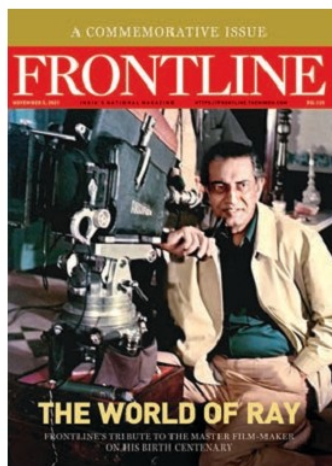
ity. H.P.S. Sachdev, a leading paediatrician who has been very critical of the government’s latest approved policy to fortify rice with iron to prevent anaemia, said that the PoU based on FAO data on food balance sheets had a cut off of 1,830 calories as a minimum energy requirement for everyone in the world. It was not based, he said, on what people were actually consuming. He said that the CNNS survey had also showed that half of the children aged between five and 19, irrespective of whether they were thin or short, had evidence of high sugar or hyper lipidemia.

“Half of our children have more robust bio markers showing over nutrition. Hunger is a very small component of what causes wasting, stunting and deaths among children. There are other determinants which also vary from place to place,” he said adding it could not be denied that hunger was a major issue in impoverished pockets. “But there are contradictions. There is over-nutrition in biochemical markers, probably because a lot of cereal is being pushed. India is supposed to be the global capital of non-communicable diseases. I am not denying there is a lot of poverty and inequitable development. But dietary diversity is the best way to go about it and overall development. How is it possible that both hunger and over nutrition exist? I think the GHI could give an opportunity for lobbies to push nutrient dense supplements and pre-mixes,” he said.

Whichever way the scores and rankings are interpreted, there should be little doubt that the pandemic worsened hunger and nutritional outcomes. If fact the GHI report has a cautionary word on that as well. There is so far no government data on the number of people who have lost jobs or were driven to penury because of the pandemic. Likewise, there has been no assessment of deprivation levels among the population. In such a scenario, the hunger and undernourishment estimates of the GHI report can be safely viewed as an underestimation of the real problem rather than an exaggeration. □



## LETTERS



### SATYAJIT RAY

KUDOS to the Frontline team for a comprehensive tribute to the master of Indian cinema ("The World of Ray", November 5). From the Editor's Note to Raghu Rai's interview, this special commemorative issue brought forth Satyajit Ray's multi-talented personality from various points of view. The four pieces from Ray's biographer, Andrew Robinson, told us about his views on cinema and music and revealed the connection Ray had with France and the contributions made by Nemai Ghosh in documenting Ray's work for posterity.



The interviews with Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal, Girish Kasaravalli and Gautam Ghosh vouchsafed the legacy Ray bestowed on his descendants. The interviews with Sandip Ray, Dritiman Chatterji, Sharmila Tagore, Barun Chanda, Aparna Sen and Saswati Sen brought out the rigour and style of his film-making in an in-depth manner.

The articles on his trilogies, magnum opuses 'Shatranj Ke Khilari' and 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', and docu-

mentaries discussed his craft and world view in depth. The article on the holy triumvirate was a thought-provoking one on the talents of film-makers who were his contemporaries.

The article on Fr Gaston Roberge re-kindled memories of yesteryear when Ray's books on film studies were used by film society activists across the country as textbooks for film appreciation.

The book review of '3 Rays' brought out the creative acumen of three generations of Rays and the intellectual hold they had on generations of Bengalis, next only to that of Tagore.

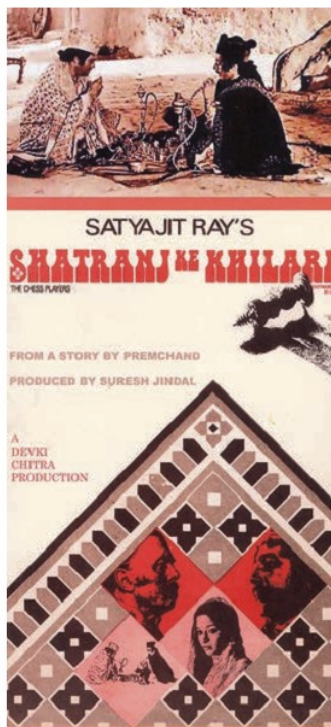
What was missing in this otherwise exhaustive issue was a listing of the awards Ray received.

This issue is one that every reader of Frontline can be proud of.

**V.B. GANESAN**  
CHENNAI

I OFFER my felicitations to the Editor and his team for the excellent special issue. Every article was a gem, highlighting one or another aspect of the cinematic genius that Satyajit Ray was. It would be worth publishing the issue as a book.

**S.S. RAJAGOPALAN**  
CHENNAI



CONGRATULATIONS on bringing out this magnificent issue on the unforgettable Satyajit Ray. The Editor's Note gave the reader an idea of the planning and labour that went into its preparation. Thanks to the Editor and his whole team for maintaining this high standard in these times of commercialisation.

The many articles and photographs were a reassurance to those of us who admire quality and appreciate beauty in the commonplace and look for grace and humanity in art.

**J.N. SINHA**  
NEW DELHI



FRONTLINE deserves accolades for this commemorative issue. It is a collector's issue for the admirers of the master filmmaker. The interviews with celebrities who worked with him presented a diverse view of the phenomenon that Ray was.

This issue will be a valuable addition to my collection of books on him.

**MOHAMMED AZAM SHAHID**  
BENGALURU

### CORRECTION

After watching Satyajit Ray's films, Akira Kurosawa remarked: "Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon." The Japanese icon, who passed away in 1998, said this in 1975, and not as mentioned in the Editor's Note (November 5). The error is regretted.

### ANNOUNCEMENT

Letters, whether by surface mail or e-mail, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials.



WORLD AFFAIRS

# SHAKY PEACE

Afghanistan struggles to regain a semblance of stability as the Taliban regime comes under terror attacks staged by the radical Islamist group Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K).

BY JOHN CHERIAN

HOSHANG HASHIMI/AFP



**MOURNERS GATHERED AROUND GRAVES** of the victims the day after the October 8 suicide attack on worshippers at a Shia mosque in Kunduz.



AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF THE country in mid August, the least that the Afghan populace expected from the new government was a quick re-establishment of law and order and an end to bloodshed. Indeed, that had happened when the Taliban first took power in 1996, ending decades of the violence in the country. This time, however, for the average Afghan the situation on the ground has gone from bad to worse. Though a relative calm has descended on most parts of the country, the economy has nosedived. The government coffers are empty, with little signs yet of the international community being ready to engage with the Taliban openly.

The United States has frozen more than \$10 billion of Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are refusing to grant emergency aid to bail out the government. The banking system is on the verge of a collapse. The government machinery is creaking at the seams as salaries have not been paid for months. The IMF has warned that Afghanistan's economy will shrink by 30 per cent if foreign aid does not materialise soon.

#### **TERROR ATTACKS**

More worryingly for the Taliban, terror attacks continue to be staged by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K). Khorasan means "the land of the sun". Two suicide attacks, a week apart from each other, on two Shia mosques in Kandahar (October 15) and Kunduz (October 8) claimed the lives of over a hundred worshippers. The Islamic State was quick to claim credit for both. In Kandahar, which is the bastion and spiritual base of the Taliban, the victims included worshippers from the Hazara and other ethnic groups. The majority Pashtuns, the ethnic group from which the Taliban had risen, belong to the Sunni denomination of Islam.

The recent spate of attacks by the IS-K started with the suicide bomb blast at Kabul airport a few days before the final U.S. withdrawal on August 30. That attack claimed the lives of more than 160 Afghan civilians and

13 American soldiers. These attacks are being staged to send a message to the Afghan people that the new Taliban government is incapable of providing the much-desired stability that it has been promising.

Until recently the IS-K was believed to be active mainly in eastern Afghanistan. The fact that the group could strike at will in other parts of Afghanistan, including in cities like Mazhar-i-Sharif and Kandahar, may be an indicator of its growing network. The IS-K also staged an attack outside a Kabul mosque where mourners had gathered to pray for the recently deceased mother of the chief Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid.

#### **TALIBAN ON WORLD STAGE**

The Taliban leadership, however, continues to maintain that it will be able to meet the challenge from the IS-K on its own and will not allow any group to use Afghan soil to launch attacks on another country. The Taliban has spurned U.S. and other international offers of help in the fight against the IS-K. The latest U.S. offer was made during talks in Doha over the October 9-10 weekend, the first dialogue between the two sides after the Taliban takeover. Were the Taliban to accept U.S. help, that would give the IS-K further propaganda mileage to question its Islamic credentials.

A statement issued by the U.S. State Department after the Doha meetings said that "vanquishing the ISIS-K is in our shared interest and we will continue to seek ways to work with the Taliban in this effort". The international community expects the Taliban to deal effectively with the threat posed by the IS-K and has made it a condition for the lifting of sanctions and early recognition for the government in Kabul. Russian President Vladimir Putin said in mid October that there were 2,000 IS-K fighters in northern Afghanistan alone. He said that the IS-K fighters planned to spread out in the Central Asian republics disguised as refugees in order to stir up "religious and ethnic discord".

The IS-K, an affiliate of the Daesh, was founded in 2015 by disaffected Taliban fighters, many of them ori-





ginally hailing from the Pakistani tribal areas along the Afghan border. It comprises disaffected Taliban cadres and former Al Qaeda members. Many former Taliban leaders who are now with the IS were radicalised after they were incarcerated in U.S. prisons where they shared space with Daesh fighters involved in the fighting in West Asia and other parts of the world. Many Uighur fighters belonging to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) who were earlier with Al Qaeda are now with the IS-K in Afghanistan. The recent suicide attack in Kunduz was reportedly carried out by a Uighur fighter owing allegiance to the IS-K. The ETIM's goal is to extend the Islamic Caliphate to the Chinese province of Xinjiang, which shares a short border with Afghanistan.

The United Nations, in a report released in the middle of the year, said that around 10,000 fighters from the Central Asian states, the Northern Caucasus region and Xinjiang have made their way to Afghanistan. Most of them had come to help the Taliban in its final offensive to oust the U.S.-backed government in Kabul. But, according to the report, a significant minority signed up with the IS-K.

The U.N. report said that the IS-K remained "active and dangerous" as it sought to strengthen its ranks with disaffected Taliban fighters. Unlike the Taliban, the IS-K does not recognise international borders and has said that the territory it aims to control encompasses present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of northern India, including Kashmir. The Daesh affiliate in South Asia does not consider the rule of the Taliban as "Islamic" enough and wants a stricter interpretation of Islamic law.

The Taliban adheres to the Deobandi school of Islam



**SERGEI LAVROV**, Russian Foreign Minister, at the Moscow Conference on Afghanistan on October 20. In his opening remarks Lavrov said that the "hard fact" was that there was a new government in Kabul and that it placed "great responsibility on the Taliban".

withdrawal schedule, the Taliban ensured that the IS-K's attempts to target the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces (led by the U.S.) did not succeed. The U.S. Air Force helped the Taliban on a few occasions by targeting IS-K positions.

But after the Taliban took over the government, the group said that the U.S. would have to respect Afghanistan's territorial sovereignty. The U.S. drone attack on an alleged IS-K target in the last week of August resulted in the deaths of innocent people, including children, and came in for widespread international condemnation. The Joe Biden administration initially claimed that those killed were the terrorists responsible for the attack on the Kabul airport.

The Taliban has given an assurance to China that the ETIM will not be allowed to operate inside Afghanistan. It has given a similar assurance to Islamabad that it will clamp down on the activities of the Pakistani Taliban—the TTP and the Balochi separatist groups. Since the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, there have been terror attacks inside Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan, and these are attributed to the TTP and Baloch separatists.

#### **RUSSIA'S LEAD IN ENGAGING WITH THE TALIBAN**

Meanwhile, the Taliban government seems to be inching towards gaining international acceptance. The Russian government hosted a meeting on Afghanistan in Moscow on October 20. It was attended by 10 regional states

**TALIBAN MEMBERS STAND GUARD** near a Shia mosque in Kandahar on October 15 after at least 16 worshippers were killed and 32 were wounded in a suicide attack.



JAVED TANVEER/AFP

#### **GLOBAL CONCERNS**

With the IS-K attacks increasing in size and sophistication, questions are being asked about the Taliban's ability to bring peace to the war-torn country. In the last years of the U.S. occupation, there was a tacit understanding between the U.S.-led forces and the Taliban about jointly taking on the IS-K. In the months following the Doha agreement of 2020, and after the Americans announced a





ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AFP

**AFGHANISTAN'S DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER** Abdul Salam Hanafi (left), who headed the Taliban delegation at the Moscow Conference, with acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Moscow on October 20.

including India; the Taliban, too, was in attendance. The U.S. was invited but did not bother to show up. The State Department cited unspecified “technical reasons” to explain the absence but said that the U.S. would participate in future conferences on Afghanistan hosted by Moscow.

A joint statement issued after the conference said that the recognition of the Taliban government by countries of the region had become “a compelling reality” and that the regional states should try to influence the Taliban through the process of “constructive engagement”. The statement also said that there should be a collective initiative to convene an international donor conference under the auspices of the U.N.

Russia has now taken the lead in diplomatic efforts to end the isolation of the new government in Kabul. Before the Moscow meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had a meeting with the acting Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi. The senior Taliban official told the media that his government had very good relations with Moscow and that the two sides discussed a wide range of issues, including the ways in which Afghanistan’s crucial location could be utilised to stimulate closer trade and economic ties between the countries in the region. Lavrov, in his opening remarks at the conference, said that the “hard fact” was that there was a new government in Kabul and that it placed “great responsibility on the Taliban”.

He took note of the Taliban government’s efforts to “stabilise the military-political situation and to ensure the smooth operation of the public governance system” in the country. Lavrov went on to emphasise that there “is no alternative in the foreseeable future” to the balance of power that had evolved in Afghanistan after August 15. Lavrov said that Russia, along with its regional partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), would engage with the Taliban government to “promote stabilisation” in Afghanistan.

According to Lavrov, the SCO and the CSTO had created a “special mechanism” some years ago to deal

with Afghanistan and identify ways to “promote stabilisation” of the country. The SCO’s recent Dushanbe Declaration stated that Afghanistan should be an “independent, neutral, united, democratic and peaceful state, free of war, terrorism and drugs” and having an inclusive government consisting of representatives from all the ethnic, religious and political groups in the country.

Interestingly, the Moscow Conference called on the U.S., which was the occupying power for the last 20 years, to “shoulder” the major costs for financing the dire humanitarian needs of the Afghan population. “The sides have proposed to launch a collective initiative to convene a broad-based international donor conference under the auspices of the United Nations as soon as possible, certainly with the understanding that the core burden of post-conflict economic and financial reconstruction and development of Afghanistan must be shouldered by troop-based actors which were in the country for the past twenty years,” the Moscow statement said.

President Putin, speaking at the annual Valdai Conference in Sochi, bluntly stated that “the primary responsibility for what is taking place in Afghanistan is borne by the countries that fought there for the last twenty years”. Putin said that the first thing these countries should do was “unfreeze” Afghanistan’s assets and give the country an opportunity to resolve some of the urgent problems it was facing.

#### **E.U. AID PACKAGE**

In the second week of October, the European Union announced an aid package \$1.15 billion for Afghanistan “to avert a major humanitarian and socio-economic collapse”. The decision was taken during a virtual G20 summit hosted by Italy to discuss the situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. The E.U. however made it clear that the “direct support” for the Afghan people would not be channelled through the auspices of the Taliban government but through international aid agencies working on the ground in Afghanistan.

The Indian delegation which attended the Moscow talks met with the Taliban delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi.

According to reports, the Indian side expressed willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, though the government has still not officially acknowledged the first formal meeting between the two sides in Moscow after the Taliban takeover. According to Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, the Indian side has “taken into account” the realities of the new situation in Afghanistan.

India is proposing to host a meeting on Afghanistan in November. The Indian government has invited national security advisers from the region, including Pakistan, China and Iran. It is to be seen whether Islamabad will accept the invitation, given the fraught relations between the two countries. The Taliban has not been invited. The Modi government apparently is yet to reconcile itself with the reality on the ground. □



# Establishment warrior

Colin Powell (1937-2021) has, among his many achievements, the distinction of being the first African American to occupy some of the highest military and political positions in the U.S., but his role in his country's brutal imperial misadventures is often glossed over. BY JOHN CHERIAN

WITH THE DEATH OF FORMER UNITED STATES Secretary of State Colin Powell on October 18 at the age of 84, only a few key individuals responsible for the brutal U.S.-led wars of the past three decades remain. Donald Rumsfeld, whose warmongering career started during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, passed away in June. Rumsfeld was Defence Secretary and Powell was Secretary of State when President George W. Bush ordered the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq without congressional

approval. Powell, who had acquired the status of a "soldier statesman" by the time Bush appointed him to the post of Secretary of State, had always been an establishment man. It was therefore no surprise that he opted to go along with the "neoconservatives" in the Bush administration such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, George Tenet, Paul Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld in arguing for mindless war and retribution after the events of 9/11.



BARRY THUMMA/AP

**COLIN POWELL'S** first big career break came in the 1980s when he was asked to join the national security establishment during the Ronald Reagan presidency. His tenure as National Security Adviser coincided with the end of the Cold War.



Most of the hagiographic obituaries on Powell that appeared in the Western media preferred to gloss over his role in the U.S.' imperial misadventures, starting from the war in Vietnam. Instead, the emphasis was on his achievement of being the first African American to occupy some of the highest military and political positions in the country during his illustrious career. Powell joined the U.S. Army in 1958, 10 years after the armed forces were completely desegregated, and served for more than 35 years. Powell, who had an undistinguished academic career, had entered the army through the Reserve Officer Training Corps. Born to Jamaican parents who had settled in New York, Powell experienced racism first hand while in uniform as a young officer assigned to a military base in the South. But as his career graph shows, Powell never really openly identified with the political struggles of his black brethren. Harry Belafonte, the American black singer and activist, described Powell as a "house slave". In a television interview in 2002, the outspoken Belafonte said that there were two kinds of slaves during the era of black bondage: those who lived on the plantation and those who lived in the master's house. "You got the privilege of living in the house if you served the master exactly the way the master intended to have you serve him. Colin Powell is committed to come into the house of the master," Belafonte said.

As a young officer posted in Vietnam, Powell helped the army top brass to initially cover up the notorious 1969 massacre of civilians by U.S. troops in My Lai. The U.S. military assigned Powell to investigate the killing of more than 300 Vietnamese civilians shot in cold blood. In his report, Powell stated that such incidents happened in wartime and emphasised that "relations between American soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent". There was no attribution of guilt in the report.

Powell's first big career break came in the 1980s when he was asked to join the national security establishment during the Reagan presidency. There was no looking back for Powell after that. In the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal and the subsequent resignations of top officials in the Reagan administration, Powell was tapped at a young age to be the National Security Adviser. His tenure as NSA coincided with the end of the Cold War. Powell was given credit for the warm ties that had developed between the Reagan White House and the post-perestroika Kremlin under Mikhail Gorbachev. Powell's next prominent posting was as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. President George H.W. Bush, who succeeded Reagan, appointed Powell to the post.

#### **POWELL DOCTRINE**

Powell then went on to play a key role in the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 and the first Gulf War in 1991. The decisive victories achieved in these two wars was attributed to what came to be called the "Powell Doctrine". According to the strategy Powell formulated, the U.S. should consider war as an option only after all other means of exerting influence are exhausted and ensuring that Washington can identify an achievable mission that

will have both domestic and international support. Powell argued that U.S. forces should intervene in a country only if U.S. "national interests" were in danger of being significantly impacted.

The invasion of Panama, code-named "Operation Just Cause", was a cakewalk for the U.S. military but a brutal experience for the Panamanian people. It was widely condemned internationally as a breach of international law; 27,000 U.S. troops invaded Panama City, the capital, to oust President Manuel Noriega, who until a few years before the invasion was a prized asset of the U.S.' Central Intelligence Agency. Aerial strikes on impoverished civilian areas near the main army barracks in the capital city preceded the invasion and cost more than a thousand civilians their lives. In 2018, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, based in San Jose, Costa Rica, issued a ruling blaming the U.S. for the invasion and demanded reparations from Washington.

#### **OPERATION DESERT STORM**

The Washington establishment accorded Powell most of the credit for the "successful" conduct of the first Gulf War, code-named "Operation Desert Storm". Before the war began, Powell told the media about the approach the U.S. military would be taking. "Our strategy in going after this army is very simple," Powell said. "First we are going to cut it off, then we are going to kill it." The Iraqi army retreating from Kuwait was ruthlessly massacred in what the U.S. media described as "a chicken shoot". Thousands of Iraqi soldiers were killed. The U.S. forces did not give them an opportunity to surrender. Writing in *Los Angeles Times*, Robert Jensen, a professor of journalism, referred to Operation Desert Storm "as the massacre that we call the Gulf War". He said it was "one of the most concentrated attacks on an entire society in modern warfare".

