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# FRONTLINE

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## On the back foot

Stung by setbacks on the electoral and judicial fronts and the Rafale and Pegasus revelations, the BJP is in a defensive mode as it begins its campaign for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election. But the opposition is yet to get its act together



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## On the Cover

In Lucknow on March 19, 2017, the then newly sworn-in Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath, flanked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, who was then president of the BJP.

PHOTOGRAPH: RAJEEV BHATT

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## COVER STORY

# BJP UNDER PRESSURE



Challenges posed by the farmers' year-long agitation against the controversial farm laws, the impact of the Lakhimpur Kheri incident, the judiciary's tough talk on this and other issues, spiralling prices and the latest Rafale revelations have forced the BJP to be **on the defensive** ahead of the Uttar Pradesh elections. **BY VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**

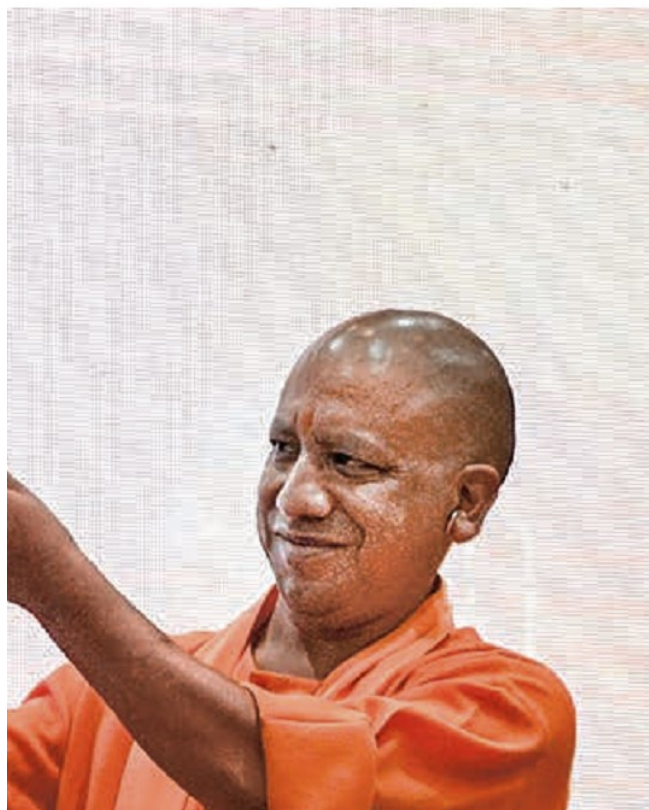
ON NOVEMBER 12, UNION HOME MINISTER Amit Shah launched what could be termed as Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) concentrated campaign for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, which are due in early 2022. Shah held a series of election-related meetings late into the night in Varanasi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Lok Sabha constituency, before moving on to other eastern Uttar Pradesh districts of Azamgarh and

Basti the next day. Azamgarh is the Lok Sabha constituency of Akhilesh Yadav, former Chief Minister and president of the Samajwadi Party (S.P.), the principal opposition to the BJP in Uttar Pradesh.

Amit Shah is often described, within the BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar led by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), as the "ultimate Chanakya" of electoral strategies. Even as the visit was under way, an



# SSURE



**UNION HOME MINISTER** Amit Shah receiving a memento from Chief Minister Adityanath at a BJP meeting in Varanasi on November 12. He exhorted party workers to leave no stone unturned to win the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in 2022.

interpretation based on this “Chanakya” narrative surfaced within Sangh Parivar circles. According to it, Shah had prepared for the crucial Uttar Pradesh elections relatively early and was hitting the ground running, especially in the context of the BJP’s stunning defeats in the West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala Assembly elections held in March and April 2021. These defeats were particularly embarrassing for the “neo-Chanakya” as it had been predicted that the BJP would make significant gains in all three States and even storm to power in West Bengal.