But Powell's reputation was only further enhanced, making him one of the most popular figures in the U.S. So much so that Bush Senior thought of replacing his Vice President with Powell in the 1992 presidential election. Bill Clinton won that election, but Powell's influence in the corridors of power in Washington remained strong. It was mainly due to the so-called Powell Doctrine that the Clinton administration did not deploy troops in the Balkans at the height of the Yugoslav conflict. Instead, the U.S. resorted to 70 days of an aerial war against the Yugoslav Federation that resulted in the disintegration of the federation and was the precursor to the Second Gulf War, which led to the disastrous invasion of Iraq.

And it was Powell, as Secretary of State under the presidency of George W. Bush, who ironically played a big role in consigning to the back burner the military and political doctrine he had himself advocated. After the events of 9/11, Powell supported the Bush administration's plan to invade Afghanistan. He had advocated a more cautious line on Iraq but, when it came to the crunch, sided with the neoconservatives in the Bush Cabinet like Cheney and Rumsfeld. According to *Plan of Action*, Bob Woodward's book on the Bush administra-





RAY STUBBLEINE/REUTERS

**FEBRUARY 5, 2003:** Colin Powell, the then U.S. Secretary of State, presenting his case at the U.N. Security Council for war against Iraq. During the course of his 76-minute-long speech, he held up a vial of what he said could be a biological weapon from Iraq.

tion's conduct of the Iraq war, it was Powell who convinced Bush to take the U.S. plan to invade Iraq to the United Nations. From the beginning there was little international support for the invasion of Iraq.

#### **HIS CREDIBILITY TOOK A HIT**

Powell's credibility, along with that of the U.S. government, took a precipitate hit after his appearance before the U.N. Security Council on February 5, 2003, to present his case for war against Iraq. Powell told the Security Council in a 76-minute-long speech that the U.S. had irrefutable evidence that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. Holding up a vial of what he said could be a biological weapon from Iraq, Powell said: "Saddam Hussein and his regime are concealing their efforts to produce more weapons of mass destruction." He presented fabricated details of what he claimed were Iraq's attempts at making "germ" weapons. He even went to the extent of falsely claiming to possess evidence that President Saddam Hussein had ordered his army to use poison gas in the event that the U.S. Army invaded Iraq. "Every statement I make today," Powell told the Security Council, "is backed up by sources, solid sources." The White House had given Powell a speech to read and he did as ordered. Powell could have taken the high moral ground and resigned and in the process could have stopped the war that had ended up destabilising the

entire region. Powell later on claimed that he really had no other choice but to obey the commands of the President. "I participated in a hoax on the American people, the international community and the United Nations," Lawrence Wilkerson, Powell's Chief of Staff at the time, later conceded.

The Security Council was not convinced, but Powell's bravura performance at the U.N. convinced a large section of the U.S. public about the need for the war and convinced wavering Democratic politicians such as Joseph Biden and John Kerry to support the war in the Senate. "Secretary Powell made a very powerful speech and, I think, an irrefutable case before the Security Council," Biden had said at the time. Powell admitted in 2011 that the U.N. speech "was a blot on his record" but claimed that it was "failed intelligence" that made him do it. Before that, he had defended the invasion, claiming that getting rid of the "terrible dictator" Saddam Hussein was a significant achievement and worth fighting for.

Powell did not express any remorse for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed as a result of the military intervention. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the Security Council in 2004 that the invasion was an "illegal" act under international law. Muntadhar al-Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist who became famous after hurling a shoe at President George W. Bush during a press conference in Baghdad in 2008, tweeted that he was sad that Powell died without facing a tribunal for his crimes against the Iraqi people. Salam Ali, a member of the central committee of the Iraqi Communist Party, said: "Colin Powell is among the top officials of the U.S. administration responsible for waging that criminal war, and misleading the world with fabricated information, who should have been held accountable for what they did."

Powell was so popular at one time within the political establishment that both the Republicans and the Democrats wanted him to run for President on their platforms. In 1996, he was on the verge of declaring his candidacy on a Republican ticket but backed out at the eleventh hour. Although Powell was a registered Republican until a year before his death, he had grown distant from the party after the Iraq debacle. In 2008, he supported Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate. In the last election too, he supported the Democrats and was outspoken in his criticism of Donald Trump.

President Joseph Biden hailed Powell "as a patriot of unmatched honour and dignity who rose to the highest ranks of the United States military and to advise four Presidents". There was bipartisan praise for the departed general. The only glaring exception was Trump, who said that the media were going overboard in their praise. He said that Powell was a "fake" Republican who had made many "big mistakes" on Iraq. Throughout his term in office, Trump was critical of all the Republicans, including President George W. Bush, responsible for starting the war in Iraq. But once in power, Trump kept the U.S. military in Iraq and actually expanded the its presence illegally into parts of neighbouring Syria. □



# FARCE OF PROSECUTION

Innocent people suffer because public prosecutors in India are not free of **government control**, and the victims are very often Muslims. BY **A.G. NOORANI**

“WITH us every official, from the Prime Minister down to a constable or a collector of taxes, is under the same responsibility for every act done without legal justification as any other citizen. The Reports abound with cases in which officials have been brought before the courts, and made, in their personal capacity, liable to punishment, or to the payment of damages, for acts done in their official character but in excess of their lawful authority. A colonial governor, a secretary of state, a military officer, and all subordinates, though carrying out the commands of their official superiors, are as responsible for any act which the law does not authorise as is any private and unofficial person.” (A.V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution*; pages 193-194)

But how was it possible? It was possible because the prosecutor was “independent of the politicians in power”. The case of one Attorney-General, suspected of breach of the principle, led to the fall of the first Labour government in 1924 and his own resignation.

In general, anyone may commence criminal proceedings subject to the risk of paying the costs of an unsuccessful action and, in some cases, of being sued for malicious prosecution. Certain statutes, however, require the consent of the Attorney-General or the Director of Public Prosecutions to the bringing of prosecutions. The Law Commission has recommended a rationalisation of the consent regime.

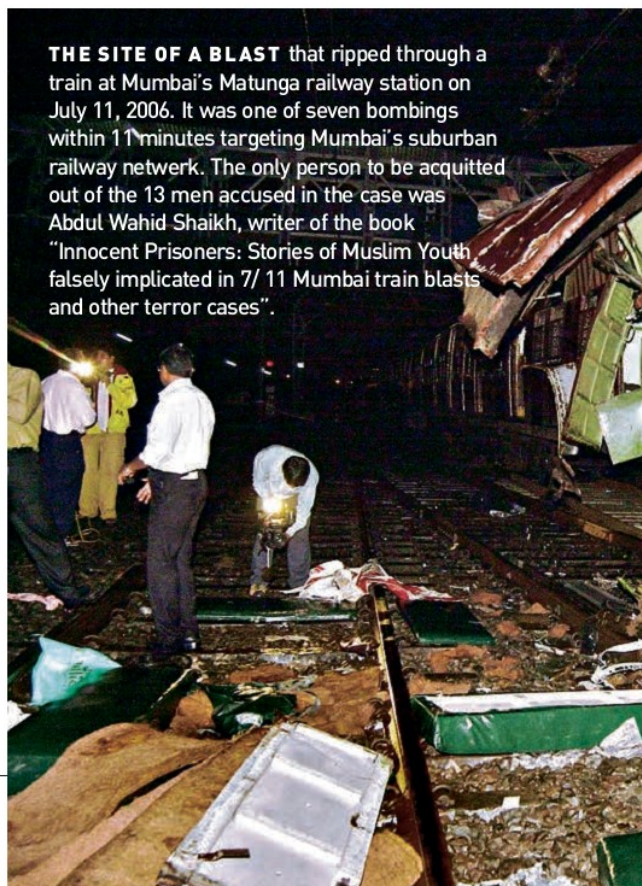
## A NATIONAL PROSECUTION SERVICE

The prosecution system was reformed by the Prosecution of Offences Act, 1985. Until 1985 in England and Wales, most criminal offences were both investigated and brought by the police; in theory they were private prosecutions. The 1985 Act does not take away the right of

private prosecution, nor does it deprive the police of their investigatory role or their power to decide whether or not to initiate proceedings. It entrusts the final decision on whether or not to prosecute and the conduct of prosecutions, begun at the instance of the police, to a national Crown Prosecution Service and gives to that service the power to discontinue proceedings. Thus, indirectly, there is a control over the police discretion to prosecute in individual cases.

The Director of Public Prosecutions is the head of the Crown Prosecution Service. The office of Director of Public Prosecutions was established in 1879. He is appointed by and acts under the general “superintendence” of the Attorney-General (Section 2 of the 1985 Act), and his powers and duties are to be found largely in that section. He is under a duty to take over the conduct of all criminal proceedings (other than those excluded from

**THE SITE OF A BLAST** that ripped through a train at Mumbai’s Matunga railway station on July 11, 2006. It was one of seven bombings within 11 minutes targeting Mumbai’s suburban railway network. The only person to be acquitted out of the 13 men accused in the case was Abdul Wahid Shaikh, writer of the book “Innocent Prisoners: Stories of Muslim Youth falsely implicated in 7/11 Mumbai train blasts and other terror cases”.





the section by the Attorney-General) which have been instituted by a police force; to institute and conduct proceedings where the importance or the difficulty of a case makes it appropriate that he should do so, or where it is otherwise appropriate; and to appear for the prosecution when directed by the court to do so in certain categories of criminal appeals. He may give advice to police forces on all matters relating to criminal offences and must discharge such other functions as may be assigned to him by the Attorney-General.

The conduct of proceedings is the responsibility of members of the Service designated as Crown Prosecutors. Since 1999, the CPS is divided into 42 prosecution areas, each headed by a Chief Crown Prosecutor; within each area there are one or more local branches headed by a Branch Crown Prosecutor who is responsible for a team of lawyers and caseworkers. Section 10 of the Act requires the Director to issue a code to Crown Prosecutors giving guidance on the general principles to be followed by them in deciding whether to institute proceedings, and what charges should be preferred. The terms of the code, which have been revised from time to time, is contained in the report which the Director must make each year to the Attorney-General who then lays it before Parliament (section 9). Crown Prosecutors have all the powers of the Director as to the institution and conduct of proceedings, but they must exercise their powers under his direction.

In India the law laid down by the courts says one thing; the reality is the opposite. This is because the organisational set-up reduces the prosecutor to a paid

hack of the State government. Section 24 of the Criminal Procedure Code of 1973, like its colonial predecessor of 1898 which it substantially adopts, empowers the Central and State governments to appoint Public Prosecutors after consultation with the High Court. Section 25A(3) enables the State government to establish a Directorate of Prosecution. Its head will be the Director of Prosecution “who shall function under the administrative control of the Head of the Home Department of the State”. Every Public Prosecutor “shall be subordinate to Director of Prosecution”—who, as we have seen, “shall function under the administrative control of the Head of the Home Department of the State”. The “powers and functions” of the Director of Prosecution “shall be such as the State government may, by notification apply”, that is, by rules under the Code S. 20A was inserted in 2006 (*NHRC vs. State of Gujarat* [2009] 6 Supreme Court Cases 767).

This does not at all guarantee the independence of the Public Prosecutor. To the contrary, not every Public Prosecutor has the independence of Rohini Salian, who refused to obey the advice to “go slow” in a politically charged case. She resigned.

#### INNOCENT MUSLIM PRISONERS

Read this book and you will realise what is at stake. *Innocent Prisoners: Stories of Muslim Youth falsely implicated in 7/ 11 Mumbai train blasts and other terror cases* by Abdul Wahid Shaikh (Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt. Ltd., D-84 Abdul Fazl enclave, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi, 504 pages; Rs.495).

It covers cases like the Khar Subway blast, the Jogeshwari bomb blast, the Borivli bomb blasts, the Mira Road blasts and others in ample detail. There is a chapter on police torture.

Also covered are the German Bakery blasts of 2010, the Malegaon bomb blasts of 2006—a case which deserves a book by itself—and the Aurangabad arms haul case. And the Akshardham attack.

The book is thoroughly documented. One wishes someone would write a biography of the brilliant and fearless advocate Shahid Azmi who was shot dead on February 4, 2010, by three men who barged into his office. He deserves a memorial. He had filed a complaint at the Kuria Police Station of threats to kill him but was not given any police protection. Mumbai Police Commissioner Ajoy Roy refused to meet him.

The writer, Abdul Wahid Shaikh, was the only person to be acquitted out of 13 accused in the July 11, 2006, Mumbai train bombings case. Born in Pune, he did his schooling in Mumbai after his family shifted there. His father was a carpenter and even did tailoring. After acquiring a diploma in teachers’ training, he got his first job in 1998 to teach science at Anjuman-e-Islam School, Mumbai. He completed his post-graduation and studied law during his nine years in jail. Keeping his promise to his co-accused, he travels around the country talking about the truth. A Hindi feature film based on his life will soon be released. He married in 2003 and has four



ALJAZ RAHIL/AP



children. Even years after his acquittal, the police continue to harass him. To fulfil the dream he had before his arrest 15 years ago, he is now pursuing his PhD.

#### DISCRETION AND JUDGMENT

The decision to prosecute is not a mechanical one. It calls for discretion and sound judgment. On December 1, 1925, Sir John Simon, a former Attorney-General, laid down the rules to the House of Commons. They were approvingly quoted by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in Parliament on February 16, 1959.

Simon said: "There is no greater nonsense talked about the Attorney-General's duty than the suggestion that in all cases the Attorney-General ought to prosecute merely because he thinks there is what lawyers call 'a case'. It is not true, and no one who has held that office supposes that it is. I understand the duty of the Attorney-General to be this. He should absolutely decline to receive orders from the Prime Minister, or Cabinet or anybody else that he shall prosecute. His first duty is to see that no one is prosecuted with all the majesty of the law unless the Attorney-General, as head of the Bar, is satisfied that a case for prosecution lies against him. He should receive orders from nobody. But that is very different from saying that the Attorney-General ought in all cases to ask nobody else's view, because he thinks there is a case to institute a prosecution without finding out what his colleagues or the government think. That is a ridiculous proposition. If the Leader of the Opposition at the general election were to make a seditious speech, does anyone mean to tell me a Conservative Attorney-General would start a prosecution against him without consulting the Cabinet? Of course, he would not. I am confident that the Attorney-General would never undertake a prosecution, whatever anybody asked him to do, unless he thought the prosecution was justified, but I should regard him... as a fool if he were to start on his own motion prosecutions which involve grave matters of public concern—treason, sedition, corruption and the like; if he did such a thing without knowing that, in the view of his colleagues, public policy was not offended by undertaking such prosecution."

Another Attorney-General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, said in 1950: "It has never been the rule in this country... that suspected criminal offences must automatically be the subject of prosecution. Indeed, the very first regulations under which the Director of Public Prosecutions worked provided that he should intervene to prosecute, amongst other cases: 'wherever it appears that the offence or the circumstances of its commission is or are of such a character that a prosecution in respect thereof is required in the public interest.' This is still the dominant consideration. I should perhaps say that, although he is called the Director of Public Prosecutions, constitutionally I am responsible for all his decisions, and as a Minister of the Crown I am answerable to the House for any decision he may make in particular cases.... My honourable and learned friend then asked me how I direct myself in deciding whether or not to prosecute in a

particular case. That is a very wide subject indeed, but there is only one consideration which is altogether excluded, and that is the repercussion of a given decision upon my personal or my party's or the government's political fortunes; that is a consideration which never enters into account. Apart from that, the Attorney-General may have to have regard to a variety of considerations, all of them leading to the final question—would a prosecution be in the public interest, including in that phrase of course, in the interests of justice?"

There is a world of difference between a party-political consideration and a consideration of the state. Jawaharlal Nehru and his colleagues would not have taken office as members of Wavell's Executive Council unless he set Subhas Chandra Bose free; that is, had he been caught alive.

For sound reasons of public interest, Tej Bahadur Sapru advised the Governor-General not to prosecute Gandhi. The prosecutions of Afzal Guru and Yakob Memon were as ill-advised as the Supreme Court's death sentence, and angry remarks by the court were disgustingly wrong.

#### POLICE ADMISSION OF TRUST DEFICIT

In what is perhaps the first admission of its kind, the police have concluded that there is a trust deficit among Muslims, who see them as "communal, biased and insensitive.... ill-informed, corrupt and lacking professionalism".

A report, "Strategy for making police forces more sensitive towards minority sections", prepared by three Directors General of Police—Sanjeev Dayal of Maharashtra, Deoraj Nagar of Uttar Pradesh and K. Ramanujan of Tamil Nadu—along with an Intelligence Bureau representative, says that distrust comes from poor representation of minorities in the forces and the conduct of some policemen during riots.

"Poor representation of the minorities in the police forces has contributed to this distrust and suspicion. It has to be admitted that the conduct of some members of the police forces in various States during communal riots had only served to strengthen and heighten these suspicions and distrust in the minority communities," it says.

Saying that Muslims form the largest minority, constituting "a vocal and large section of the population" in most States, the report calls for urgent correction of the perception in the community about the police as it "impinges on the communal situation of the country and thus its internal security" (Smita Nair; *Indian Express*; July 17, 2014).

There is one case of police misdemeanour which deserves exposure—the prosecutions in the Bhiwandi riots case in 1970.

The Bhiwandi case involved nearly 50 Muslims charged with destroying Hindus in the city. Involved was a leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Ibrahim Maddu. If the falsehood was not exposed before the Madon Commission, they would have been convicted on tutored evidence, that is, tutored by the police. □



# From Hungary with love

The life and work of **Alexander Csoma de Koros** (1784-1842), who spent his life travelling and learning languages in his search for the roots of the Hungarian people and language, form the first strong cultural link between India and Hungary. BY **MARGIT KÖVES**

"AREN'T you cold? Should I get the fire started?" asks Dr Archibald Campbell of Alexander Csoma de Koros in the second scene of Gábor Lanczkor's 2010 play *The Malaria*. In the play, two young people, an Irish girl, Barbara, and a Hungarian boy, Sandor, are in front of Beechwood House in Darjeeling at the location where Csoma—as Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842) is called for short in Hungarian—spent his last four days. The power of Csoma's presence is such that the local characters and the outsiders start understanding one another's language without interpretation. In an interview, Lanczkor has described how standing at the graveside of Alexander Csoma de Koros in Darjeeling gave him the impetus to write the play.

Csoma's life and work are open to interpretation in many ways, and the exhibition "Pilgrim Scholar—Alexander Csoma de Koros Memorial Exhibition", which opened in the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) on October 4, presents Csoma's life, work and his death in Darjeeling, builds on the global reception of Csoma's work, and the emotional impact his work exercises on Hungarians in Hungary. From the 19th century novels and poetry were written about Csoma. Mor Jokai's novel *Eppur si muove* centres

around the figure of Csoma. Lajos Áprily, Gyula Juhasz, Sandor Endrodi wrote poems about Csoma, and even Robert Browning's poem about the "grammarian" (*A Grammarian's Funeral*) carries an allusion to Csoma in its reference to the grave above Darjeeling. Novels and poems still deal with his character. Apart from the play by Gábor Lanczkor, there is a novel by Andras Mullner (2000) and a film by Tibor Szemzo, *Guest of Life* (2006), to mention a few.

Hungarians are enthused by the way Csoma walked thousands of kilometres, joined caravans or trav-

elled by ship and adapted to the lifestyles of the places he found himself in.

## HUNGARIAN NATION-BUILDING

In the first decades of the 19th century, at the time of Hungarian romanticism, there was no definite narrative of Hungarian history. The Orient appeared to be a crucial element and a strategic asset since from the 18th century Hungary had been a part of the Habsburg monarchy. There was a strong emphasis on features that distinguished Hungary from Austrian and German culture. The issue of national origins and the demand for a national history were connected. This coincided with the movement for the renewal of the Hungarian language, the creation of the national epic, the *Flight of Zsoltán* (1825) by Mihály Vorosmarty, the establishment of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825), and the founding of the National Theatre (1837). It was expected that a scholar or a poet should highlight the ancient glory of the nation, and Csoma's search for the original homeland of Hungarians fortified the narrative of the nation and reinforced the project of nation-building.

The "Pilgrim Scholar—Alexander Csoma de Koros Memorial Exhibition" is based on the bequest preserved in the Oriental Collection



A SKETCH of Alexander Csoma de Koros by by Ágoston Schoefft.

PICTURES: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT







about the basics of Buddhist religion, Tibetan culture, medicine, astronomy, poetry, and linguistics, and the content of the “Alexander Books” was compiled. These four books represent the beginning of Tibetology and Western Buddhist studies, which are considered to be now the most valuable part of Csoma’s heritage and recognised as part of Memory of the World by the UNESCO since 2009. These books as well as studies on Tibetan Buddhism occupy a major part of the exhibition.

This part of the exhibition in the IGNCA was also enriched by statues and objects, like a 15th century statue of Manjusri, a 19th century statue of Tsongkhapa, a 17th century statue of Atisa, Chinese and Nepalese bronze statues of Buddha along with objects like a vajra, a burner and silver vases for rituals given on loan by Tibet House.

There were forced breaks in Csoma’s studies when his teacher did not spend time with him in 1824-25. But in 1827, in Kanam, Sangs-rgyas

Phun-tshogs stayed with him for three years. Also, in Kanam the complete Tibetan canon was available and he could study Tibetan language, religion and culture relatively undisturbed. By 1830 he had enough material to compile his Tibetan-English Dictionary and his Grammar.

#### ASIATIC SOCIETY STINT

Csoma published these works in 1834 in Calcutta (now Kolkata), where he was appointed the librarian of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In the Dictionary he printed the name of Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs, a very unusual practice in the 19th century. In the Preface he gives a brief account of his travels and the difficulties of studying a language that had been so far studied only superficially. Apart from the Dictionary and Grammar, Csoma also published extensive studies on the Buddhist canon, about Buddhism and about grammatical works in Tibetan. He was elected an honorary member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1833.

This is also the reason why on October 28 the exhibition will be taken to Kolkata, where a number of manuscripts and other documents are preserved. The Asiatic Society of Bengal also maintains a special room, Csoma’s room, with objects of art from Hungary and his birthplace, Transylvania.

The exhibition presents the response to Csoma’s work after his death by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-1894), Solomon Caesar Malan (1812-1894), Denison Ross (1871-1940), the Hungarian Count István Széchenyi (1791-1860), his first well-known biographer, the British-Hungarian Theodore Duka (1825-1908) and the famous Hungarian Indologist, the uncle of Amrita Sher-Gill, Ervin Baktay (1890-1963). Ágoston Schoefft’s painting of Ranjeet Singh’s court and the portrait of Csoma made by Schoefft are also presented.

An impressive part connected to the exhibition was a series of lectures and a closing panel discussion. On October 8, Gergely Orosz presented a lecture on the Alexander Books. On October 12, Ágnes Kelecsenyi had webinar on Alexander Csoma de Koros and Oriental research in Hungary. On October 18, there was a panel discussion on “Indian and Hungarian Cultural Encounters” by Indian and Hungarian panellists, Radha Banerjee Sarkar, Bandana Mukherjee, Kumud Bhansali, Imre Lazar, Margit Köves, and the moderator, director of IGNCA, R.C. Gaur, who also curated the events linked to the exhibition.

Csoma’s life and work are the first strong cultural link between India and Hungary and Csoma is presented to young people as a model of perseverance and sacrifice in the interest of learning new languages, widening one’s horizons and merging oneself more deeply in history, relating it to the past of other peoples. For the last 16 years there is an essay competition among students of Hungarian in Delhi University named after Alexander Csoma de Koros, and his birthday is celebrated as Csoma Day in April on Csoma’s birthday. □





# GLOBALISATION AND CULTURAL MEMORY

The Tulsa massacre in the U.S. and Partition narratives in India carry profound lessons for mankind. The memories, left behind through artefacts, now excavated from the debris of history, teach us the meaning of **human fellowship** and the need for atonement for historical wrongs. BY **SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY**

OUR identities, both individual and collective, rest on public memory. These memories, cultural in character, are rooted in objects, artefacts, memorabilia, landscape and photographs that are part of our everyday experience. They constitute what critics in recent decades have called “material memories”, currently threatened by the ongoing globalisation/Americanisation of the world. Cultural globalisation has led to widespread destruction of local habitats and familiar cityscapes and the creation of a monochrome culture. Consequently, forgotten narratives and “material memory” have become important areas of study by avant-garde cultural critics today.

This essay will suggest how some of the recent critical works in the domain of material/cultural memory have unveiled forgotten narratives that are central to understanding the identities of minorities, African Americans and other victims of history. Curating, cataloguing and preserving cultural documents have become pivotal to the reconstruction of the archival past; they have brought to centre stage the museum as a crucial site for understanding revisionist history and multiculturalism. I shall argue that critical enterprises in the field of memory studies are vital to understanding movements such as ‘Black Lives Matter’. They have relevance for our own milieu as well.

We are familiar with the term “global village”,<sup>i</sup> coined

by the Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan; we are equally familiar with the notion of “the citizen of the world”, following the ancient Greek and the Upanishadic traditions. In most quarters, these concepts are regarded as positive markers of a progressive world order in terms of education, culture, lifestyle, and financial and economic well-being. However, the ‘global modern’ or globalisation that has gained currency today, spearheaded powerfully by the advertisement industry and the corporate world, differs radically from the earlier approaches to the one-world concept championed by seminal figures such as Rabindranath Tagore in the first part of the 20th century.

Globalisation today has many faces and defining characteristics.<sup>ii</sup> It speaks of the primacy of the English language and the dominance of the Western/American culture, technology, costume, lifestyle, entertainment, industry and life values. It entails the devaluation of the village, the province, the local, the ‘tradition’ and the oral. The metropolis overrides the province. Consequently, languages of the world, the so-called ‘vernaculars’, are in a state of retreat. They are considered subordinate and dispensable. The more ‘educated’ we are the fewer languages we tend to speak. Languages, in this view, are not means of communication; they are a marker of prestige and status.

Our choices in the arena of fashion, clothing, gadgetry and hairstyle mimic their counterparts from Barcelona to Brisbane. There is centralisation of political, economic, legislative and cultural activities in late capitalism. Uniformity is the watchword. As a critic from Venezuela records graphically:

“Americans indeed have a mania for uniformity.... Everywhere are the same gas stations, the same supermarkets, the same food, the same churches, the same press, the same people. The American cultural mosaic is in fact a monolith, a monochrome, a monotone. All flat and of one piece. Little by little, all the nations of the world are becoming more like one another in their Americanisation. The Pepsi Cola is no less than a great cultural outpost, a contemporary frontier abbey converting the barbarians. Yet the Yankee might does not represent civilisation by force but voluntary subjugation.”<sup>iii</sup>

There is a paramount need today to critique the dominant model of globalisation and its effect on cultural





THE SMITHSONIAN COLLECTION

**JUNE 1921:** A black man killed in the race massacre at Tulsa, Oklahoma, U.S., from the Smithsonian Collection. "Race massacre photos were sold as souvenirs, and photo postcards."

memory, built on the lived experience of the citizenry across the world. The victims of history face the growing threat of extinction; their life values are against powerful oligarchies in the transnational order. There is alienation and amnesia among many, including the marginalised indigenous people across the world.

#### HARNESSING THE WISDOM OF THE LOCAL

I suggest that nativism, revivalism or xenophobia cannot be the answers to the present predicament. Tradition by itself is not regressive, nor is modernity, linked to the Western Enlightenment model, necessarily a virtue. Instead, recognising the wisdom of the local and harnessing it to the concerns of the global in a critical, non-hierarchical manner, as Tagore pointedly argued, could affect one-way border crossings; migration of ideas for the betterment of the whole world could go beyond the present asymmetry in cultural transactions and international relationships. Tagore wrote insightfully: "I have come to feel that the mind, which has been matured in the atmosphere of a profound knowledge of its own country and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from other countries."<sup>iv</sup>

"To know other countries," declares Sri Aurobindo, "is not to belittle but enlarge our own country and to help it to a greater power of its own being."<sup>v</sup>

Memory is linked to imagination and creativity and is

vital for the growth of human civilisation. It is more than a nostalgia for the past; forgotten narratives and revisionist history help us in refashioning our identities. We may, in this sense, look at two outstanding examples for our purpose: two instances which help us in resurrecting the 'usable past', a term insightfully used by the celebrated American critic Russell J. Reising<sup>vi</sup> in his pioneering critical work in 1986.

#### TULSA RACE MASSACRE

In recent years, cultural historians have paid attention to what has been called the 'Tulsa Race Massacre' dating back to 1921 in Oklahoma.<sup>vii</sup> The centenary of this event is being observed this year. Here, as well as in the case of India's Partition, the purpose of memory is to determine how we value our history and what we value from our collective past. "It's about truth telling, about our shared past and shared future." While the collection of material artefacts such as coins, posters, postcards, photographs, potteries, household items, furniture and everything else that have survived the ravages of history, both natural and man-made, are worthy of excavation, it is crucially the museum that becomes more than a storehouse for the assembled artefacts. Essentially, the task involves "provenance, cataloguing, preservation and interpretation".

It has been suggested in some quarters that the term 'Tulsa Race Massacre' is a misnomer; instead, it should be called 'Tulsa Race Riots'. The term 'massacre', it may be argued, is a more apt nomenclature, given the magnitude of the conspiracy and the organised manner in which the state colluded with the killing and destruction of prosperous black settlements of Greenwood in Tulsa,



Oklahoma, in February 1921. Known as the Negro Wall Street of America in early 20th century, Tulsa was home to 11,000 black people; one-tenth of the town's population, "spanned 35 black areas close to 200 businesses, 31 restaurants, more than two dozen grocery stores, 5 hotels, 4 drug stores and 2 theatres, 1 dozen churches, 2 schools, 2 hospitals, 2 newspapers and a public library." The blacks thus had a pride of place in Tulsa; they comprised a substantial section of the clergy, teachers, doctors and businessmen among other professionals. This would soon change, and for the worse.<sup>viii</sup>

The ostensible reason for the riot/massacre was the alleged sexual attack by Dick Rowland, a black youth, on Sarah Page, a 17-year-old white elevator operator. It was reported that Sarah 'screamed' and Rowland 'fled' from the scene, with clear innuendoes of a sexual attack. This was on May 30, 1921.

On May 31, 1921, *Tulsa Tribune*, the leading newspaper of the town, published a sensational report about an "assault and attempted rape"<sup>ix</sup> by Rowland. It was found out much later that "in the Drexel Building elevator, Mr Rowland had accidentally stepped on Ms Page's foot, and she had then used her purse to hit Mr Rowland who later admitted to grabbing Ms Page's arm. But the truth did not matter as much as the legend that Sarah Page was physically and sexually assaulted by Dick Rowland."<sup>x</sup>

It turned out to be a classic case of "the threat of interracial rape" that "haunts the American psyche", an argument famously used by the critic Leslie Fiedler in his celebrated book *What Was Literature: Class, Culture and Society*, 1982.<sup>xi</sup>

Soon after the publication of the incendiary news, as expected, sporadic skirmishes broke out between groups of blacks and whites across the 4th Street and Cincinnati Avenue.<sup>xii</sup> Instead of curbing the violence firmly, the authorities appointed 350 to 500 white men as special deputies, granting them blanket authority to arrest, shoot and kill those they deemed to be assailants and lawbreakers. Little wonder that, given the entrenched prejudice and racial animosity in the town, the deputies functioned more like a vigilante group not answerable to any legal authority and were a law unto themselves.

The massacre continued for approximately 12 hours between May 31 and June 1, 1921. By the noon of June 1, according to a conservative estimate, roughly 300 blacks had been killed. Greenwood's business district and more than 1,000 black residencies lay in ruins. Shocking as it seems, machine guns and airplanes were used to spray bullets on a number of unarmed blacks. The fact that many of the blacks had first-hand military experience in World War I (1914-1918)<sup>xiii</sup> worsened the conflict and turned the riots into a battle zone. The reprisals by the whites were swift and merciless. In the classic novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902)<sup>xiv</sup>, Joseph Conrad's fictional character Kurtz, who carries the "whiteman's burden", wants to "exterminate all the brutes", a refrain found in all the colonial discourse. George Orwell's semi autobiographical novel, *Burmese Days* (1934)<sup>xv</sup>, also serves as a good example.

It needs to be mentioned here in parenthesis that while the participation of America in the Great War was ostensibly for the promotion of democracy abroad, the actual treatment meted out to returning black soldiers by white supremacists went counter to the professed policy of the American state. As David A. Davis tells us in his incisive study, "Not Only War is Hell: World War II and Lynching Narratives", far from being treated as war heroes, a number of black soldiers often met with tragic and inglorious ends as victims of racial bigotry in an era dominated by the Ku Klux Klan. It unmasked the "hypocrisy of American intervention in World War I and the arbitrary brutality of American racism".<sup>xvi</sup> In short, "fight for liberty abroad, but condone brutality at home".<sup>xvii</sup>

As Davis argues cogently:

"When Wilbur Little, an African American soldier returned to Blakely, Georgia, from service in World War I, a group of white men met him in the train station and forced him to strip off his uniform. A few days later he defied their warning not to wear the uniform in public and a mob lynched him. His lynching sent the message to all African American soldiers returning from the war that their sacrifice for the cause of liberty would not lead to racial equality in America. A number of texts by African American writers published between 1919 and the 1930s, however, inverted that message by invoking the trope of the lynched soldier to make the case for civil rights."<sup>xviii</sup>

As for the black districts of Tulsa, when the strife was over, many parts of the town resembled a demilitarised zone with broken down walls, scattered furniture and household items, including religious books and the holy Bible in the midst of smouldering fire and rising plumes of smoke. According to later enquiries, it was revealed that what happened at Tulsa was 'basically a military style attack' against a civilian community. The loss to the property was around 20 million dollars in today's currency. No insurance was paid as compensation for the loss of black property.

It must be noted that the Tulsa race violence was not an isolated one or an aberration, it was not a rare happenstance at odds with the liberal culture of New York, Boston, Los Angeles or Berkeley. Similar outbreaks against the blacks had taken place in other cities as well, for instance in Chicago, 1919; Arkansas, 1919; Florida, 1923, among others, in disturbing frequency that shocked the civilised conscience in America. In Tulsa, people were keen to forgive and forget; they resumed their life with confidence and renewed vigour. By 1942, the district had been rebuilt with 242 black-owned and black-operated business; evidence of the carnage and destruction were not outwardly visible, at least for the outsiders and visitors.

#### PHOTOGRAPHS AS TROPHIES

The memories of the Tulsa massacre did not die, however. They were preserved, not so much by the victims, but paradoxically by many of the dominant whites who celebrated white triumphalism; they desired to visually represent and share with other whites their role/joy in





**SEPTEMBER 22, 1947:** Mahatma Gandhi with refugees at Purana Qila in New Delhi as they prepare to go to Pakistan. The truth of 'material memory' is seen in the Partition narratives in India too.

the widespread destruction of the Greenwood district. Postcards with riot scenes and black families huddling in fear and withdrawing from the city with saved belongings on horse-drawn carts were circulated as prized items. Such photography, as critics point out, was central to lynching culture of the turn of the century. Captions such as "Running Negroes out of Tulsa", or "Little Africa on Fire", or "Herding them in the Convention Hall" were widely circulated as "war trophies; they survive today after nearly a century".<sup>xix</sup> Many of them were kept as rare items in affluent white homes and passed down to generations, oblivious of the racial dimension of such artefacts. Race massacre photos were sold as souvenirs, and photo postcards.<sup>xx</sup> Karlos K. Hill explains insightfully the process of photographing the Tulsa Massacre of 1921.<sup>xxi</sup>

He says: "The 1921 [Tulsa race massacre] could aptly be described as a community lynching. By this I mean that the incineration of every significant structure in the Greenwood district and the indiscriminate killing of its residents was meant to create a spectacle of violence so powerful that terrorised black people would leave the city and never return."<sup>xxii</sup>

It may be mentioned in this context that spectacles of lynching were often staged in many town squares in America, right up to the first decades of the 20th century, in full view of an assembled population, comprising all strata of society. The idea was to create fear, awe and intimidation, especially among the blacks. As Davis argues, such public hangings turned "vigilante justice into the modern spectacle of enduring power".<sup>xxiii</sup>

The outbreak assumed more virulent forms in towns where blacks had done relatively well and occupied civic space in a conspicuous manner as in Tulsa. Ghettos had been given up here in favour of a more respectable city space with facilities that matched the white counterparts. Efforts to rise in class hierarchy, inspired by the preaching of progressive-minded clergy, were swiftly put down by the racial oligarchies in many towns.

#### TRUTH, ATONEMENT AND RECONCILIATION

In recent decades, there have been welcome moves to make atonements by colonial regimes for the perpetration of violence and war crimes. Apology by heads of states for crimes against subjugated nations by erstwhile colonial powers in Asia, Africa, Australia and Latin America have drawn the attention of the world to victims of history. Similarly, through the use of artefacts such as memorabilia, postcards, coins and furniture, there has been renewed attention paid to victims of the Tulsa race massacre.

The address of President Joe Biden of the United States at the Tulsa Centenary, 2021, was a message in the right direction.<sup>xxiv</sup> While conservative opinion in the U.S. may feel uneasy with the teaching of critical race theory in the classroom, progressive-minded institutions and civil society increasingly regard the teaching of revisionist history as a key imperative in the liberal agenda, a long-term remedy against racial crimes.

Colonialism, diaspora and displacement continue to haunt modern literary imagination. Speaking about his latest novel *Afterlives*, the Tanzanian novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2021, who hails originally from Zanzibar and now settled in the United Kingdom, says: "My interest was not to write about the war or the ugliness of colonialism.



Instead, I want to make sure the context in which war and colonialism happened is understood. And that the people in that context were people with entire existences.<sup>xxv</sup> This is a recurring note in some of the finest literature of our times.<sup>xxvi</sup> It is also a leitmotif in the present essay dealing with memory and lived experience.

The truth of 'material memory' is also seen elsewhere including in the Partition narratives in India. Art/cultural historian Anchal Malhotra<sup>xxvi</sup> shows us brilliantly, through the use of artefacts, as to how 'material memories' could be vital for acts of healing and reconciliation among victims caught in the crossfire of history. The objects recalled are seemingly commonplace: a *gaz*, a *ghagra*, a *maang-tikka*, a pocketknife, a peacock-shaped bracelet or a set of kitchen utensils. Every object remains deeply etched in memory; it recalls what Walter Benjamin had memorably said about the 'halo' of art work and artefacts.

*Remnants of a Separation* is "a unique attempt to revisit the past through artefacts carried across the border. These objects absorbed the memory of a time and

place, remaining latent and undisturbed for generations. They now speak of their owners' pasts, and emerge as testaments to the struggle, sacrifice, pain and belonging at an unparalleled moment in history."<sup>xxvii</sup> As Anchal Malhotra puts it aptly, the book "seems to have only opened the doors to a larger, more cavernous excavation of migratory memory, and its persistently relevant consequences"<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Tulsa massacre and Partition narratives carry profound lessons for mankind. The memories, left behind through artefacts, now excavated painstakingly from the debris of history, teach us the meaning of human fellowship and the need for atonement for historical wrongs. □

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## ENDNOTES

i See Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, (1962); *Understanding Media*, (1964)

ii See *Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th Century India*, Revised 2nd, South Asian and Global Edition, Routledge, 2018, pp. xiii-xviii for a detailed discussion of this issue.

iii Quoted in Sachidananda Mohanty, *In Search of Wonder: Understanding Cultural Exchange: Fulbright Programme in India*, New Delhi: Vision Books, 1997, p.33.[Foreword : J.K. Galbraith].

iv See Saranindranath Tagore, 'The Way of Unity,' in Sisir Kumar Das Ed., *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol.3, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996.

v See Sri Aurobindo, *The Future Poetry*, [The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo], Vol.26. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 1997.

vi See Russell J. Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*, Routledge, 1986. This is path-breaking book that paved the way for understanding American literary sensibility and identity going beyond the notions of the 'melting pot', 'manifest destiny' and 'American exceptionalism'. It has profound implications for understanding culture in general.

vii See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html> Accessed on 6.10.2021

viii See 'Remembering Tulsa': Special Report, Smithsonian Magazine <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/remembering-tulsa-180977764/> 'To mark the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, Smithsonian Magazine compiled a collection of our coverage of the attack.' Accessed on 6.10.2021. The article offers a comprehensive account of the incident, written with empathy and objectivity.

ix The accusation was later recanted by Tulsa Tribune, the city's main paper. But the damage was already done. See 'The Real Sarah Page,' <https://theblackwallstimes.com/2021/08/13/the-real-sarah-page-center-for-public-secrets-reveals-full-identity-of-woman-whose-false-allegation-launched-tulsa-race-massacre/>. Accessed on 10.10.2012.

x See 'The Black Wall Street Times,' <https://theblackwallstimes.com/2021/08/13/the-real-sarah-page-center-for-public-secrets-reveals-full-identity-of-woman-whose-false-allegation-launched-tulsa-race-massacre/>. Accessed on 10.10.2012.

xi See Leslie A Fiedler, *What Was Literature: Class, Culture and*

*Society*, 1982; rpt. Holiday House, 1984.

xii Ruins of the Tulsa Race Riot 6-1-21 | Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.si.edu/object/ruins-tulsa-race-riot-6-1-2>. Accessed on 6.10.2021

xiii See 'Not Only War Is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives', by David A. Davis, *African American Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3/4 (Fall - Winter, 2008), pp. 477-491

xiv See Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, London: Blackwood's Magazine, 1899; 1902.

xv See George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, Harper and Brothers, 1934.

xvi See Davis, Op. Cit. p.488.

xvii Davis, Op. Cit. p.488.

xviii Davis, Op. Cit. p.477.

xix See National Museum of African American History and Culture, U.S. (NMAAHC). Paul Gardullo recounts the stories behind objects in the Smithsonian Collections from the Tulsa race massacre. Accessed on 6.10.2021

xx See 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre - Tulsa Historical Society & Museum . <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/> Accessed on 6.10.2021

xxi See 'Photographing the Tulsa Massacre of 1921' by Karlos K. Hill in Smithsonian Magazine, dated May 27, 2021. Accessed on 6.10.2021.

xxii See Karlos K. Hill 'The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History,' University of Oklahoma Press, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/blog/154545>. Accessed on 11.10.2021.

xxiii Davis, Op. Cit. p.477.

xxiv 'Remembering the Tulsa race massacre 100 years later', by Narayan Lakshman <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/remembering-the-tulsa-race-massacre-100-years-later/article34710923.ece> Accessed on 6.10.2021

xxv See Smithsonian Magazine. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/nobel-prize-2021-abdulrazak-gurnah-180978832>. Accessed on 8.10.21

xxvi See Anchal Malhotra, *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2017. An excellent volume in this genre, well researched and lyrically told, one of the finest Partition narratives one has read.

xxvii *Remnants of a Separation*, Op Cit.

xxviii *Remnants of a Separation*, Op Cit. p.xvi.