A number of BJP and Sangh Parivar insiders told *Frontline* that Shah and his team of election strategists had learned from their mistakes and overconfidence they displayed during the March-April 2021 elections and that the Uttar Pradesh electoral battle would hence be fought with meticulous planning. “As part of this, the top leadership would directly interact with the grass-roots cadre on a regular basis and enthuse them,” they said in unison.

The nature of Shah’s November 12-13 meetings in Varanasi underscored their observation. Apart from all the top State leaders, including Chief Minister Adityanath, Deputy Chief Ministers Keshav Prasad Maurya and Dinesh Sharma, BJP national vice president Radha Mohan Singh, Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, who is also the State election in-charge, 98 district-level leaders, regional unit presidents and ground-level leaders in charge of all the 403 Assembly constituencies in the State attended the meetings.

The publicity blitzkrieg surrounding the two-day visit emphasised the significance of the “Shah expedition”. The BJP’s hoardings and other campaign material virtually submerged Varanasi, Azamgarh and Basti. According to informal estimates, there were at least 10,000 hoardings of Shah across the three districts.

## FOUNDATION FOR PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Reportedly, Shah’s exhortations to party workers in Varanasi were on predictable lines, with one point of emphasis. As recounted by one of the participants at the closed-door meetings, the broad thrust of his speech was as follows: “We have to win the 2024 Lok Sabha elections under Modi’s leadership, and the foundation for it will have to be laid by scoring a thumping win in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections. As we all know, the country can progress only with Modi as Prime Minister and Adityanathji as Chief Minister. We will leave no stone unturned to achieve this. We will do whatever it takes to return in triumph with a higher number of seats.”

He went on to say that even if the opposition, the S.P., the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Congress, formed a grand alliance, it would be unable to defeat the BJP. Shah apparently praised the Adityanath government’s record on the law and order front, actions against the mafia, and management of health services during the pandemic. However, cautioning against complacency, he said: “Our organisational and political machinery have to function like clockwork. Above all, party workers must serve as a bridge of faith for the common man, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed at the party’s National Executive meeting held recently in Delhi. Service, resolve and dedication should be our motto.”

Many senior BJP-Sangh Parivar activists present at the meeting told *Frontline* that the “pep talk had all the ingredients of a normal Shah exhortation”, but they were still not sure how far this would get translated into popular support on the ground and how effectively the “people-connect” plans would be implemented. Almost all of them stated that there were both external and





NARINDER NANU/AFP

**FARMERS** burn an effigy with pictures of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Adityanath, some Ministers and businessmen during a protest against the farm laws, in Amritsar on October 16. The overall message from the results of the recent byelections is that an anti-BJP churning is taking place in northern and western India, where the farmers' struggle has considerable impact.

internal issues that would make it difficult for them to respond positively to Shah's call.

#### EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ISSUES

Said a senior Lucknow-based RSS activist: "The external problems are manifold. They range from the challenges thrown up by the farmers' year-long agitation against the controversial farm laws, the impact of the related Lakhimpur Kheri incident in which a Union Minister's son allegedly mowed down a few agitating farmers, the judiciary's tough talk on this incident, to the latest Rafale deal revelations."

According to this leader, the judiciary's recent pronouncements are significant. A Supreme Court bench had taken to task both the State government and its police on the Lakhimpur Kheri issue. Before that, in late October, it made scathing comments against the Union government in the Pegasus spyware matter, questioning the very manner in which it had dealt with the revelations.

He said: "It is as though there is something constantly, almost on a day-to-day basis, erupting in institutions at the national and international level, against Modi, putting both the party and its governments

at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh on the back foot. The negative impact of these developments has got exacerbated on account of the crushing price rise of essential commodities as a result of the steady spiralling of the prices of diesel and petrol. The internal issues are seemingly less serious, as they involve the personality and organisational tussles between Modi and Adityanath, and a truce of sorts has been called between them by the RSS top brass. Still, references to the 'cold war' between the 'Big Two' come up in organisational gatherings from time to time, and this, too, affects the cadre's morale."