# ‘A good translation is a creative transformation’

Interview with **Dr K. Chellappan**, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Prize for Translation 2020. BY **KANNAMMA NATARAJAN**



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

DR K. CHELLAPPAN, known as Dr KC in academic circles, found himself in the limelight once again when the Sahitya Akademi Awards were announced on March 12. Chellappan was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Prize for Translation 2020

for his Tamil translation of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*, a classic Bengali novel that raises a number of questions which are valid and relevant even today.

It would not be amiss to assume that the Sahitya Akademi Award for

Chellappan is not just for his most recent work but a comprehensive accolade earned for his many accomplishments in the field of translation and comparative literature. His books—*The World as a Stage: Shakespearean Transformations*;



R.K. Narayan: *The Ironic Myth-maker; Shakespeare and Ilango as Tragedians: A Comparative Study; Literature within/across the walls: Comparative studies in classical and modern Tamil Literature*; and *Tagore, Bharathi, and T.S. Eliot: Towards Creative Unity (Tagore lectures)*—occupy an important place in Indian academics and continue to be subjects of discussion amongst scholars of literature.

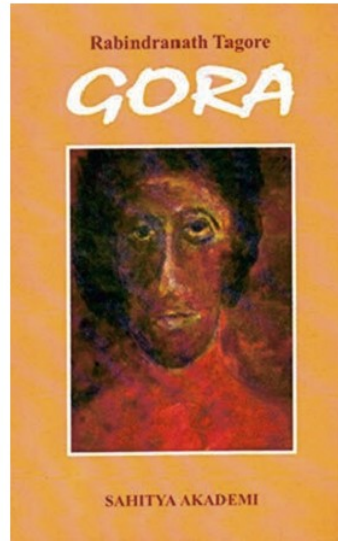
Chellappan, who began his career teaching at Rajah's College, Pudukkottai, has worked in many colleges in Tamil Nadu and taught hundreds of students for over four decades. Many of his students are heads of departments and senior professors of literature in colleges throughout the State.

A documentary on Chellappan's career and innovative teaching methods titled "An Inspiring Teacher", funded and released by his students, and a book titled *One Humanity, One Literature*, which celebrates his contributions to English literature, showcase the love and respect he enjoys even now among his students and literary scholars.

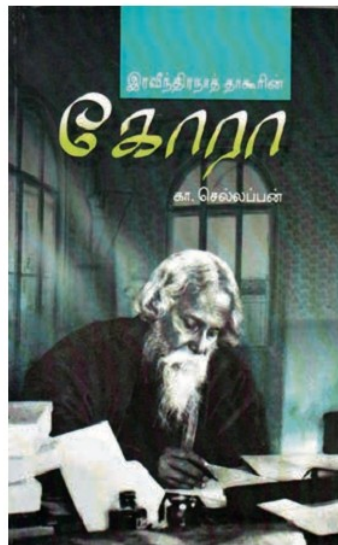
Chellappan's greatness as an eminent scholar and a devoted and compassionate teacher is because of the principle, "I slept, and dreamed that life was beauty. I woke, and found that life was duty", which he followed right from the beginning of his career and continues to date.

Tagore's poetry and short stories have been translated into many lan-

"Tagore's 'Gora' is very relevant to the present day as it questions Hindu fundamentalism and even nationalism."



**TAGORE'S** "Gora" in English and (below) Tamil translation, both published by the Sahitya Akademi.



guages, but there are not many takers for his novels. *Gora*, the longest of Tagore's novels, brims with complex and philosophical ideas and demands dexterity from the translator. Chellappan the translator has not disappointed us. He deserves appreciation for his complete and unabridged translation of *Gora* in Tamil, which is sure to elicit literary and critical attention.

Chellappan was kind enough to answer some of our questions about his work and success as a writer. Excerpts:

#### What drew you to writing, and particularly to translation?

I believe, with [Francis] Bacon, that writing maketh a perfect man. As a teacher and student of literature, I enjoyed reading and teaching good writings, and I thought that through writing I can express my deepest self and share it with others.

More particularly, translation brought me into contact with great minds, past and present; and translation is a way of possessing a work. As translation is a bridge between minds and languages, I felt that by translating good works from Tamil into English and vice versa, I might introduce new vistas to readers in both the languages.

#### What are your other works? Which one did you find difficult to translate?

I have translated selected poems of Bharathi and Bharathidasan, and Kove. Manisekaran's *Kutrala Kurinji* into English. I have translated Kalaignar's *Kuraloviyam* as "Kural Portraits", his novel *Thenpandi Singam*, and his prose poem "Meesai Mulaitha Vayathil" as "Budding Moustache, Blooming Poetry". I have also translated Ma.Po. Sivag-nanam's works that deal with the freedom movement.

I found Kalaignar's works more difficult because of their poetic dimension.

#### Is there a difference in reading a book for pleasure and reading for the purpose of translation?

Reading for translation can also be a pleasure, but our purpose in reading for translation is to decode the original by delving deep into the secrets. One has to coax the text to come out of its silence. [The literary critic] Northrop Frye said that poetry is silent, only criticism speaks. That is true of translation because translation also involves interpretation and criticism.

#### Is it possible for a translator to be faithful to the source text and be original/natural at the same time?

Yes, to a great extent. Fidelity to the original can coexist with creativ-



ity. Of course, one has to take some liberties with the original. Just as [T.S.] Eliot said that tradition and individual talent are not opposites, one can discover one's creativity while submitting to the other and one can find one's true self by losing it.

**What, to you, are the most important elements of good translation?**

A good translation is a creative transformation. It should recapture the *dhvani* [sound] and the spirit of the original, and if possible, try to find some kind of formal or stylistic equivalence with the original. It discovers a deeper third language by reconciling with the two systems.

**The general belief is that translations occupy a secondary position in any literary culture. What is your view?**

Yes, but [Jacques] Derrida thinks that the original is a kind of translation and all that we have are only translations of translations. Translation is also a moment of growth for the original because there are quite a few hidden texts in the original.

**Why do certain texts/authors get translated more often than others?**

Though some get translated because of their popularity, I feel that only works with vitality and dignity get translated again, because they can yield new meanings in every new encounter.

**How do you deal with negative book reviews?**

I try to see whether I can learn anything out of it. If it is too bad, I simply ignore it.

**What is your advice to upcoming translators?**

Translate what you enjoy; don't attempt literal or part-by-part translations. [Translators] can have some models.

**What does receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award mean to you?**

An award from the national body of letters is a recognition at the national level. I value it.

**What inspired you to choose Tagore's "Gora" for translation?**

It was the Akademi's choice. But I welcomed the assignment as I like *Gora* very much. It is very relevant to the present day as it questions Hindu fundamentalism and even nationalism.

Though Gora, an Irish born, champions nationalism in the narrow sense, he finally realises that Indianness cannot be simply inherited, it can be acquired. The novel also shows truth is greater than the nation.

**When did you first realise that you wanted to translate "Gora"?**

Even on my first reading, I felt like translating it.

**Was it easy to enter into the world of Tagore?**

Yes, because of its modernity and universality.

**Do you think your translation will have the same impact on readers as did Tagore's "Gora"?**

It may not. But my readers may not have read the original.

**How do you think it will be compared to Sujit Mukherjee's English translation of "Gora", your source text?**

The Tamil translation cannot give the exact impact like that of Mukherjee's. But every reader will have his own perception and reaction. Such differences will only help to discover new possibilities of meaning.

In short, meaning is never a finished product but a continuous process.

**There are many English translations of "Gora". Why did you choose Sujit Mukherjee's translation as the source?**

Mukherjee, being a Bengali and a writer in English, has been able to get the nuances of the original, linguistically and culturally.

**How long did it take you to finish the book?**

About six months.

**Were you able to get the right word/expression the first time itself or did you have to revise your work till you got it right?**

I do revise my versions. All translation is only an aspiration and an approximation.

**Did your views about the novel/characters change while working on the novel?**

Yes, while translating, I come into closer contact with the text. Any reading involves dialogue and intimacy with the text. Interpretation is a hermeneutic process in which there is a surrender which also becomes a conquest. More so in translation because it needs reformulation in the new language.

The Sanskrit word "sahridaya" means a reader must share the mind of the author. Sometimes, total empathy may be neither possible nor desirable. Unless I possess the original, I cannot communicate it to others.

**Are you happy/satisfied with how the novel ends? Gora's awakening seems a bit sudden and unreal.**

The present ending of the novel is good enough because there is both reversal and recognition in the Aristotelian sense. Gora recognises he can become an Indian by choice if not by birth. He sees in Anandamoyi, the stepmother, the image of true India, as she has no caste or religion. The Indian mother becomes a symbol of Mother India.

**What book or author is next on your list of translation?**

I would like to translate T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland".

**Have you ever thought of or made an attempt to write a novel/short story?**

Not yet. Though not a novel, I want to do something on the rivers in Tamil Nadu and the ancient Tamil culture which developed on their banks. As one belonging to the Sivaganga region, I want to do something related to its role in the freedom struggle. □



# Land beyond the Line

This book fills an important gap in scholarship on the history and current state of the **portion of Jammu and Kashmir** and Gilgit-Baltistan illegally occupied by Pakistan. BY **K.P. FABIAN**

**T**HIS book is timely, and, in a sense, was overdue. For decades, the question of Jammu and Kashmir has been viewed by the public, global as well as subcontinental, as a matter that Pakistan brings up from time to time at the United Nations or at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where it blames India for not abiding by its commitments to U.N. resolutions. The state of affairs in Jammu and Kashmir gets highlighted from time to time in the international media. However, what is happening in the portion of Jammu and Kashmir illegally occupied by Pakistan hardly gets any mention. We do not know of any Indian scholar's book on the state of affairs on the other side of the Line of Control (LoC).

Ambassador Dinkar Srivastava, eminently qualified by professional engagement with the whole question at the U.N. forum and elsewhere, has filled the gap by writing this book, which is fortified by his thorough research.

The illegally occupied territory consists of two parts: part of Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan acquired the first part by committing aggression

and the second by manipulation in tandem with the British Indian government. The author has given a lucid account of all this. Often, the story of Gilgit-Baltistan is ignored or rendered inaccurately. One of the merits of this book is that little-known facts have been brought to light.

The author is to be commended for seeking out Pakistani writings on the subject. The Pakistani sources include the writings of two prominent actors: Major General Akbar Khan, who as Lieutenant Colonel led the 'tribal invasion', and Justice M.Y. Saraf, who was a Muslim Conference activist. The author has used Urdu sources too: for instance, Qudrat Ullah Shahab of the Indian Civil Service

(ICS), who wrote on the formative years of Pakistan in his book *Shahabnama*.

The author points out that Pakistan took decisions on Kashmir without consulting the Kashmiris. He writes: "The Kashmiris were absent not only in the higher echelons of decision-making in Pakistan, but even within the Muslim Conference leadership.... Most of the Muslim Conference leaders were from Jammu, with little or no following in Kashmir."

## PAKISTAN'S VIOLATIONS

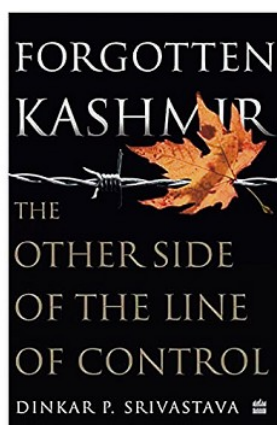
The book is well-structured with seven sections and 23 chapters. The first chapter is about the invasion. On August 12, 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh

signed a Standstill Agreement with Pakistan. Even when that agreement was in force, in violation thereof, Pakistan started planning an invasion.

The original plan of transferring arms from the Pakistani military stores to the civilians to be sent to Jammu and Kashmir did not work out as the British Army chief refused to issue rifles. The way out was to use an existing approval to transfer 4,000 military rifles to the Punjab Police on the understanding that the latter would "transfer them for action in Kashmir". With telling effect, the author quotes Pakistan's written submission to the U.N., asserting: "The Pakistan government emphatically deny that they are giving aid and assistance to the so-called invaders..."

The author tells us about the little-known Karachi Agreement of April 1949 that made the so-called Azad Kashmir government an instrument at the disposal of Pakistan. It was an agreement secretly concluded between Pakistan on the one hand and the Muslim Conference and the president of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) government on the other.

The expression "PoK



**Forgotten Kashmir**  
**The Other Side Of**  
**The Line Of Control**  
Dinkar P. Srivastava  
HarperCollins India  
Pages: 439  
Price: Rs.699





THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**JUNE 7, 1947:** Jawaharlal Nehru with Viceroy Mountbatten and Muhammad Ali Jinnah at a conference in New Delhi where Mountbatten disclosed Britain's "partition" plan for India.

Government" is misleading. As the author says: "The PoK government was based neither on elections nor on a Constitution. It was a creation of Pakistan and run by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas, based on the Rules of Business." The text of the Karachi Agreement is given as annexure.

An entire chapter is devoted to how the issue of Jammu and Kashmir was dealt with at the U.N., in which the author with irrefutable logic demolishes Pakistan's case. A plebiscite as proposed by the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) was accepted by Pakistan in December 1948. If Pakistan were sure of winning the plebiscite, it could have withdrawn its forces and insisted on holding the plebiscite. The

author states: "It did not want to relinquish the territory it had gained for the uncertain outcome of the plebiscite." The account is a study in sound historical reasoning.

#### **SUDHAN REVOLT**

The fourth chapter is on the Sudhan Revolt, once again a little-known page of history. Pakistan dismissed Sardar Ibrahim Khan as president of PoK in May 1950 and his tribe, the Sudhan, took to arms. The Pakistani military put down the rebellion.

The seventh chapter is about the Simla Agreement of 1972 and how Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then Pakistan Prime Minister, tightened Islamabad's grip on PoK. We are given some little-known facts. A brief account of how Indira

Gandhi was deceived by Bhutto would have been of interest to younger readers.

The 22nd chapter, titled "Wishes of the People", robustly argues that Pakistan never cared for those wishes. The argument is detailed and solid.

There is a discussion on plebiscite and self-determination. The author says that it was [Governor General] Louis Mountbatten's decision to insert the provision for a plebiscite while accepting the accession of Jammu and Kashmir. It needs to be pointed out, especially keeping younger readers in mind, that the matter is a little more complex.

The author writes: "Lord Mountbatten, while accepting the Maharaja of Kashmir's unconditional offer to accede to the In-

dian Union, attached the condition that the State's future should be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people determined in a plebiscite." This statement is historically inaccurate. There was no reference to any plebiscite in the Governor-General's acceptance of the Instrument of Accession. Mountbatten, with the approval of the Cabinet, wrote a separate personal letter to the Maharaja saying: "As soon as law and order have been restored in Kashmir and her soil cleared of the invaders, the question of State's accession should be settled by reference to the people."

The above is taken from Ambassador Narendra Singh Sarila's well-researched book *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's*



*Partition.* Obviously, the reader will be curious to know why Mountbatten did what he did and why the Cabinet let him do it. Mountbatten did it to keep the chances open for Kashmir to join Pakistan as Clement Attlee's government in the United Kingdom wanted it. London saw Pakistan as an ally able and willing to support the West in the Cold War that was in the making.

However, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Cabinet had another reason. Strictly speaking, the Indian Independence Act did not make it obligatory for the princely states and statelets to join one of the two dominions. The Act stated that the 'paramountcy' ended, implying, without saying it in so many words, that the states were free to do what they wanted. London had, at one time, thought in terms of one or two states remaining independent.

For example, there was a thought that an independent Hyderabad would serve Britain's strategic interests.

However, there was a change of policy on the part of London in 1947.

In his letter of instructions to Viceroy Mountbatten, Prime Minister Attlee had said: "It is of course important that the Indian States should adjust their relations with the authorities to whom it is intended to hand over power in British India.... but HMG [His Majesty's Government] do not intend to hand over power and obligations under paramountcy to any successor State."

Mountbatten, Sardar



**JULY 2, 1972:** Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan signing the Simla agreement.

Patel, and V.P. Menon accomplished an exceptionally difficult task of the integration of the States.

We have to see the concurrence of the Nehru Cabinet to Mountbatten's idea of plebiscite in Kashmir in the right historical context.

The Instrument of Accession, as drafted by V.P. Menon, made it clear that it was for the ruler to take the decision. Pakistan founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah had already scored a point by accepting in September 1947 the accession of Junagadh, which had no land boundary with Pakistan.

#### JINNAH'S PLANS

The reader will note that Jinnah, who wanted partition on the basis of religion, was accepting of the accession of Junagadh, with 80 per cent Hindus. Nehru wrote to Jinnah proposing a referendum with both India and

Pakistan agreeing to accept the result thereof. Jinnah did not agree. Eventually, the court in Junagadh requested India to take over. The Nawab of Junagadh had already fled to Pakistan with his collection of dogs. A referendum held later supported joining India by a huge margin.

It is also likely that Jinnah had wanted India to accept the principle that the ruler alone was competent to take the decision, keeping in mind the Nizam of Hyderabad who wanted independence. Jinnah wanted to prevent the accession of Hyderabad to India. An independent Hyderabad, in the heart of India and friendly to Pakistan, was an important objective for Jinnah.

Mountbatten insisted that the Nizam should disband the Razakars [a private militia] and hold a referendum and an elec-

tion, for an eventual accession to India. The accession of Hyderabad was settled only in September 1948. In short, there was good reason for the Nehru Cabinet to agree with Mountbatten's offer to conduct a plebiscite in Kashmir in October 1947.

Those who blame Nehru for the offer of plebiscite are on a weak wicket. It should be added that the author does not belong to that school of thought.

The last chapter, titled 'Ideology, Strategy, and Future of PoK', starts with a quotation from Gibran Peshimam, a Pakistani journalist, on the pathetic condition of the people there: "It is a land and a people with a past, and perhaps a future—but with no present." The Constitution is "interim", though with 13 amendments since 1973. The people have no representation in Pakistan's National Assembly.

The book could have been edited better. A map or two, a few photographs, and a chronology can be considered for future editions.

This book will be of interest to the general public as well as to scholars. Let us hope that it will be read in Pakistan. Let us also hope to see a healthy academic debate between scholars across the LoC, a debate where the interlocutors have mastered the art of disagreeing agreeably. □

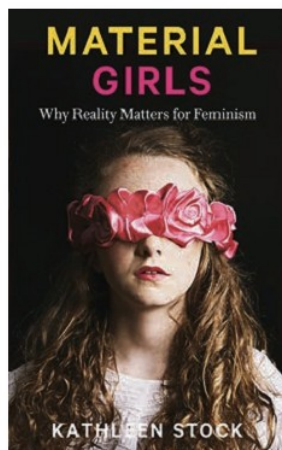
*Ambassador K.P. Fabian is Distinguished Fellow at Symbiosis University. His book The Arab Spring That Was And Wasn't is about to be published.*



# Colonising gender identity

Two new books, both by authors critical of gender identity ideology, take on the challenge of exploring the tide of sex denialism currently sweeping advanced capitalist societies. BY SUSAN RAM

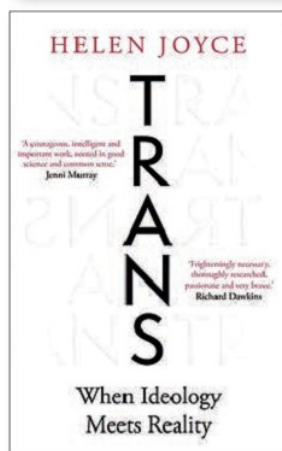
A SPECTRE is haunting Europe, North America and every corner of what is collectively known as the West. Unlike the transformative revolutionary presence invoked by Marx in the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*, this 21st century phenomenon is all about division, denial and muddled, anti-materialist thinking. Bedecked in alluring cotton candy shades of pink, blue and white, it appears on advertising hoardings and floodlit buildings. It sashays its way into public service promotional material and political party manifestos, onto police vehicles and riot shields, into school teaching guidelines and university curricula. It hovers over a swathe of public settings, from workplaces to changing rooms, from prisons to public toilets, from hospital wards to sports teams. Wherever it surfaces, it targets everyday language, replacing words rooted in, and expressive of, material reality with an alphabet soup of euphemisms, Orwellian neologisms and plain untruths.



## Material Girls Why Reality Matters for Feminism

By Kathleen Stock  
Fleet, London, 2021

Pages: 312  
Price: £16.99



## Trans When Ideology Meets Reality

By Helen Joyce

One World Publications,  
London, 2021

Pages: 311  
Price: £16.99

This phantasm enjoins us to hack away at 'wrong thinking', by which it means the body of scientific knowledge that humans have built up over

millennia of experience and collective effort. In its place, we must embrace a new orthodoxy: the notion that every human comes with a preformed, immut-

able 'gender identity', an inner state which only that individual can divine through arcane, unverifiable and mystical processes. Through the recitation of mantras and 'proper' use of pronouns, we must continually affirm the primacy of this 'innate' gender identity over an individual's 'socially constructed' biological sex. Men can be women, women can be men, anyone can be 'non-binary' (neither man nor woman) or adhere to any variant on an ever-expanding menu of 'genders'—on their own say-so, and regardless of the implications for those around them and society at large.

Welcome to the wacky world of gender identity ideology.

This world view, and the movement that has developed around it, has taken root in advanced capitalist societies with extraordinary speed. From its origins in the United States academia in the closing two decades of the last century, it has advanced primarily through the promotion of transgenderism, presented as some sort of new frontier in the global battle for social justice. On this basis, it has achieved a degree of exposure—and acceptance—that sets it apart from any other recent movement for social change.

## RESPONSE OF THE LEFT

Despite the contrast this wildfire advance presents with, say, the long-drawn-out, often bloody campaigning characteristic of



anti-racist struggle, gender identity ideology has attracted surprisingly little scrutiny on the Left. There seems to be little awareness here of how profoundly the goals of this ideology and its attendant movement differ from those of civil rights movements of the past (those of black people and gays, for instance). Whereas these historic movements battled for the universal rights to which all people are entitled, advocates of gender identity ideology are intent on appropriating the already-fought-for rights of another oppressed group: women.

Few on the Left seem willing to confront this 'colonising' impulse. In the U.S., where gender identity ideology has put down particularly deep roots, it receives as much 'affirmation' from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) as it does from mainstream Democrats, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris among them.

For members of the British Labour Party, raising doubts about what strikes many as a nonsensical world view (in particular, the insistence that men can in a literal sense 'be' women, rather than simply choose to 'live as' the opposite sex) can result in name-calling, ostracism and even threats of violence (as in the case of the British MP Rosie Duffield, currently under fire for her gender critical views).

On the radical left, too, critics of the notion that gender identity takes precedence over biological sex are fighting a stiff battle. While some organisations



**KEEGAN**, who identifies as gender creative, pours glitter on his head during his ninth birthday party at his home near Austin, Texas, on May 10, 2019. Critics of the notion that gender identity takes precedence over biological sex are fighting a stiff battle.

(the Socialist Workers Party, for instance) have adopted an unalloyed pro-gender identity stance, others are maintaining a low profile, perhaps in the hope that the whole controversy will somehow fade away. Little attempt is being made to evaluate the long-term impact of this ideology, particularly for working-class and ethnic minority women. Some 'progressives' are calling for dangerous male criminals who 'identify' as women to be accommodated in women's prison facilities—and for male-bodied people to have access to women's rape centres and refuges.

Thus far, the Communist Party remains the only force on the British Left to have expressed unambiguous opposition to the ideology and its anti-materialist underpinnings.

#### NO DEBATE

Extreme hostility towards critics and non-believers is a defining feature of the gender ideology phenomenon. Dissenters can expect nothing but

trouble, from accusations of bigotry, transphobia and 'fascism' to banishment from social media platforms, from the cancellation of speaking engagements to the loss of jobs and livelihoods. Women who, like the author J.K. Rowling, express even mild, carefully phrased gender critical views on social media will find themselves the target of rape and death threats.

In Scotland, where the devolved government headed by Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish Nationalist Party appears bent on outlawing all opposition to the new orthodoxy, critics may even find themselves confronting a court summons to face charges of 'hate speech'.

The resulting atmosphere is one from which even the possibility of discussion and debate is being expunged. For extreme gender ideologues, the mere mention of debate, or the need to lower the temperature by sitting together around a table, is anathema.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, those at

the sharp end of the pillorying and abuse are women. Despite the fact that many women critics of gender ideology are socialists who embrace the support of trans-identifying allies, a punchy acronym TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist), is now regularly deployed against them. Significantly, no equivalent slur has been coined for use against gender critical men.

There is in fact a striking degree of asymmetry in the way gender identity ideology has been applied in respect of the two sexes. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. In a world characterised by an enduring sex hierarchy in which the sex class or category known as women is subordinated to that of men, it follows that gender ideology will have weightier implications and consequences for the former than the latter. Given the continuing hold of what Engels called the "world historic defeat of the female sex", there can be no question of the application of genderism unfolding in the context of a level playing field between men and women.

In this situation, it is women who are bearing the brunt of the gender ideological offensive. Particularly startling has been the vehemence of efforts to delegitimise and even expunge words and language specific to women (including the term 'woman' itself). At the behest of powerful, well-funded lobbying organisations (Stonewall in the U.K.; the American Council for Civil Liberties (ACLU) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) in the U.S.), public



health messages and advertising copy aimed at women are increasingly adopting ugly Newspeak neologisms such as 'menstruator', 'chest-feeder', 'cervix-haver', 'birthing parent', and 'bleeder'. Or, to quote the phrase selected by the influential medical publication *The Lancet* for the cover of a recent issue, 'bodies with vaginas'.

Corporations, government departments, public sector bodies, and publicly funded services such as health and education get tutored in the new lexicon via lobbying organisations' lucrative partnership schemes. In order to improve their ratings, subscribers strive to adopt what is presented to them as 'best practice' in terms of 'diversity' and 'inclusion'. As with the term TERF, changes in terminology are directed exclusively at women and their bodies; reciprocal terms for men (penis haver? Prostate owner?) have yet to appear.

#### **THREAT TO SINGLE-SEX SPACES**

Beyond the growing truncation of their language, women are also being ordered to open up their vital single-sex spaces: places of sanctuary and safety won through hard-fought struggles by earlier generations of women campaigners. Women-only toilets, changing rooms, shower facilities, hospital wards, rape centres, prisons and refuges for female victims of domestic violence: all have become grist to the ideology-driven demand for unqualified access to any man who 'identifies' as a woman. In women's

sports, too, competitors increasingly find themselves up against, or displaced by, male-bodied individuals who enjoy the considerable physical advantages gained from having passed through male puberty.

Under assault, too, are the institutions, procedures and reforms, introduced as the result of campaigning by women, designed to extend women a hand upwards in their battle for equality. All-women shortlists, introduced to boost the presence of women in elected bodies; women's officer positions within political parties and trade unions: here, too, the terms of eligibility are being thrown wide open.

Where did the ideas firing this extraordinarily sweeping attack on women, their language and their sex-based rights originate? And what explains the rapidity of their advance over the past two decades?

Two new books, both by authors critical of this turn, take on the challenge of exploring the tide of sex denialism currently sweeping advanced capitalist societies.

Both writers rise commendably to the challenge. For Kathleen Stock, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex, the contradictions and muddled thinking that riddle gender ideology demand exposure to the clear light of day. Helen Joyce, a journalist at *The Economist*, draws on her skills as a writer to dissect the trans phenomenon, the most visible manifestation of this ideological offensive. Taken together, these two books constitute a cogent and intelligent introduc-

tion to the controversy for readers new to the subject, and an invaluable source of arguments and references for those seeking to sharpen their gender critical thinking—and action.

For Kathleen Stock, a stalwart of the intellectual battle against the new idealism whose cool rationalism tends to incense opponents (among them faculty and students at her university), upholding the distinction between sex and gender is essential to the task of liberating women from oppression. As its title announces, *Material Girls* is a thoroughgoing defence and celebration of women's materiality, a lucid evocation of the many dimensions that constitute women's embodied reality. Sex matters, argues Kathleen Stock, because it simply cannot be written out of the script. Across countless dimensions of life—from medical treatment to sport, from access to jobs to physical safety—their sexed bodies have a profound impact on women's lives.

As Kathleen Stock underlines, none of the above can coexist with a gender identity world view whose core axioms dismiss the very notion of material reality. These central tenets are summarised thus:

"1. You and I, and everyone else, have an important inner state called a gender identity.

2. For some people, inner gender identity fails to match the biological sex—male or female—originally assigned to them at birth by medics. These are trans people.

3. Gender identity, not biological sex, is what

makes you a man or a woman (or neither).

4. The existence of trans people generates a moral obligation upon all of us to recognise and legally to protect gender identity and *not* biological sex." (p.11)

She has little difficulty making mincemeat of each of the above. She is especially good at teasing out confusions and contradictions, at probing the way in which words and their meanings have fallen prey to manipulation and casuistry by one side of the 'debate'. A case in point is the word 'gender': the beating heart of what strikes many commentators as a quasi-religious, cult-like world view. She notes:

"It is a standing feature of almost any argument between feminists and trans activists that the word 'gender' will appear there in several different senses, often unnoticed and in a way that increases confusion and toxicity exponentially. Cultural historian Bernice Hausman captures the confusion well when she writes how ... she began to realise that 'although most people adhered to a distinction between "sex" and "gender" that relegates the first term to nature and the second to culture, some were beginning to use "gender" to refer to both realms'." (p.37)

To guide readers through the gender labyrinth, Kathleen Stock lays out four distinct ways in which 'gender' can be understood.

Firstly, there's 'gender-as-euphemism': a "polite-sounding word for the division between men and women... thought to have



the benefit of an absence of embarrassing connotations of sexiness in the copulatory sense.” (p.38) She calls this GENDER1.

Next, there’s gender as a descriptor of “social stereotypes, expectations and norms of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (p.39), variable to a degree across cultures. This is GENDER2 in her typology.

Thirdly, gender can be used to designate the division between men and women, as understood to exist between two distinct sets of people: “those who have the social role of masculinity projected on to them, and those who have the social role of femininity projected on to them.” (p.38) GENDER3 incarnates this sense of womanhood versus manhood.

Finally, with GENDER4, we arrive at the pairing of ‘gender’ with ‘identity’. Here gender takes on yet another sense: that of the private experience of gender role: “roughly, whether you relate to yourself psychologically as a boy or man, girl or woman, or neither, in a way that has nothing directly to do with your sex.” (p.38) It is purely in this sense that ‘gender’ is being invoked by sex denialist theoreticians and ideologues.

#### DEMOTION OF SEX

A similar slipperiness, Kathleen Stock argues, surrounds gender identity ideology’s attempts to re-define—and demote—the concept of ‘sex’. As she notes, whichever definition of biological sex you opt for—whether the ‘gamete account’, which distinguishes between organisms on develop-

mental pathways to produce small versus large gametes; or the ‘chromosome account’, which highlights the distinct chromosomes (XX and XY) typically possessed by women versus men; or the ‘cluster account’, which focuses on the combination of morphological characteristics (for instance, skeletal structure, genitalia at birth, fat distribution) relevant to identifying people as male or female—the binary nature of sex is incontestable:

“Properly understood, the ‘sex binary’ requires only that the vast majority of people fall into one category or the other. And on the three understandings of sex offered above, they do.” (p.59)

This matters because, for gender identity adherents, it is axiomatic that biological sex is non-binary and exists on a spectrum. Kathleen Stock has fun with the fanciful claims made by influential proselytisers of this claim, in particular the U.S. sexologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (of Brown University), who argues for the existence of at least five distinct human sexes.

The murky, postmodernist waters from which such views emanate also come in for appropriately tongue-in-cheek treatment. Kathleen Stock is particularly unimpressed by ‘queer theory’—currently the stock-in-trade of university gender studies and liberal arts departments throughout the West. This doctrine, most famously expounded by Judith Butler, professor of comparative literature at Berkeley, rests on key

postmodernist claims about the nature of reality, in particular the view that nothing exists independently of its ‘social construction’ through language. There is no objective reality; there are no pregiven facts about natural selection; the notion of there being two naturally pregiven stable biological sexes is illusory; everything is up for grabs.

As Helen Joyce observes in her more explicit engagement with the ‘trans’ phenomenon, this is a world view tailor-made for the neoliberal age: one where the ‘individual’, their ‘choices’ and their ‘identity’ rule the day: “Within applied postmodernism, objectivity is essentially impossible. Logic and reason are not ideals to be striven for, but attempts to shore up privilege. Language is taken to shape reality, not describe it. Oppression is brought into existence by discourse. Equality is no longer achieved by replacing unjust laws and practices with new ones that give everyone the chance to thrive, but by individuals defining their own identities, and ‘troubling’ or ‘queering’ the definition of oppressed groups.” (p.61)

With a focus on the practical results of this kind of thinking, Helen Joyce identifies the institutions and special interests—lobbying groups, big corporations, and well-funded charitable foundations—that are driving this trend. But she also highlights another crucial aspect of gender identity ideology: the damage it is inflicting on society in general, and

the danger it poses, most of all to working-class women and to children.

#### REINFORCING GENDER STEREOTYPES

How does an individual set about divining their ‘innate’, ineffable, and fixed-for-all-time gender identity? According to the gender identity rulebook, on the basis of the traits, behaviour and preferences deemed to be ‘characteristic’ of men/boys versus women/girls. As Helen Joyce notes, whether in the material sent out by lobbying groups to schools or in social media ‘trans tutorials’ aimed at teenagers, the stereotypes are out in force:

“Bish, a British sex-education website for teenagers... recommends placing yourself on several ‘gender scales’. Listed under ‘looks masculine’ are rational, tough, takes charge, independent, headstrong, active and outgoing; under ‘looks feminine’ are emotional, soft, takes part, sharer, sensitive, passive and shy. It notes that these are what men and women are ‘supposed to be like.’” (pp.117-118)

Rather than being encouraged to question these stereotypes, young people are instructed to “work out for yourself where you are on each scale, and from that decide whether you are a boy or a girl, or something in between”. Determining/choosing your gender identity boils down to making a selection from a catalogue of reactionary, sexist clichés.

For readers new to the issues, Helen Joyce’s exploration of the ways in which gender identity ideology is impacting the



lives of children will be particularly shocking. In a further show of the asymmetry which characterises the application of this world view, the most serious consequences are being felt not by adult men seeking to change gender (trans women) but by troubled, traumatised children and adolescents who are told their problems stem from 'living in the wrong body'. On the basis of the 'affirmation only' policies in place in proliferating gender identity clinics, such youngsters are being encouraged along an experimental, poorly evidenced transition highway marked by powerful puberty-blocking drugs, cross-sex hormones and, ultimately, surgical interventions. At this end of the age spectrum, transition can result in permanent loss of fertility, lifelong dependence on medication and, for a growing number of de-transitioners, profound regret for irreversible decisions made when they were far too young.

#### UNDER THE RADAR

The subterfuge and under-the-radar lobbying that underlie this developing tragedy come in for detailed scrutiny by both authors. In a chapter titled 'How did we get here?' Kathleen Stock explores the transformation of Stonewall, originally a campaigning organisation for gay and lesbian rights, into the U.K.'s primary promoter of ideologically driven transgenderism. This adroit shift ensured a continuing inflow of funds following the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the U.K. in 2013. On this

basis, an amply resourced lobbying group has been able to influence not simply its 'partners' in business, education and local government but also Parliament itself. When in 2016 the Parliamentary Select Committee on Women and Equalities launched a public enquiry into transgender equality, the witnesses it called were overwhelmingly drawn from only one side of a dispute involving sharply conflicting interests.

This imbalance is now being addressed by grass roots women's organisations and gender critical groups, some of them social media-based. Their efforts over the past three or four years have brought the subterranean activities of extreme gender ideologues to the attention of growing numbers of people and spurred a much-needed debate.

This fight-back against the more extreme claims and demands of gender identity ideologues has been particularly marked in the UK, where socialist, trade unionist and women's organisations have deeper roots and greater reach than across the Atlantic. Activists from such circles form the backbone of organisations such as Women's Place UK, Fair Play for Women and the Safe Schools Alliance (which is actively combating the infiltration of anti-scientific, stereotype-reinforcing material into schools). Gay activists critical of the sex denialism central to gender identity ideology (which targets the very notion of same-sex attraction) have quit Stonewall to set up a new organisation, the Lesbian

and Gay Alliance, to defend their rights.

Despite their continuing efforts to close down meetings, silence opponents and in general 'disallow' any real discussion of a world view which so directly threatens women's rights, language, safety and fight for equality, gender identity ideologues are increasingly finding themselves under challenge. In Scotland, the battle is on to retain the protections for women guaranteed by Britain's 2010 Equality Act, which makes provision for women's sex-based rights, including access to single sex spaces. Meanwhile, down in London, the Conservative government headed by Boris Johnson has pulled back from the idea of introducing gender self-identification: the ability to 'change' one's legal status free of all regulation or scrutiny.

In this respect, Johnson and company seem to have read the room better than the official opposition. At its recent annual conference, the Labour Party revealed yet again the degree of 'policy capture' to which it has succumbed on this issue. In response to the question, posed during a TV interview: "is it transphobic to say only women have a cervix?" party leader Keir Starmer could only come up with: "Well it is something that shouldn't be said. It is not right... this debate needs to be conducted in a proper way in which proper views are expressed." Another prominent party figure, the MP David Lammy, described gender critical women as "dinosaurs" intent on "hoarding their rights".

Luckily, other voices exist within the Labour Party. One of those belongs to Lachlan Stuart, a former policy adviser to Jeremy Corbyn, a defender of women's rights and a gender-critical gay man. In a recent social media comment, Stuart set out the terms of the debate that, however difficult and irrespective of what might constitute 'proper' terminology, needs to take place:

"As a body politic, as a society, we cannot simply remove the fundamental buttresses underpinning progress towards liberation for half the population without stopping to question the impact on that population.... At the end of the day, it is the people who matter, the people who must be served. And the people know that we humans don't change sex. Any party building a prospectus on that false foundation is going to fail. Sooner or later."

Postscript: In early October, Kathleen Stock became the target of a vicious campaign of harassment, conducted by masked students and condoned by some faculty members, aimed at getting her sacked from her job because of her 'transphobic' views. While the Sussex University authorities, including the vice chancellor, have condemned these actions, Kathleen Stock has received no trade union backing despite the direct attack on her employment rights. Following police warnings about very real threats to her safety, she has cancelled her classes for the rest of the autumn term and will remain off-campus. □



# 'Love jehad is a pernicious

Interview with **Professor Upinder Singh**, author and Professor of History, Ashoka University. BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

SHE grew up surrounded by books. Most were books on economics, a subject she did not quite like. But she liked books, so when Upinder Singh grew up she decided to write, edit and co-edit them. With a dozen titles to her credit, Professor U. Singh, as she is often called, has just published *Ancient India: Culture of Contradictions*. Such is her mastery over her craft that on reading this refreshing take on ancient times, the reader begins to find parallels with contemporary India, be it the existence of pluralism as well as religious violence, or the presence of misogyny.

Now a Professor of History at Ashoka University, Professor U. Singh was earlier Head of the Department of History at Delhi University. The elder daughter of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Gursharan Kaur, Professor Singh wears her lineage with humility. She spoke to *Frontline* about her latest book, published by Aleph Book Company. Excerpts:

**Your book resonates with examples one can relate to in contemporary India. For instance, you talk of ancient India being full of pluralist benevolence and religious violence.**

Our understanding of history can be transformed if the past resonates with us, if we see it in terms of issues that are important to us today, and if we invest time and energy to try to truly understand it. That is why my book is structured around the coexistence of certain radical tensions and contradictions that were present in ancient India and are also visible today—between social inequality



SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

and salvation, desire and detachment, goddess worship and misogyny, violence and non-violence, and debate and conflict.