The RSS leader's remarks were straightforward. He said: "Among the five States that will go to polls in early 2022, the farmers' agitation, and the subsequent split of the Shiromani Akali Dal [SAD] from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance [NDA] has practically sounded the death knell for the party in Punjab. And the going is not all that smooth in Uttarakhand and Goa. Under normal circumstances, Uttar Pradesh should have been a cakewalk, but a series of developments is steadily casting doubts on that certainty."

The senior leader cited some recent developments that have been embarrassing the BJP and its governments at the Centre and in the States. "Indeed, the time-tested Hindutva communal polarisation card can be still played, but the modus operandi would have to be planned carefully this time, because people in general are desperate and incensed on account of the spiralling prices, and this works against the promotion of communal polarisation," he said.

#### OPPOSITION IN DISARRAY

However, he and his Sangh Parivar colleagues are of the opinion that one of the greatest plus points the BJP has, even in what could be objectively termed as its worst phase in the last seven years, is the inability of the opposition parties to capitalise on this situation. They are of the view that neither the principal opposition, the Congress, nor others, including the Trinamool Congress, which handsomely retained West Bengal in the March-April 2021 elections, have been able to present a concrete, coordinated and forceful thrust against the government. "Indeed, the opposition parties are making some gains in a handful of regional elections, including the byelections to State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha, and in local bodies in different States. But cumulatively, they do not add up to an effective national-level alternative. And indeed, at the personality level, there is no one on the other side that can match Prime Minister Modi's stature and manoeuvring capabilities."

Despite this obvious advantage, this group of Sangh Parivar activists believe that the recent setbacks to the BJP are too significant to be brushed aside.

#### FALLOUT OF THE LAKHIMPUR KHERI VIOLENCE

One of the developments cited by the Sangh Parivar activists was the forensic lab's report on the October 3 violence at Lakhimpur Kheri, which resulted in the death of eight people, including four farmers agitating against





**CONGRESS LEADER** Rahul Gandhi, Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav. The opposition has been unable to present a concrete, coordinated and forceful thrust against the BJP governments.

the controversial farm laws. Ashish Mishra, Union Minister Ajay Mishra's son, and his associates were accused of running over four farmers with his SUV. Others killed in the violence were BJP workers Shubham Mishra and Shyam Sunder Nishad, Hari Om Mishra, the driver of a car in Ajay Mishra's convoy, and journalist Raman Kashyap.

The forensic report, which came out barely three days before Shah's election campaign entry in Varanasi, revealed, in unmistakable terms, that shots were fired from the guns of Union Minister Ajay Mishra's son Ashish and his friend Ankit Das.

Both Ashish and Ankit Das, who had been arrested in connection with the violence, had denied having fired from their licenced firearms. However, according to the forensic report, shots were fired from Ashish's rifle and Ankit's pistol. Said the Lucknow-based leader: "This has become such a big embarrassment for the BJP and the Adityanath government, and the revelation is inviting widespread condemnation of the Union Minister and the BJP. Not only are opposition parties and social activists criticising us, but even BJP Lok Sabha members such as Varun Gandhi have joined them. The manner in which Varun Gandhi has openly stated that the Prime Minister is protecting the accused in the Lakhimpur Kheri case is drawing support from large sections of society. In turn, this too is impeding our public outreach initiatives."

At a different level, the forensic report led to the transfer of Vijay Dhull, the Superintendent of Police of Lakhimpur Kheri, some 40 days after the incident. Dhull was attached with the Uttar Pradesh State police headquarters in Lucknow and was kept on waiting list, indicating that there was an element of punishment in the process. This action at the bureaucratic level has only added to the political leadership's embarrassment. The Adityanath government, on its part, has been trying to send reassuring messages to farmers protesting against the farm laws, especially in and around Lakhimpur Kheri.

In the immediate aftermath of the October 3 violence, the police, under Dhull's leadership, registered

two first information reports (FIRs). One of the FIRs was lodged by the farmers against Ashish, Ankit and some others, while another was lodged by a BJP worker against unidentified persons. Ashish and his father, Ajay Mishra, had claimed that the former was not present in any of the vehicles, one of which ran over the crowd of farmers, killing four of them. The farmers, on the other hand, claimed that the Minister's son was in one of the SUVs with a friend of his.

The killings triggered nationwide outrage, with farmer leaders and opposition parties demanding Ajay Mishra's dismissal. But these demands have not had any effect on the Union government, and Ajay Mishra was seen sharing a stage with Amit Shah during a public meeting in the last week of October.

#### **SUPREME COURT'S OBSERVATIONS**

Before the publication of the forensic lab report, the Supreme Court too tore into the Uttar Pradesh government's handling of the case. The apex court stated on November 8 that the State government had not provided sufficient details in its status report on the police investigation into the Lakhimpur Kheri violence case. The court has repeatedly pulled up the police and the Adityanath government in relation to the case.

Justice Surya Kant, a member of the bench hearing the case, stated unequivocally that it was not confident of the State judicial committee's overseeing of the case. He added that the court was inclined to appoint a former judge of a different High Court to monitor the case and that the judge could independently monitor the investigation until the charge sheets were filed. Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana, too, remarked that there was nothing in the status report on the investigation except a statement that some more witnesses had been examined.

In a previous hearing, the court had asked the State government to identify more eyewitnesses and to provide them with protection. The court expressed surprise when Harish Salve, representing the Uttar Pradesh government, said that only 23 witnesses had been



identified until then. Justice Hima Kohli questioned why the mobile phone of only one accused person, Ashish Mishra, had been seized. Justice Kant went on to add that “prima facie, it appears that one particular accused is seeking to be given benefit by overlapping two FIRs, you can appreciate very well the fate of the case”.

The November 8 hearing also witnessed a unique instance when the lawyer for Ruby Devi, the widow of BJP worker Shyam Sunder Nishad, who was killed in the violence, expressed a lack of confidence in the inquiry by the Uttar Pradesh government’s Special Investigation Team. There were claims at the hearing that the BJP worker was killed in police custody. Clearly, all new revelations in relation to the Lakhimpur Kheri violence are going against the BJP and its governments.

### **RAFALE REVELATIONS**

New revelations on others fronts, such as the Rafale fighter jet deal, are adding to the BJP leadership’s discomfiture. Central to these revelations is the French news portal Mediapart, which pointed out with documents that the Indian deal with the aircraft manufacturer Dassault Aviation involved “offshore companies, dubious contracts and false invoices”. It also pointed out that Dassault had paid 7.5 million euros in secret commissions to Sushen Gupta, a middleman and defence contractor, between 2007 and 2012 during the bidding process.

Interestingly, Gupta’s services continued even after the Modi government came to power in 2014. Mediapart asserted that Gupta had received kickbacks during the finalisation of the deal in 2015-16. More shockingly, Mediapart reporter Yann Philippin said that both the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate had proof of the secret payments to Gupta as early as October 2018, but they had not even taken cognisance of the matter (story on page 9).

Talking to *Frontline*, the political observer Ravinder Kumar pointed out that in any other country, revelations such as the ones on the Lakhimpur Kheri case and the Rafale deal would have resulted in a huge political upheaval, forcing the government or at least the Ministers concerned to resign. “But the level of hubris in the BJP leadership is such that they have decided to brazen these out, thumbing their nose at people at large. However, people are responding, albeit in fits and starts, as can be seen from the broad trends of the recent results of byelections held in different States.”

### **DRUBBING IN BYELECTIONS**

Kumar was obviously referring to the results of byelections to three Lok Sabha seats and 30 Assembly constituencies held on October 30. The results were a mixed bag, but they reflected the anti-BJP, anti-Central government sentiment that is building up in northern and western India. Of the three parliamentary constituencies, the BJP lost Mandi in Himachal Pradesh and the Dadra and Nagar Haveli seat in the west, while retaining Khandwa in Madhya Pradesh.