Asoka's desire to promote dhamma and genuine religious dialogue and concord is exceptional, but even lesser kings did not try to create a theocratic state. Most of them followed a pluralistic policy and extended patronage to a variety of religious groups, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. This is something positive, to be appreciated. But there are references to episodes of violence. For instance, the Buddhist text "Chulavamsa" refers to a Pandyan army carrying off a golden Buddha image from Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. It also states that when Rajendra Chola's army invaded Sri Lanka, it broke into relic chambers and monasteries and looted images made of gold and other precious materials. An inscription on a stone door guardian proclaims that it was wrested from the Chalukyas by the

Chola king Rajadhiraja after he had burnt down the Chalukya capital Kalyanapuram. We should note that these accounts of the looting of religious images and destruction of religious structures were part of narratives of war.

## RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION DOWN THE AGES

**We know of the large-scale desecration of temples by Muslim rulers in medieval India. Similarly, Brahmin rulers destroyed hundreds of Buddhist monasteries in ancient India. Have we always been a nation of a dominant religion riding roughshod over all else?**

The truth often lies between exaggeration and denial. There are several significant references to religious persecution in ancient texts. For instance, Buddhist tradition describes Pushyamitra Shunga as having destroyed 84,000 stupas, killing all the monks in a monastery at Pataliputra, and announcing a bounty of a hundred gold coins to anyone who brought him the head of a Buddhist monk. The Huna rulers Toramana and Mihirakula are also accused of persecuting Buddhists. The Pallava king Mahendravarman is said to have persecuted Jains. A Pandya king is said to have impaled 8,000 Jains. Kanhana's *Rajatarangini* says that king Shankaravarman plundered 64 temples. King Kshemagupta is said to have destroyed a monastery in Srinagara and used the material to build a temple. King Harsha of the Lohara dynasty is reported as having plundered the wealth of temples and appointed an



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# recent invention'

official for melting down images of the gods for the royal treasury.

Of course, we should not take all these details or statistics literally, but the evidence does clearly indicate that the pragmatic multi-directional patronage and live-and-let-live attitude of rulers of ancient India was sometimes punctured by violent persecution, sometimes backed by political or economic motives.

**Why is it that the common Indian knows about Aurangzeb but is ignorant of the actions of say, Pushyamitra Shunga or Mihirakula?**

Historical figures (including Aurangzeb) are not as simple as they seem. Historians have long known about these things, but not all history percolates into the popular domain. History has always had a political angle to it. But these days, the state is making a stronger pitch to reshape history in the educational and popular domains because it thinks it will reap political gains. History and political propaganda are two different things. History should be left to historians who are faithful to their discipline and not to the agenda of a political party.

**We have recently had a couple of instances when attempts at an independent take on religion received much flak. I am referring to a clothing line's Diwali advertisement, and earlier the arrest of a satirist in Madhya Pradesh for a joke on a BJP leader. Have we always been so intolerant of criticism of religion or leaders in our history?**

People of all kinds—film-makers, writers, artists, historians—have borne the brunt of the “ban culture”. This breeds an atmosphere where free thought or creativity cannot flourish, where writers and artists

are forced to either engage in self-censorship or face the music, an ugly music.

In ancient India, although religion was a serious business, there was also a tradition of making fun of it, for instance in texts such as the *Mattavilasa Prahasana* and *Bhagavadajjukam Prahasana*. The *Agamadambara* is a Sanskrit play written by a respected Brahmin Nyaya philosopher, Jayanta Bhatta. The play contains religious satire, serious philosophical discussion, and reflections on the political management of a pluralistic religious terrain. The works of Kshemendra also contain a great deal of social and religious satire.

Ancient India had a long and lively tradition of philosophical dialogue, debate and disagreement on issues such as dharma, the nature of reality and existence, ethics, and the path to liberation from samsara. Look at the Mahabharata. There were also debates within and across various disciplines. This is something that has to be recognised and appreciated. But we also need to understand that debates were not always open-minded discussions. They were often games of one-upmanship, geared to demonstrate mastery and superiority over rival thinkers or systems of thought. We should also remember that the participants in these debates were usually upper-class, upper-caste men.

**Varnas in ancient India were largely endogamous. Interestingly, there were different yardsticks (“anuloma” and “pratiloma”) for men and women who married above or below their station. What does it say about gender relations and women's position in society?**

Although the ancient texts speak with horror about *varna-sankara* or

the mixture of varnas, the four varnas were not conceived of as necessarily endogamous. Dharmashastra texts accept *anuloma* marriages between a man of a higher varna and a woman of a lower varna, but disapprove of the reverse (*pratiloma* marriages).

Caste or *jati* is supposed to be endogamous. The caste system cannot survive without control over the sexuality and reproductive potential of women. Many ancient texts indicate increasing efforts to control and confine women within the bounds of the family and household and to inculcate a certain model of docile, obedient behaviour. This may sound depressingly similar to attitudes prevailing in India today, but then, as now, there were women who did not conform and who dared to strike their own path.

It is simplistic to talk about “the position of women” in ancient India. Male dominance and women's subordination are features of all societies known so far in history, not only in India, but all over the world. Women never were and are not a homogeneous category. Their experience has always varied, depending on class, caste, and economic and political standing. The degree and nature of their subordination depended on these factors and on the nature of the kinship structure.

**For a common man, yesterday's “pratiloma” marriage is today's so-called love jihad, or a Dalit man's marriage with an upper-caste woman. Do you agree?**

These things are quite different. The ancient Dharmashastra idea of *pratiloma* marriage is based on varna, or hereditary class. The idea of the so-called “love jihad” is a pernicious recent invention, aimed at preventing inter-religious marriages



from a Hindutva standpoint.

What is common to both is the interest in defining social boundaries by regulating marriage. Also, the idea that a woman has no independent identity or autonomy, that her identity is subsumed into that of the husband and the family into which she marries. Throughout history, we see attempts to control women's sexuality and reproductive potential in order to perpetuate some powerful people's notion of an ideal society.

### **CASTE IN ANCIENT SOUTH INDIA**

**Unlike the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Sangam poetry does not talk in terms of caste. How did caste enter South India in a big way?**

The social milieu of early Tamil Sangam poems is very different from that of the northern Sanskrit texts. These poems mention Brahmins, but the fourfold varna system does not seem to have made any real impact. Early Tamil society was based not on caste but on lineage-based descent groups known as *kutis*. There were ideas of impurity, and of high and low social status, but these did not amount to the practice of untouchability. Taboos on intermarriage and inter-dining are not visible. In fact, some of the groups which in later times were considered "untouchable" have a fairly respectable status in Sangam poems.

Caste and untouchability took root in South India sometime between the third and sixth centuries and are even more visible during the Pallava period (sixth to ninth centuries). The hymns of the bhakti saints suggest that "untouchables" were not allowed to enter temples. The spread of caste and untouchability in South India seems to be connected with royal patronage of Brahmins. But the early history of caste is not fully understood.

**You talk of goddesses in ancient India, Ushas and Aditi, Prithvi and so on in the Vedic Age. Yet we have had a subordinate, male-centred life for women. How does one explain this**

**irony? Is this fascination for male-centred existence the reason why we always see Radha along with Krishna, and not as an independent deity?**

The story of goddess worship in India is not one of diminishing significance, but of increasing vibrancy and importance. The ability to visualise divinity in feminine form is seen in ancient India right from prehistoric times. "Goddess culture" formed a strong, continuing aspect of popular belief and practice, cutting across sectarian identities and divides. Goddesses were important not only in Hinduism, but also in Jainism and Buddhism. The great Hindu gods have their consorts, but there are also independent goddesses such as Durga. But we should not be surprised to find that goddess worship coexisted with the subordination of women.

Gender relations in ancient India present a complex picture. While the Manu Smriti puts forward the model of an obedient woman within the household, dependent on her father, husband and son in different stages of her life, other sources give a different picture. Hundreds of inscriptions from across the subcontinent record gifts made by women to religious establishments. The importance of women of the royal household is evident from texts such as the *Arthashastra*, and also from the example of queens such as Prabhavatigupta and Didda. Buddhist and Jaina texts talk about women who renounced the world and joined the monastic order. Andal and Akka Mahadevi were bhakti saints who rejected traditional womanly roles in order to pursue a higher spiritual calling. So it is a complex, mixed picture. There was subordination, but there was also agency.

**You write in the book that desire and love featured in ancient Indian texts. Yet we have plenty of instances of moral policing by non-state actors on Valentine's Day in the name of Indian culture today. So, what exactly is Indian culture?**

What we refer to simplistically as

"Indian culture" is neither singular nor homogenous. It has multiple strands. It includes continuities and changes, tensions and contradictions.

One of the chapters in my book discusses the many different attitudes towards love and sexual desire in ancient sources. Ancient literature in Tamil, Prakrit, and Sanskrit eloquently express the sentiments of love and longing. The Kamasutra contain the kama-experts' analysis of pleasure. Sculpture (mostly found in religious spaces) celebrates the human body and ranges from subtly sensual to frankly erotic. Pleasure was recognised as a legitimate goal of human existence, to be pursued with a sense of balance and in harmony with the goals of dharma and *artha*, even *moksha*. Extreme love was justified only when it formed a template for love for god. In bhakti poetry, the love between devotee and deity was visualised as reciprocal, intense, sublime, a path to a higher spiritual goal.

And yet what is interesting is that these diverse perspectives coexisted with powerful philosophical and religious traditions that viewed all forms of desire as sources of bondage and suffering, to be abandoned and transcended.

**Finally, in the times of an authoritarian government and an even more intolerant society, how relevant is Kautilya's warning about cruel and unjust rulers meeting their nemesis? I ask because our media bandies about the name of Kautilya rather freely, even irresponsibly. Kautilya's "Arthashastra" is a very complex text....**

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is indeed a complex text whose complexities are often not properly understood. I think that the text's warning of cruel and unjust rulers meeting their nemesis due to prakriti-kopa, 'anger of the people', is quite prescient and suits modern democracies better than ancient monarchies. It is quite amazing that a text written around 2,000 years ago was able to visualise a potential state in such a brilliant manner and can speak to us even today. □





A black and white portrait of a man with dark hair and glasses, resting his chin on his hand in a thoughtful pose. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

**MANU SHETTY** has worked with the Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago, on 'Tulu Oral Narratives'. He was a student of A.K. Ramanujan and collaborated with him in translating contemporary Kannada writers.

# Amasa

Amasa is Amasa's name. Maybe because he is dark, maybe because he was born on a new moon day (amavasya), the name Amasa has stuck to him. If his parents had been alive, we could have found out why he came to be called Amasa. But by the time he could walk around on his own, the mother who bore him and the father who begot him had been claimed by their separate fates. Since then the Mari temple has meant Amasa, and Amasa has meant the Mari temple. But just because he lives in the Mari temple doesn't mean that he is an orphan. The Mari temple has offered shelter to many like him. Especially in the summer, the little temple becomes a regular camping ground for people seeking shelter from the heat. Now, apart from Amasa, there is also an old man living there. He's really ancient: so old that every hair on him has gone grey. Nobody so far has seen him get up from where he usually sits on a tattered black blanket in a corner of the temple. He's always on it, feet stretched before him, or leaning on a pillar, or with his hands behind him. Apart from these three or four postures, he knows no other. He is always like this, as though lost in thought. Perhaps it is his wrinkled face, or white moustache, thick as an arm, which comes all the way down to his neck from his shrivelled face, that makes him look so thoughtful. By his side lies a man-sized bamboo stick. It doesn't have much use though, since Amasa is always around whenever he wants to move about. But it would come in handy to chase away chickens, sheep and the young goats that wander nearby.

We've talked of all this, but we haven't told you his name. Everyone in the village, from the youngest to the oldest, calls him Kuriyayya (sheep man). Was he named so at birth? That concerns neither you nor us. But this much is certain; for as

long as he could, he had herded the sheep of the village headman. Even now when he sits with his eyes half-closed, he counts the sheep, one by one, on his fingers, to himself. This goes on, six or seven times each day. And he hasn't missed a single day. Amasa began to grow up right in front of his eyes. He is now around ten or eleven. Whenever Kuriyayya calls, Amasa answers. Every evening as the night descends on the village, Amasa and Kuriyayya wait eagerly for the monastery bell to ring. The moment it strikes, Amasa grabs the plate and glass kept by Kuriyayya's side and runs. As the night has already fallen by then, you can't see Amasa running in the dark. But if you skin your eyes and peer into the inky night, you can see the darkness stir at his flight. One doesn't know for how long he's gone. It's only when his call "Ayya" shakes the night that you know he has returned. Kuriyayya sits up if he's lying down. As always, they eat the gruel from the monastery together in the dark. Amasa then goes to sleep. Though the village, too, has by then gone to sleep, the silence of the night is broken now and then by the barking of dogs and the hooting of owls. The old man, unable to sleep, stares into the night, mutters things to himself, calls out to Amasa a few times and, getting no reply, finally falls asleep.

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As the Mari festival comes to all the neighbouring villages once a year, it came to Amasa's village too. It was only then that Kuriyayya had to shift himself to another place, for the villagers scrubbed the temple, painted it with white-lime and red-earth, and made it stand out. When it was done, as the morning sun fell on it, the Mari temple shone with added brilliance. Only Kuriyayya's corner, surrounded by all this brightness, looked even gloomier. In the hall, a dozen men

Devanuru Mahadeva, who wrote his first story in a police lock-up, says: "A person lives in his/her language like fish in water. Today, language is used like clothing, but it must be like one's own skin."

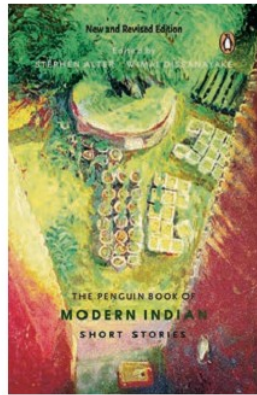


milled around, busily running back and forth, getting the torch ready, cutting paper of different colours for decorating the yard and a hundred other things. And since almost everyone there wore new white clothes, the Mari temple sparkled white. One of those present, Basanna, was a short, dark man sporting a French moustache. He too wore new white clothes and in them shone darker still. His big yellow teeth protruded through his closed mouth and reflected the lustre of his clothes. Holding a broom, Basanna stomped over to Kuriyayya's corner and shouted "Ayya". Since Kuriyayya would respond only after he'd been spoken to a few times, everyone spoke loudly to him. Kuriyayya slowly opened his eyes, watching the white figures that kept coming and going in front of his eyes. Old memories stirred and began to form in front of his eyes. The Mari festival meant the Tiger Dance. That meant him. The Tiger danced in front of his eyes. The drumbeat in his ears. Those were the days of the elder village headman. Kuriyayya was then a boy about as tall as Amasa. The vigour of Kuriyayya's dance had impressed the elder. Giving him a gift of clothes, he had said: "Till the end of our days stay in my house. You'll have your food and clothes. Just look after the sheep, that's all." His shrivelled face blossomed; the brightness of the Mari temple and the people around glinted in every wrinkle of his face.

Basanna shouted "Ayya" in his ears, this time even louder. He turned and looked up. Seeing Basanna, he grasped the reason for his presence. Bamboo stick in his right hand, he stretched out his left arm. When Basanna held the outstretched hand, he pulled himself up and slowly walked over to the other corner and sat down. Basanna shook the blanket a couple of times and spread it out in the corner where Kuriyayya now sat. The dust shaken out from the blanket swam in the morning sun. Where the blanket was before, there now lay a thick layer of reddish dust and dirt. But as the morning sun fell on it, it, too, seemed to turn white.

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It was noon by the time Amasa returned from his playful ramblings. He couldn't believe what he saw. All kinds of things were going on there. The smell of white-lime and freshly smeared cow dung around the Mari temple crowded into his nostrils. Kuriyayya had been moved from one corner to the other. In the hall, some men had crowded round in a circle and were jumping up on their toes to look at something. In the middle was a man doing something. Amasa hopped over and peeped. He saw diadems, two-headed birds and other such things



**THE STORY** "Amasa", translated by A.K. Ramanujan and Manu Shetty, features in "The Penguin Book of Modern Indian Short Stories" edited by Stephen Alter and Wimal Dissanayake (Penguin Books, 1989).

being crafted out of coloured silver paper. Everything that had been made appeared wonderful to his eyes. As the man in the middle crafted these things, the crowd alternately offered instructions and uttered appreciations: "It should be like that... it should be like this... Besh! Ha!" and so on. A long while later, after his eyes had soaked in all that they could, Amasa went over to Kuriyayya and sat by his side. In a row on the other side and leaning against the wall were several large red and white parasols and whisks for the deity; they had been put out in the sun to dry. In a corner was a tall coconut tree, swaying gently against the sky. Amasa's eyes ran to the top of the tree, where seven or eight large bunches of coconuts weighed it down. When he ran his eyes down the tree he noticed that someone had painted the stem of the tree in stripes of white-lime and red-earth. He slid closer to Kuriyayya and said, "Ayya." Kuriyayya looked at him meaning to ask "What is it?" Amasa said excitedly, "Look Ayya! Look! Someone's painted your tree

with white-lime and colour." Kuriyayya peered ahead. He could see only a short distance, and then everything was lost in a haze. But what he saw was this: someone had used a coconut for sorcery and had buried it in the cremation ground. It had sprouted, cleft the earth and sprung up. He had plucked it from there and planted it in the corner of the Mari temple, saying, "Let it be here; at least as mine." It had grown in front of his eyes; sprouting leaves and shedding them, bearing scars on its body where it had once borne leaves. It had grown and grown, taller and taller, and now stood fully grown.

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As the festival days went by, relatives and friends from around started descending one by one on the village. As usual they would first visit the Mari temple and then go about their business. Some would forget everything and settle down there to gossip. All the old scandals from the various villages would be dug up and updated. While all this was going on, in the yard Basanna was warming up the drum over a straw fire and tuning it. Children were jumping around him like an army of monkeys, Amasa among them. As Basanna raised the drum to his chest and beat it, its sound rang through, chadchad-nakunanakunanakuna, like a gong to the four corners of the village. Unable to resist, the kids around him started to dance. Basanna, too, was inspired and started to dance, beating his drum dangudangudanguchuki. The children danced, Basanna kept step, all of them falling over each other and those passing by. Heaven only knows who had taught Amasa to dance but he was stepping out





better than the others. Everyone watched him in amazement. By then the women too had gathered around to watch. Bangari just couldn't take her eyes off Amasa. As she watched him, she felt again a deep desire to have a child of her own in her arms. It had been six or seven years since she'd been married, but so far....Raging at people's taunts, she had even slept around a bit. Yet nothing had borne fruit. She couldn't afford medicine-men and things like that; she and her husband were too poor. While women like her were already old by their thirties, she was one who could pass off for a bride. Men who saw her couldn't help wanting her, even if for a moment; such was her bearing. And yet—no fruit. Things couldn't go on like this forever. For a long time, as the night set in, stones would start falling on her house, one after the other. Her husband would raise welts on her back, and hide himself in the house. The stones had since stopped falling, and the people had begun to forget. Now, in her eyes, Amasa continued to dance.

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While all this was going on, two landlords dragged in two fattened goats. The crowds instantly split into two. Children ran this way and that. The goats panicked at the beating drum and started to pull frantically. As the men holding them faltered, two more joined in and holding on tight, stood them in front of the Mari temple. The frenzied drumbeat continued. The goats stood frozen, their eyes rolling. The temple stood in front, the silver deity shining through the open door. From within, billows of incense smoke wafted out. A man, wearing only a small piece of cloth between his waist and knees came out with holy water carrying a garland of flowers. He stood in front of the goats, closed his eyes and started to mumble. His dark body was covered with veins. They seemed to throb in time to his mumblings. He then cut the garland into two and tied them around the goats' necks. Then he placed the loose flowers on their foreheads, sprinkled the holy water on them and, joining his hands in prayer, said, "If we've done anything wrong please swallow it, Mother, and accept this." His shrill voice resounded throughout the temple. But for the distant din, everyone around the temple stood with bated breath.

For a while everything stood still, except for the eyes of the goats that were turning round and round. Then all of a sudden the goats quivered. The drumbeat arose again and drowned all other noise. The group moved on. A bunch of children, including Amasa, ran behind it. The elders drove them away, but they returned the next moment. The procession reached an open field. There, a well-built man stood casually by a tree stump, holding a knife. As everyone was otherwise occupied, nobody noticed the children who had once again crowded around. As two men held the goats by their fore and hind legs and stretched their necks on the stump, the man brought down the waiting knife and in a single stroke

severed the heads the bodies. Someone poured holy water into the mouths of the severed heads. They gulped a couple of times and then closed shut. On the other side the bodies lay writhing. By now the heads were still, eyes turned upwards. Blood spurted from the writhing bodies as they spun around drenching the earth red. Some fellow shot into the middle and pulled the garlands of flowers dripping with blood. Not satisfied with that, he draped them around Amasa's neck and said: "Dance!" As the blood drenched his throat and started to drip, Amasa panicked and ran. Some others followed. Even in his sleep Amasa saw only this sight. Several times that night Amasa sat up frightened. They kept the lamps burning all through the night. The outsiders slept all around the temple, curled up in their white shawls. That night the Mari temple was lit up.