In the Assembly byelections, the Congress wrested seats from the BJP in Himachal Pradesh while retaining its seats in Rajasthan. However, the BJP retained its newfound sway in Assam, winning all the five seats there in contest along with its allies. The Trinamool Congress swept the elections in West Bengal with huge margins, while the BJP and its allies held on to the north-eastern States. The overall message from these byelections was clear about an anti-BJP churning in northern and western India, where the farmers’ struggle has considerable impact.

### **SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS**

However, BJP leaders are by and large optimistic that some sort of solution can be found for the farmers’ agitation by the time the Assembly elections are held. They expect a solution once Amarinder Singh, former Congress Chief Minister of Punjab who resigned from the party recently, forms his own party. The plan apparently is to initiate negotiations with him, leading to a firm commitment from the Union government on incorporating minimum support price (MSP) as a requisite in farm laws. An assurance to put the controversial farm laws in abeyance until 2024 is also discussed as part of this package.

However, many BJP leaders across north India are sceptical about this so-called “package” coming to fruition. They believe that the leadership of the government and the party cannot do it since “collections” have already been received from crony capitalists who would benefit in a big way once the farm laws are implemented. Some others, however, argue that the “friendly” capitalists can be shown other ways to make up for the loss since winning the next round of Assembly elections are of paramount importance to the party.

Which direction will Modi and Shah take? There are no clear answers at the moment. But what is clear is that this government and its leadership, which has been facing corruption charges relating to some deals, including the Rafale deal, could go to any cynical length to overcome the big challenges before them.

BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra’s blatant communal targeting of the Congress leadership, particularly the Gandhi-Nehru family, branding them anti-Hindu, could well be an indicator of the cynical games to come in the near future. Patra chose to spew communal venom when Amit Shah was making forays into Varanasi.

Even as the sectarian plans of the BJP and its Sangh Parivar associates seem to be taking shape, the farmers’ agitation spearheaded by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha has called for massive mahapanchayats in all State capitals on November 26 to mark a year of the movement. The umbrella organisation of farmers is also in intense preparations for the “Lucknow Mahapanchayat” on November 22. This mahapanchayat in the capital of Uttar Pradesh is expected to witness a massive gathering of farmers, which would forcefully take forward the movements against the Union government and its political leadership. □



# The ghost of Rafale

The spectre of the Rafale fighter jets deal refuses to dissipate for the Narendra Modi government. **Damning new revelations** belie its claims that the deal was above board and for the public good. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI



REGIS DUVIGNAU/REUTERS

ON NOVEMBER 7, THE FRENCH NEWS portal Mediapart published details of invoices that were allegedly false but were used by aircraft manufacturer Dassault Aviation to secure the sale of 36 Rafale fighter jets to India for a record €7.8 billion. The investigative portal said that the deal involved “offshore companies, dubious contracts and false invoices”, adding that Dassault paid €7.5 million in secret commissions to middleman and defence contractor Sushen Gupta between 2007 and 2012 during the bid process.

Not only that, Sushen Gupta also received kickbacks during the finalisation of the deal in 2015-16. In short, he continued to benefit from the deal even after a change in the government in France in 2017. Despite the dark cloud over Rafale, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the deal in April 2015 amidst much fanfare. The deal was signed in 2016 by Jean-Yves Le Drian, who was Defence Minister under President Francois Hollande, and Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar.

**DEFENCE MINISTER** Rajnath Singh (right) listens to his French counterpart Florence Parly delivering a speech during a ceremony held for the delivery of the first Rafale fighter to the Indian Air Force at the factory of the French aircraft manufacturer Dassault Aviation in Merignac near Bordeaux, France, on October 8, 2019.

In yet another shocking disclosure, the reporter Yann Philippin said that despite two Indian intelligence agencies, the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (E.D.), having proof of secret payments since October 2018, they neither pursued the matter nor began an investigation.

These three exposures, seen along with past revelations around the deal, advance the suspicion of a massive cover up. With the coming to light of inconsistencies in the defence deal involving an inter-governmental agreement, investigators have unearthed several disturbing information relating to the deal—high prices of the jet,



**ERIC TRAPPIER**, Chairman and CEO of Dassault Aviation, and Florence Parly with Anil Ambani, chairman of Reliance Group, at MIHAN Special Economic Zone, Nagpur, on October 27, 2017, for the foundation stone-laying ceremony of Dassault Reliance Aerospace Limited.

unprecedented government concessions, procedural violations, waiver of anti-corruption clauses in the contract, deletion of integrity provisions, shady middlemen, choice of offset partners and suspicions over leakage of confidential documents. But the Rafale issue has not been taken to its logical conclusion in both France and India.

#### **'BOGUS PURCHASE'**

Sushen Gupta, one of the key links to the entire saga, reportedly hails from a family whose members have acted as middlemen in the aeronautical and defence industries for three generations. Dassault hired him as a middleman in 2001 when India announced that it wanted to buy fighter jets. Defsys Solutions, one of Dassault's subcontractors in India on the Rafale contract, belongs to the Gupta family. The company is said to have sold Rafale models to Dassault. According to Mediapart, this mid-sized company with 170 employees is not a specialist in making models. It assembles flight simulators and optical and electronic systems for the aeronautical industry, often under licence for foreign companies.

In 2017, when France's anti-corruption agency, Agence Francaise Anticorruption, audited Dassault, it found an item of expenditure costing €508,925 entered

under the heading "gifts to clients". On further investigation, Dassault supplied the agency with a proforma invoice dated March 30, 2017, supplied by Defsys Solutions. The agency report said: "This invoice, which related to 50 per cent of the total order (€1,017,850), was for the manufacture of 50 models of the Rafale C, with a price per unit of €20,357." The Dassault group was unable to provide the agency any document or even photograph to show that these models existed or were delivered. According to Mediapart, the inspectors suspected that this was a bogus purchase designed to hide hidden financial transactions. Thereafter, Defsys issued a statement terming Mediapart's report as "wholly unsubstantiated, misleading and baseless". The company shared tax invoices to claim that the 50 models were indeed supplied to Dassault. "Delivery challans, E-way bills and GST returns related to such delivery have been duly filed with the relevant authorities," it said.

#### **SECRET PAYMENTS**

Mediapart accessed more than 12,000 pages of confidential documents from the CBI's probe in the AgustaWestland case, which contained evidence of secret payments. Referred to as the VVIP Chopper Scam, the case involves alleged kickbacks paid to middlemen, possibly even



politicians and bureaucrats, in the purchase of helicopters manufactured by the Italian defence manufacturing firm Finmeccanica for €550 million.

The contract for 126 Rafale aircraft was signed in 2010 with Mukesh Ambani as an “offset” partner when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in power at the Centre in India. The scam came to light in 2012. In 2014, the deal fell through, and in 2015, Dassault signed the deal and took on board Anil Ambani, Mukesh Ambani’s brother, as an offset partner.

As per the documents shared by Mediapart, Sushen Gupta received secret commissions from AgustaWestland via Interstellar Technologies Ltd, a shell company registered in Mauritius. The Mauritian authorities agreed to send numerous documents relating to this company, including contracts, invoices and bank statements, to the CBI and the E.D. “This was how Indian detectives discovered that Sushen Gupta had also acted as an intermediary for Dassault Aviation over the Rafale deal. Interstellar Technologies, his Mauritian company, received at least €7.5 million from the French aviation firm between 2007 and 2012, thanks to information technology contracts that were clearly overbilled, and from which most of the money was discreetly sent to Mauritius allegedly using a system of false invoices. Some of these invoices even got the name of the French company wrong, referring to it as ‘Dassult Aviation’,” according to the Mediapart report.

#### POLITICKING OVER REVELATIONS

The expose triggered a political storm in India. Both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came out looking bad in the fresh revelations and took to politicking over it. The BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra tore into the Congress leadership and said that the Congress should be renamed “I Need Commission”. Addressing the media, he said: “We had seen the kind of canards, misinformation and lies that Mr Rahul Gandhi of the Congress party had tried to spread before the 2019 Lok Sabha election but the results are there for all to see.” Explaining parts of the Mediapart story, he said during which party’s tenure “corruption and commission took [sic] place as far as Rafale is concerned will be out” soon.