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That was also the night that railway gangman Siddappa had one too many. He had come with his belly full of spirit. It wasn't actually his fault. It was the spirit in him that played around with him that night. If he closed his eyes a storm raged within him. So he staggered around leaning on his stick, weaving aimlessly through the streets. When he came to a lamp post he flew into a rage. He lashed out at it, kicking and flogging it with his stick, his fury shaking the entire neighbourhood. Not content with that, he made it take on the role of the local politician, the contractor, his railway boss or the money-lender Madappa, and yelled at it: "Bastard! You think you are a big shot just because you go around in white clothes. You hide your face when you see me. Forget us, we are loafers. We hang out on any street corner." He wailed aloud, weeping, and continued with renewed vigour. "Don't vent your anger on me. Look at him laugh at my words...Laugh, laugh away. It's your time to laugh. What else would you do but laugh? You are, after all, the one who uplifts the poor. Laugh...let the communists come. They'll put an end to your laughter. Till then you can laugh, so laugh, laugh..." His laughter and shouts rose and fell, stumbled down the village street and whined through the cold, dark night. Unable to sleep through all this, Amasa woke up with a start every now and then. It must have gone on for a long while. Nobody quite knows when or where Siddappa finally fell. His laughter, his shouts, died out.

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It was dawn again. The village spent the morning yawning. Every verandah was filled with people. But there were still many who hadn't woken up. For instance, Siddappa. At noon, the Tiger dancers arrived at the Mari temple. The headman's bond-servant arrived and said, "The headman's house needs coconuts," and before Kuriyayya could say yes, he had climbed the tree, plucked the coconuts, and left. Back at the house, the women had oiled and combed their hair, decked it with flowers and





were running in and out. The young men teased the passing girls and were chided in turn. The drumbeat of the Tiger Dance drew everyone to the Mari temple. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Tiger dancers. All of a sudden the Tiger's cage flew open. All eyes fell on it. A huge Tiger leapt out, a lemon between his teeth. The startled crowd moved back and formed a circle around him. A few more Tigers, a Hyena and a Clown emerged one after the other. Among them was a Tiger Cub too. After all of them had come out, they stood in a row, joined their hands in prayer to the deity and accepted the holy water. The dance began immediately after. The Hyena was the best of all, and his costume fitted him perfectly. Remember the man who had sported the knife so casually at the sacrifice yesterday? It was the same man. The crowds would run when he strode towards them, keeping step with the drumbeat. When the dance came down the street, women and children clambered up the parapet and watched it with their lives in their hands. The dancers had only to turn towards them, and they would dash into their houses and bolt the doors. The dancers continued, entered the landlord's street, and danced in front of the village hall. All the worthies, even

the upper-castes, like the headman and the priest, had gathered there to watch the dance. They made gifts to the dancers according to their status and expressed their appreciation. Long after night had fallen and the dance had ended, everyone in the village continued to see the dance and hear the drumbeat. Those who fell asleep and closed their eyes, and the men even as they undressed their wives, saw only the Tiger Dance along with the drumbeat dangudangudanguchuki. The village headman, unable to sleep, came out for a stroll. The bond-servant, who was awake, saw him and stood up. The headman put a beedi between his lips and struck a match. For a moment, his face glowed red in the dark and flickered out. He gulped the smoke in silence for a while and then turned to the servant. "The one who played the Tiger Cub. Whose boy is it?" "That's Amasa," came the reply. "Who's Amasa?" enquired the headman. "That's him. The orphan boy that lives there with Kuriyayya. That's him." The headman was astonished. "My! When did he grow up so much?" Before his eyes, Amasa's Tiger Dance came dancing its many and wondrous steps. □

*Stories selected by Mini Krishnan*

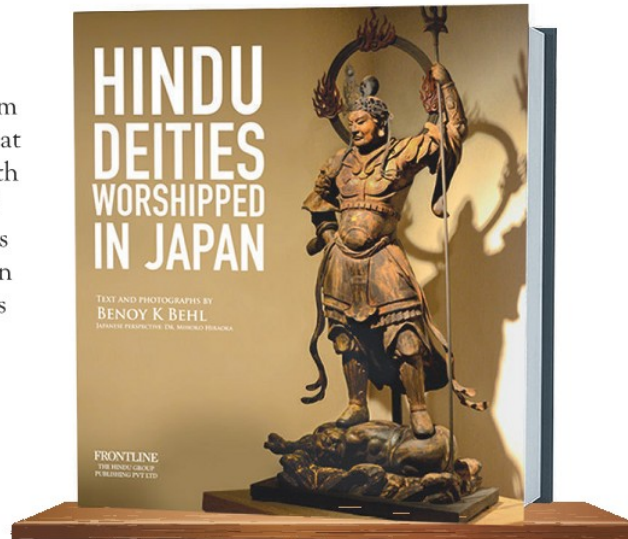
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WILDLIFE

# ON THE TRAIL OF T23



**T23 MOVING IN A TEA ESTATE** near Gudalur, bordering the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve.



# It took 21 days for a team of forest staff, veterinarians, tribal trackers, elephants, sniffer dogs and drones to track down T23, the wounded dominant tiger of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve which had killed four humans and several livestock.

Text & photographs by M. SATHYAMOORTHY

THE methodical operation to capture Tiger 23, a “problematic” tiger in the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) in Tamil Nadu, made headlines in September-October. Wildlife enthusiasts and the public eagerly followed the outcome of each day of the 21-day operation tiger rescue.

T23 was dominant over a vast territory extending from the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve to Kakanallah, an area contiguous with the Bandipur Tiger Reserve and National Park in Karnataka, and occupied a variety of habitats. The 14-year-old tiger turned “problematic” when it was believed to have killed four humans and 20





livestock in the Mudumalai-Gudalur forest range and buffer zones. On October 1, after the tiger killed a tribal person at Masinagudi, Shekhar Kumar Niraj, Chief Wildlife Warden, issued an order to hunt the animal, and the State Forest Department launched a massive operation. The Madras High Court, in response to a public interest litigation petition, passed an order on October 5 that the tiger should be caught alive and not killed. (According to a report published in *The Hindu* on October 10, Shekhar Kumar Niraj clarified that the word hunt was used as defined in the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and did not mean that the tiger was to be killed. Killing it was to be the last resort.)

The 21-day rescue operation involved forest officials, wildlife veterinarians, elite forest force, special task force (STF), front-line forest staff, the use of drones, camera

traps and sniffer dogs, and the deployment of two 'kum-kis' (trained elephants)—Udayan and Srinivasan—from the Theppakadu Elephant Camp in Mudumalai. On October 15, T23 was finally tracked down in the Masinagudi forest and tranquillised and taken to Mysuru for rehabilitation.

D. Venkatesh, Field Director, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, said: "We started the operation on September 24. At that time, the tiger was in the Devan and Mayfield estates near Gudalur. The tiger always moved into the swamp. It was a small area but difficult to enter. We managed to make the tiger move out of the swamp to the tea bushes. We tried to dart it, but it escaped. After seven days it returned to the Masinagudi area. On October 1, it killed one person and a cow. Here the terrain was different from that in the tea estate area. Between October 2

**THE MASINAGUDI FOREST**, part of T23's range.







and October 11, we could not locate the animal. We even used live bait. On October 12, the animal was captured in a camera trap at the Kargudi range of Mudumalai; then it moved to Bosepara, which was full of lantana bushes. We located the animal, and our four darting teams went inside but the tiger jumped out and moved into the thick forest. For the next two days, it moved in and around the Kargudi area. On October 14, we got information that the animal was prowling around in the Ombatta area. We moved there in three groups, but the tiger was hiding.

**SHEKHAR KUMAR NIRAJ** (atop a 'kumki' elephant), Chief Wildlife Warden, Tamil Nadu, led the operation.

Late that evening we received information that the animal was near the elephant camp. We tracked it and made sure it did not move into Masinagudi."

Dr N. Kalaivanan, a senior wildlife veterinarian who headed the team of veterinarians, said: "T23 is an interesting animal. As per records, it was born in the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. When it was camera-



**TIGER**, the third sniffer dog after Adhavai and Rana to be involved in the operation.



**THREE DRONES** aided the tracking operation. On October 15, the sedated tiger was located with the help of a drone.





trapped in Wayanad in 2010, it was about three years old. In 2011, it was camera-trapped in Bandipur. From 2012, it created its own territory in the Masinagudi area. T23 was a dominant tiger: it used most of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve's core area, that is, 60 per cent of the reserve; Masinagudi; the Mudumalai range; Gamehut; Ombatta; Bosepara near Gudalur; Kakanallah; and the Mayfield and Devan tea estates in Gudalur. Its range included scrub jungle in Masinagudi and dry deciduous, moist deciduous and evergreen forests and tea estates. In

**THE ELITE FORCE OF THE TAMIL NADU** Forest Department, along with field staff from the Gudalur and Nilgiris Forest Divisions, was among the teams involved.

2019, the ageing tiger faced attacks by other dominant tigers and suffered grievous injuries. After that, unable to kill wild prey, it avoided the core area of the reserve and moved to Masinagudi forest [in the buffer zone] and was even spotted near a residential area at Bosepara.

"We had placed cameras all along the routes of T23.



**FOREST STAFF** testing a net gun at Masinagudi. One net gun was kept ready to fire a net to entangle the tiger.



**AS MANY** as 150 camera traps were set up in Masinagudi, Mudumalai and Gudalur to monitor the movement of T23.





**T23 USED** a variety of habitats in Mudumalai. It also visited the paddy fields in the tribal settlements in Bosepara.

We were able to locate the animal. In one day, it moved from Bosepara to Masinagudi, which is a distance of approximately 50 kilometres. It avoided footpaths and moved among the bushes, circumventing camera traps. It knew exactly where the cameras were placed. We watched from machans to see if it would come for the live bait. But it did not take the bait. It seemed to know by experience why the bait had been placed. The tiger moved into areas near villages and started to lift cattle. This was an aged animal but not incapacitated. It was not fully weak. We worked out all possible methods in this operation, but we did not get any results. That is why we struggled a lot.”

#### **DARTING THE TIGER**

Explaining the method employed in the rescue operation, he said: “Darting a tiger is not an easy task. It is not like tracking an elephant, which is easy. The tiger is an elusive animal. To dart a tiger, we need a clear view of the animal. What happens in the case of man-eaters is that if it is a young animal, it will take refuge in fringe areas. In small areas such as villages we may be able to corner the animal in cultivated land. We then go in a vehicle or on elephant back and dart the tiger.

“In most of the cases, the animal will be aged or incapacitated and unable to walk a long distance. It will hide in bushes in a localised area or in a small patch of forest. In such cases, we can go near and corner the



**AT BOSEPARA**, tribal people have to walk up to 3 km through the tiger reserve to reach their village.

animal or dart it safely from a vehicle or elephant back or from machans. T23 was moving in a larger area through a bigger natural forest, so tracking it and following the pug marks was not easy. It was a big challenge. In this operation, traditional knowledge and modern technology were used. Tribal trackers were the backbone of this operation. They can tell from a pug mark when the animal has moved from a place, in which direction, and even how fast it was walking. They are the main source of tiger





**THE FAMILY MEMBERS** of M. Basavan, 82, on October 1, at Masinagudi. His body was found near a bush. T23 had killed him and eaten his hand and intestines.

information. Based on their information, we were able to track the tiger and succeed in the operation. We tracked T23 for almost 18 days. We spotted it only five times, that too from long range or sometimes among tea bushes, making darting difficult.

“At one point, we spotted the animal at a three-metre range, but we were unable to dart it as we needed at least three to five seconds to see the animal and release the trigger. Also, it was raining and we were unable to see the pug marks. There were leeches everywhere and we were unable to sit anywhere, to eat or take rest.

“On the evening of October 14, we heard that the tiger was walking on the road in the Theppakadu-Masinagudi road inside the tiger reserve. T23 was probably scared of other dominant tigers and felt safe walking on the road. We followed the tiger the whole night because there were thousands of people in Masinagudi attending a temple festival. T23 was heading towards a fringe area. In order to prevent further human kill, we made sure the tiger did not come to Masinagudi. We were in the vehicle the whole night with guns. Next morning [October 15], the animal moved into the reserve forest again. The tiger charged towards the ‘kumkis’. We were seated on elephant back. Dr Rajesh Kumar had just three seconds to dart the tiger. After receiving the dart, the tiger ran into the forest and hid among thick bushes. We used traditional tracking knowledge and modern technology to

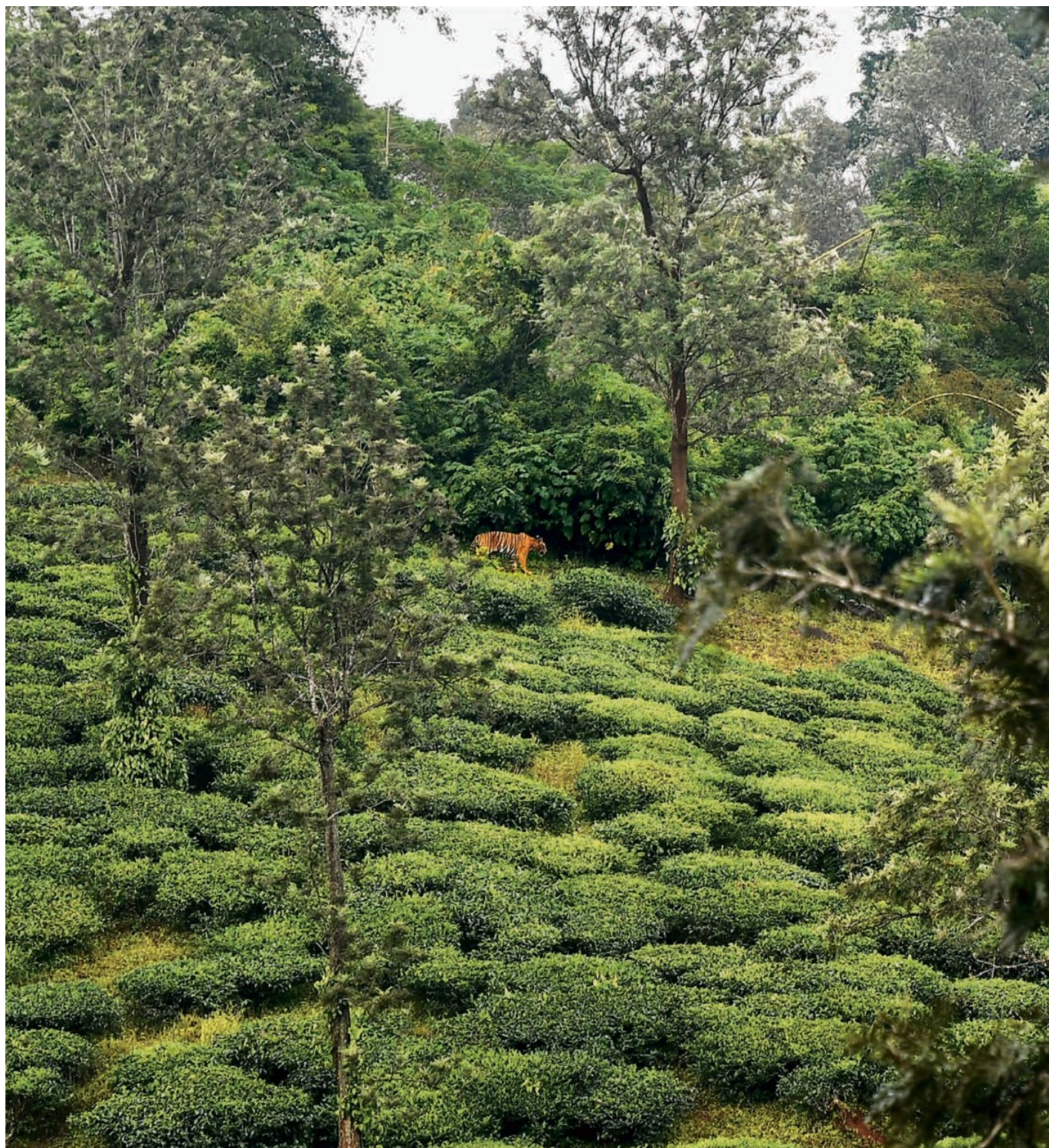
track it. The drone operator helped us in locating the sedated tiger.”

Bomman, a tribal tracker who belongs to the Betta Kurumba tribe, said: “Tracking T23 was difficult because there was another tiger of the same size. We had to look for a particular pug mark, which was 15 cm by 15 cm. Sometimes other animals had walked over the pug mark. There was no trace when the tiger had walked on grass or road. In such cases, we lost track. It was not easy to spot a pug mark on a rainy day. We found a pug mark, just the impression of a toe, and with that we were able to track the tiger hiding in the bushes. Once we tracked the tiger, we informed the officials to come to the spot. It was a difficult operation but in the end we are all happy that we were able to capture the tiger alive.”

#### **FIRST RECORDED ATTACK**

T23's first recorded attack on humans was in 2020. On August 31, 2020, there were reports in Masinagudi that a carnivore had killed a woman named Gowri. Her body was found, after one hour of searching, near a lantana bush close to the reserve near the Masinagudi checkpoint. The Forest Department immediately placed camera traps there and in many other places in the vicinity. The dead woman's husband said it was a male tiger that had killed her. After analysing the footage from the camera traps, the Mudumalai team realised that it was T23. Since that sighting, there was no sign of the tiger in the area. A few months later news of a carnivore lifting cattle came from Sreemadurai, Bosepara and Mudukuli tribal villages. The people of these villages and political leaders





petitioned the authorities to capture the animal but no action was taken.

On July 17, 2021, a tiger mauled to death Kunjukrishnan of Nijnakolli village near Bosepara, and the same evening a tiger killed a cow. People staged a road roko at Sreemadurai and at the Thorapalli forest checkpost on the Gudalur-Mysuru National Highway for four hours. The Gudalur Forest Division placed camera traps in the area to identify the tiger. On the basis of the camera

footage, the forest officials were able to establish that it was T23 that was killing cattle in the area and that it could have killed Kunjukrishnan. They placed bait cages to trap the tiger, but the animal moved away into the core forest area, lifting a few cattle on its way past Sreemadurai, Bosepara and Mayfield Estate.

On September 24 at 11 a.m., T23 attacked Chandran at Devan Estate. He was rushed to Gudalur Government Hospital. He was given first aid and sent to Ooty Medical





**T23 IS SEEN** at the far end of the tea garden near Gudalur. The tiger did not panic whenever it was chased; it moved away quietly into the bushes.

College and Hospital, where he died later. People staged a road roko in Gudalur demanding that the Forest Department capture the tiger or shoot it. On September 26 the tiger killed two cows at Mayfield Estate. Meanwhile, the Gudalur Forest Division involved veterinarians and

trackers to locate T23. Trap cages were placed near a kill and camera traps were placed on the estate.

On the morning of September 27, Tamil Nadu Forest Department personnel and members of the Wildlife Disaster Management Team, Kerala (Wayanad Forest Division), went to Mayfield Estate. On the way, they passed a dead cow; it had been tied to a tea bush, and the tiger had killed it. Members of the Kerala and Gudalur forest teams waited near a swamp on the estate where they believed the tiger was hiding. They burst firecrackers hoping that the noise would bring the tiger out into the open. The tiger left the swamp and moved up to the tea estate. Veterinarians rushed up the hill to dart the tiger, but it went further up into the estate. On the basis of inputs from the team that was tracking the tiger's movement with drones, veterinarians followed it, but it went into thick bushes on top of the hill. The operation could not continue as it started to rain heavily. It resumed around 5 p.m. When the tiger emerged from the bushes, the veterinarians moved forward to dart it, but it went into the bushes again. T23 did not panic whenever it was chased; it just walked away slowly. As the light started fading, the search operation was stopped for the day at 6 p.m.

The next morning, the tiger was still in the swamp on Mayfield Estate. Forest trackers and members of the Kerala team tried to push the tiger out to a particular place where four veterinarians were waiting in four different spots to dart it. From 9 a.m. to 2:45 p.m., they tried their best to get the tiger to leave the swamp, but T23 proved too smart for them. It moved out of the swamp but not in the direction where the veterinarians were waiting but upwards into the tea estate.

At 3 p.m. it walked out of the bushes majestically to the road. A veterinarian was in a jeep parked on the road. The tiger moved towards the jeep, but he did not see it. People who were watching the action from the opposite side called out to him as the tiger was hardly 10 metres from the jeep. T23 moved behind the jeep, jumped into the tea bushes, came out in the open at 3:05 p.m., glanced at the veterinarian and moved out of range of his dart gun. The trackers were unable to locate the tiger, and the operation was stopped for the day at 6 p.m.

On September 29, the search teams got information that the tiger had moved to Devan Estate. They waited with the police on the roadside. Drones were flying everywhere. Power saws and firecrackers were used to make noise and the trackers yelled to make the tiger move out of the bamboo forest into the open area, all in vain. The next day, the operation continued at the Devan and Mayfield estates although the camera traps had not captured sightings of T23. The trackers searched the areas the whole day without success.

On October 1, the search teams had an early start. There was information from residents that the tiger had moved into Bosepara. At 8 a.m. they got information from a good friend of this writer in Masinagudi that T23 was back in Masinagudi, which is the eastern side of its territory. Sadly, there was also news of a missing person.





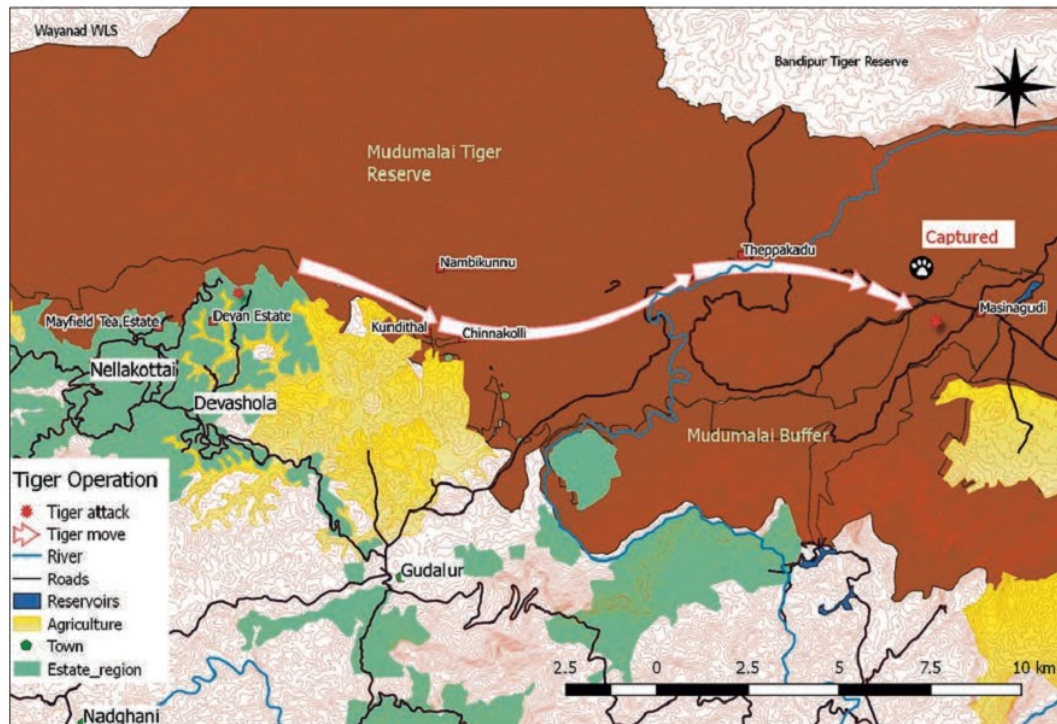
#### TAMIL NADU FOREST DEPARTMENT

personnel and members of the Wildlife Disaster Management Team, Kerala (Wayanad Forest Division) continuing the search on September 27 despite the heavy rain and humid conditions.

**KALAN** (left), one of tribal trackers who led the operation, and his team members Bomman (in khaki-coloured pants) and MeenKalan (with knife in the foreground). Also in the picture is P. Arunkumar (right), Deputy Director, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (Buffer Zone).







All the forest teams moved to the Masinagudi forest checkpost. A camera trap at Masinagudi had captured T23, confirming its presence near the place where it had killed a woman last year. By noon all the forest vehicles involved in the search travelled on the Singara road to an abandoned quarry where T23 had been spotted. Hundreds of local residents and tribal people were also in the area searching for the missing person. At 1:20 p.m. the public found the body of the missing tribal person, M. Basavan, 82. The tiger had killed him when he was alone, dragged him into a bush and eaten his hand and intestines. Meanwhile, the local police came to the spot and requested the public to move out. The people of Masinagudi and political leaders of the area staged a road roko at the junction of the Singara, Ooty (Udhagamandalam), Moyar and Gudalur roads.

The tiger crossed the Masinagudi-Theppakadu road at a spot where two cows were grazing; it moved between the cows and went into the forest towards Moyar. The forest teams moved towards the Moyar road. Meanwhile, the road roko was continuing. At 7:30 p.m., the order came from Shekhar Kumar Niraj to hunt down the tiger, following which the protesters dispersed. By 4:30 p.m., police personnel of the STF had taken charge of the operation and asked all members of the public to move out of the operation site to ensure that they did not come within the range of the dart guns.

On October 2, the search operations resumed at 6 a.m. Forest trackers left the Masinagudi checkpost, which was the base camp for the operation. Members of a rapid response team from Ooty, wearing body armour, joined the operation as did the sniffer dog Adhavai. The

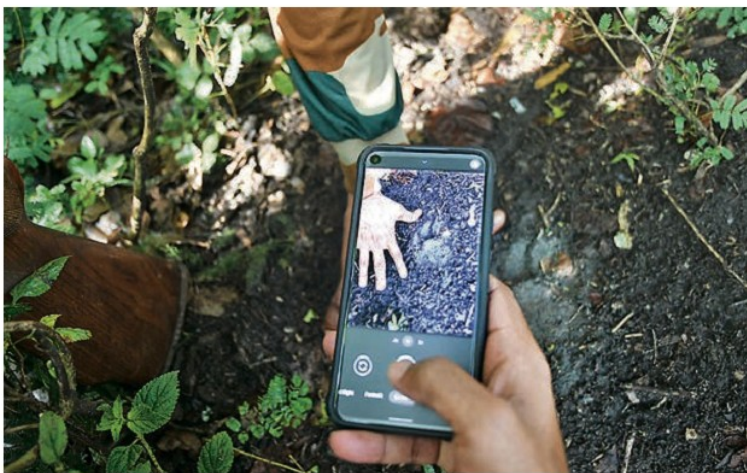




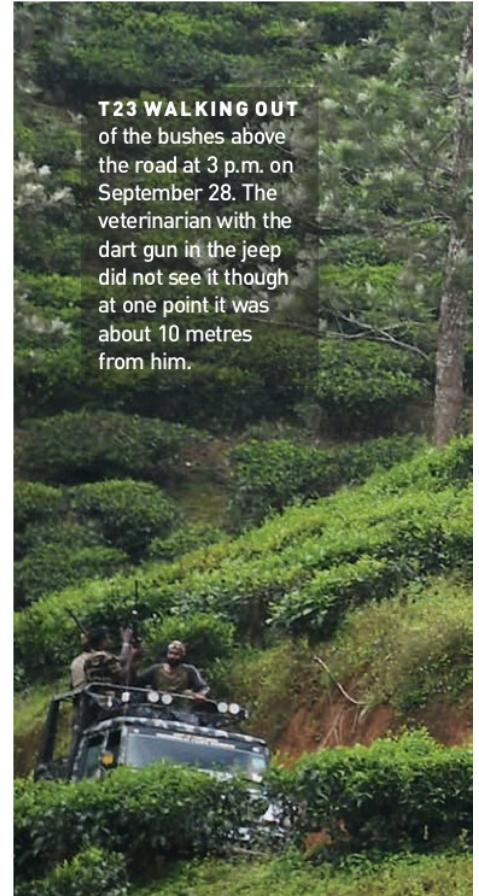
**FOREST STAFF BRIEFING** the STF personnel who took charge of the operation on October 2.



**TRACKERS AND A FOREST VETERINARIAN** looking at a pug mark in the buffer zone on October 4. It had rained heavily on the previous night.



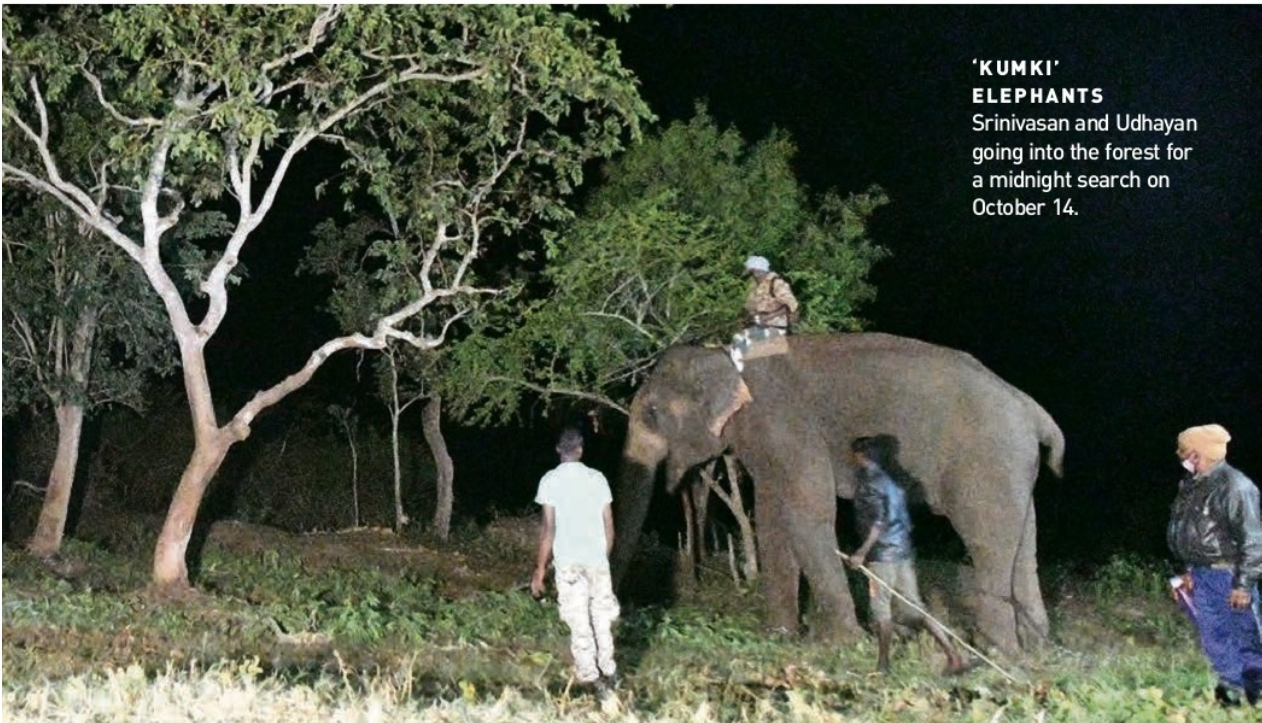
**A MEMBER** of a tracking team taking a picture of a pug mark at Singara road. T23's pug mark measured 15 cm by 15 cm.



**T23 WALKING OUT** of the bushes above the road at 3 p.m. on September 28. The veterinarian with the dart gun in the jeep did not see it though at one point it was about 10 metres from him.







**'KUMKI'**  
**ELEPHANTS**  
Srinivasan and Udhayan  
going into the forest for  
a midnight search on  
October 14.





**WILDLIFE VETERINARIANS**, led by N. Kalaivanan (second from right), filling the darts with medicine. They followed this procedure of readying the dart guns every single morning of the operation.



**VETERINARIANS** waiting for T23 to come out of the bamboo forest along a river near Singara road at Masinagudi.



**FOREST STAFF** from the Masinagudi checkpoint running behind T23 after seeing it cross the Masinagudi-Theppakadu Road and move towards the Moyar forest on October 15.

operation was started at the Masinagudi-Theppakadu road, which had been closed to traffic. D. Venkatesh; Bhosale Sachin Thukkaram, Deputy Director, MTR (Core Zone); P. Arunkumar, Deputy Director, MTR (Buffer Zone); and veterinarians explained the situation to the STF personnel and gave them photographs of the animal from different angles.

At 8 a.m. the STF team went into the forest. At 9:30 a.m., trackers and veterinarians went into the forest following news of a sighting near Masinagudi. At 4 p.m. Basavan's funeral procession started from Masinagudi to the burial ground close to the checkpoint, the path used by T23. Suddenly, a few people allegedly instigated the public to stage a road roko with the body of Basavan. Police and Forest Department staff pacified the crowd, and the funeral procession went on its way. In the evening, an elite force of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department joined the operation, and the number of camera traps was also increased.

The next day, the hunt resumed at 6 a.m. To help those inside the forest, a walkie-talkie team was formed; the members of the team were given repeaters to avoid loss of communication. The field staff had seamless wireless connectivity between the Mudumalai and Gudalur forest divisions courtesy of N. Mohanraj, a wildlife expert in the Nilgiris district. He also ensured that the drones, with their batteries fully charged, were in the right place at the right time. He told *Frontline* that the entire rescue team was equipped with wireless communication in the form of 26 walkie-talkies, two repeater stations and three drones. "We provided a small charger with inverter in the jeep. With the jeep's battery, we charged the batteries of the walkie-talkies and drones. The walkie-talkies faced the problem of interoperability because of different frequencies as the repeaters were in Glenmorgan [a village near Ooty] and Gudalur. So, we used e-packs (a portable repeater that can cover up to 6 km) which could connect all the wireless networks and telephones of the field teams. We used three e-packs for this operation as we were covering about 40 sq km. In the final operation on October 15, we used six walkie-talkies. We did not use mobile phones in this operation."

T23, meanwhile, had killed a cow near Moyar village, and the forest teams moved to the place and placed camera traps there. At 10:30 a.m. a net gun was tested and the 'kumki' elephants joined the operation at Masinagudi. In the afternoon, State Forest Minister K. Ramachandran visited Basavan's house at Masinagudi, and later briefed the media about this operation. A sniffer dog, Rana, from Bandipur, joined the search effort. At 4 p.m. came news of T23 being sighted at Singara road, behind a resort. The tracking teams tried their best to capture the tiger, but the light was fading and the day's operation was stopped.

On October 4, a third sniffer dog, Tiger, joined the operation. From early in the morning, veterinarians and trackers looked for T23's pug marks near Singara road. Veterinarians and Shekhar Kumar Niraj were on the back of elephants. Anti-poaching watchers sat atop trees





**THE SEDATED** and secured tiger was treated for its wounds and put in standardised cage and taken to Mysore Zoo for further treatment.

on the roadside. Meanwhile, a few teams had gone into the forest. The next morning, the focus of the operation was again on Singara road. Animals as live bait were tied at several places and from a resort on Singara road searches were conducted using thermal drones. Veterinarians then decided to erect machans on treetops and wait for the tiger to come to the live bait. On October 6 they left by 5 a.m. armed with dart guns to watch from machans. They returned in the evening without sighting the tiger. Singara road remained the focus of the search for the next four days, but for six day, none of the camera traps had caught the tiger passing by. Traps had been placed at Masinagudi, Singara road, Moyar, Bosepara, the Mayfield and Devan estates and at Ombatta inside the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve .

On October 11 night, T23 was sighted in a camera

trap at Bosepara, which meant that the tiger had covered almost 25 km from its previous sighting. Early the next morning, another camera trap in Bosepara recorded a sighting of T23. All the villages in the vicinity were alerted through a public address system about the tiger. At 1:30 p.m., trackers spotted it inside Bosepara. The veterinarians converged on the spot in the leech-infested forest in heavy rain but had to call off the operation and return to the base camp by 7 p.m. On October 13, the focus shifted from Bosepara to Odakolli, a Paniya tribal village that borders the reserve. Although the tiger was present in the area, the veterinarians were unable to dart the animal because of the cover of thick bushes and the bamboo forest. The teams returned to base at 5 p.m. in fading light. The following day, at 8 p.m., a vehicle driver saw a tiger on the roadside near Theppakadu; people in





**THE 'KUMKI' ELEPHANTS** Udhayan and Srinivasan were integral to the success of the operation. T23 was darted by a veterinarian sitting on the back of Udhayan.

another vehicle that had broken down near Mudumalai also saw the tiger and informed the forest staff. All the forest teams were placed near Masinagudi to prevent the tiger from entering the town where crowds had gathered for the temple festival. The 'kumki' elephants tracked the tiger all night long, and all the teams worked throughout the night and into the early hours of the morning to make sure that T23 did not enter Masinagudi.

At 6 a.m. on October 15, forest officials made a public announcement asking the people of Masinagudi, Moyar, Singara and Mavanallah to remain indoors and to keep their cattle tied up at home. At 9 a.m., when the rangers, foresters, field staff and veterinarians were having their breakfast after their all-nighter, T23 emerged from the bushes and crossed the road towards Moyar in full view of everyone near the Masinagudi checkpoint. Immediately, all the teams ran in the direction of the tiger. However, within minutes, T23 attacked a buffalo. Many people witnessed this. For the next three hours, there was no news of the tiger. At 1 p.m., news came that trackers with the help of drones had located T23, that it had been darted and that they were now searching for the sedated tiger. Exactly at 6 p.m. T23, which had reigned over the forests of Masinagudi, Mudumalai and parts of Bandipur, came out of the forest in a cage and was taken to Mysuru for treatment.

The Kerala Forest Department provided a standardised cage to transport the tiger. It was earlier planned to

shift the tiger to Aringar Anna Zoological Park in Chennai. But after consultation with the National Tiger Conservation Authority, it was sent to the Chamundi Animal Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre at Koorgalli near Mysore Zoo for treatment. Shekhar Kumar Niraj said: "We successfully darted the animal and secured it. We gave first-aid and other treatment. I spoke to the National Tiger Conservation Agency and the National Zoo Authority and the Chief Wildlife Warden of Karnataka to admit T23 in Mysore Zoo instead of Vandalur Zoo to cut down on journey time and to avoid stress to the animal."

Forest Minister Ramachandran said on October 15 that the Tamil Nadu Forest Department had killed "man-eater tigers" in 2014 (at Kundachappai near Udahamandalam), 2015 (Biderkad) and 2016 (Devarshola). "This is the first time we captured it alive. We decided to send it to the Mysuru wild animals rescue centre for treatment. After the tiger recovers fully, our Chief Minister will decide where to relocate it." Supriya Sahu, Principal Secretary, Department of Environment, Climate Change and Forests, Government of Tamil Nadu, said on October 15: "The T23 operation was a complex one. The challenge before the Forest Department was to capture the tiger alive. I am very happy the Forest Department was successful in doing it. More than 100 people were engaged 24/7 in capturing the tiger. Darting operation had been done several times in the past, but it was done successfully today." □



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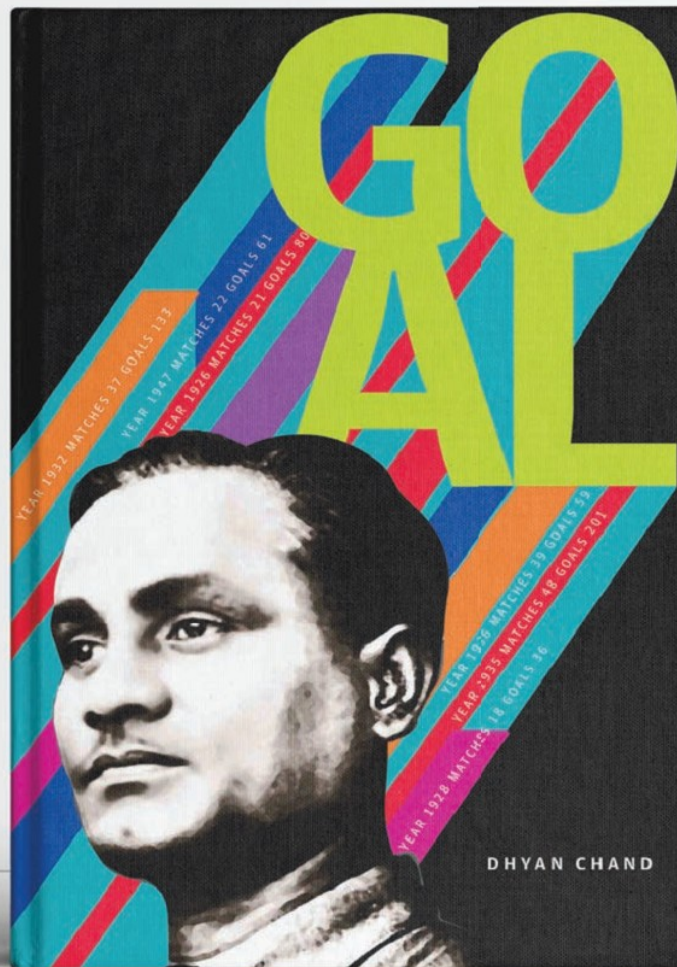
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