Accusing members of the Nehru-Gandhi family, Sambit Patra said: “The Mediapart story says that corruption, influence-peddling and favouritism marked the deal during the UPA government. Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Robert Vadra, all say that I need commission.” Persisting in the same accusatory vein, he said that Rahul Gandhi should respond “to this from Italy”, and that corruption, which had become homeless after the BJP came to power, had found its new address at 10 Janpath, referring to the residence of Sonia Gandhi. He added: “The negotiation that took place over 10 years was not for a deal, but for commission. We didn’t see an agreement for purchase, but there was an ‘agreement of commission’. The commission was payable at the rate of 40 per cent.”

In a separate press conference, Congress spokesper-

son Pawan Khera countered the BJP, saying that the ruling party had launched “operation cover up”. The Congress had demanded a Joint Parliamentary Committee probe into the deal, but the Modi government showed no signs of agreeing to institute one. Pawan Khera claimed that the BJP was instead busy burying the “black melting pot of corruption, kickbacks and collusion.... In doing so, the government has undermined national security, jeopardised the interests of the armed forces and caused a loss of Rs.41,000 crore to the exchequer. The corruption can be tracked to Prime Minister Modi’s own doorstep.”

#### ‘RAFALE PAPERS’

On October 4, 2018, Arun Shourie and Yashwant Sinha, two former BJP Union Ministers, along with Supreme Court lawyer Prashant Bhushan, presented evidence on what came to be known as the “Rafale Papers”.



**SUSHEN GUPTA**, one of the key links to the Rafale saga, at the office of the Enforcement Directorate, in New Delhi on March 30, 2019.

An official complaint on the matter was filed with the then CBI Director Alok Verma. The complaint alleged that Modi had abused his office and his position as a public servant to obtain a valuable thing in the nature of “offset” contracts for Anil Ambani. The misuse resulted in a hike in the price of procurement and provided a pecuniary advantage to both Dassault and Ambani’s Reliance Aerostructure Limited (RAL). According to the complaint, this would amount to criminal misconduct under Section 13(1)(d)(ii) of the Prevention of Corruption Act. Alok Verma reportedly wrote to the Defence Ministry concerning the documents mentioned in the complaint, seeking their comments.

Shortly after that, on October 11, the Attorney General of Mauritius sent documents about Sushen Gupta to the CBI. In the heightened drama, around midnight on October 24, Alok Verma was sacked, and a raid was conducted at the CBI headquarters. N. Nageshwar Rao was made the interim CBI chief. He took possession of all the locks of rooms and file cabinets before transferring 11



# ‘Why is the government running away from inquiry?’

Interview with Congress spokesperson **Pawan Khera**. BY **PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI**

THE latest disclosures by the French online investigative journal Mediapart about proof of a cover-up of a Rafale kickback payment to defence middleman Sushen Gupta has created a political storm of sorts. According to Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera, the documents reveal that the Indian intelligence agencies the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (E.D.) were in possession of documents that proved Sushen Gupta's nexus with the “political high command” in the BJP government, meaning the Prime Minister, and Dassault Aviation, the manufacturer of Rafale fighterjets.

Excerpts from the interview he gave *Frontline*:

**In the Mediapart disclosures, there is a hint of direct intervention by the Prime Minister in closing the deal at a much higher price than that negotiated by the Indian Negotiating Team. This also vindicates the Congress' stand on corruption in the Rafale deal. How is the party planning**



**to take this to the people, especially when elections to four State Assemblies are round the corner?**

These are important disclosures and the Congress is planning to educate the people about the new details now. Our spokespersons and other leaders are going to all parts of the country and will talk about the details through press conferences and other public interactions. Then the Congress Parliamentary Board will deliberate on the issue to decide how it can be raised during the forthcoming winter session of Parliament. We will take it to all corners of the country and explain

how massive corruption has taken place in the deal and how this government has done its best to cover up the scam. We are sure these facts will educate people about what really happened. Never in the history of India has a Prime Minister personally intervened, undermining the stand taken by the Indian Negotiating Team. There is a note on the file, which is in public domain now, where the Defence Ministry has requested the

other top officers. Whether there was a connection between Rafale and the midnight drama is not known but it certainly added to the intrigue around the Rafale scam and was seen as the reason for Alok Verma's removal.

On March 26, 2019, the E.D. raided Sushen Gupta in connection with the AgustaWestland case and reportedly recovered incriminatory documents. Pawan Khera said at the press conference that the documents included the benchmark price document of August 10, 2015, a record of discussions by the Indian Negotiating Team of the Defence Ministry, the Excel sheet of calculations made by the Defence Ministry and Eurofighter's counter-offer of 20 per cent discount to the Government of India. A note dated June 24, 2014, sent by Sushen Gupta to Dassault offering a meeting with “the political high command” was also recovered. Pawan Khera wanted to know whether such a meeting had taken place with the “high command” in the Modi government.

He alleged that “this was nothing short of endangering national security, sedition and a gross violation of the Official Secrets Act”. The documents of the Indian Negotiating Team giving details about how it calculated the price of the aircraft was especially disturbing. In the

charge sheet against Sushen Gupta, the E.D. said he had gained “sensitive data which should have only been in possession of the Ministry of Defence”. It is unclear how Sushen Gupta got hold of these documents, said Mediapart. But in a note dated September 2012, which was recovered by the E.D. during its raid, Sushen Gupta suggested that he had handed over money to some Indian officials on Dassault's behalf. “The risk is taken, you have an agent we have paid, now make sure it is legal clean and defensible. [...] No money no decisions [...] People sitting in office asking for money. [...] Those people will, if we don't pay, put us in Jail.” In March 2019, the E.D. arrested Sushen Gupta. After spending two months in custody, he was charged with money laundering in the AgustaWestland case and then released on bail. Sushen Gupta has denied any wrongdoing.

In December 2018, a three-member Supreme Court bench comprising the Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi and Justices S.K. Kaul and K.M. Joseph declined to order a probe into the corruption allegations in the aircraft deal. In November 2019, the same bench dismissed review petitions filed by Arun Shourie, Prashant Bhushan and Yashwant Sinha against the previous judgment, putting a lid on the “Rafale Papers”. The review



Defence Minister to request the Prime Minister's Office [PMO] not to intervene. This is bizarre. It is unprecedented that without a tender you go ahead and buy something worth Rs.526 crore and spend Rs.1,670 crore, you sacrifice the transfer of technology clause, you remove the anti-corruption clause. Why is the government not acting, why is it running away from inquiry?

**But is it not a fact that kickbacks started being paid between 2007 and 2012 when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in power, and the BJP has been able to only highlight this aspect, obfuscating all other details? Is that making the Congress somewhat defensive about the whole issue? Is that the reason why Congress leaders are not able to raise the issue so forcefully?**

I don't think so. We have to understand that even if there was payment of kickbacks during 2007-12 when we were in power, there was no deal then, so where is the question of *quid pro quo*. If you go back, there was payment of kickbacks to the same middleman, Sushen Gupta, by Dassault during 2000-04, so does it mean that the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government was also corrupt? There has to be a deal, there has to be a money trail, there has to be an agreement to establish *quid pro quo*.

Mere payment of commission by a company to a middleman does not make it corruption if no deal has been signed. In this case, there are documents in the public domain to directly link the middleman with the "political high command", then the intervention by the

PMO sidelining the negotiating team, and then the signing of the deal, by getting the no corruption, no commission, no middleman clause removed. All this information has been with the CBI since 2018 and with the E.D. since 2019. So why has the government chosen to sit over it and not conduct an inquiry?

**The Congress made the Rafale scam its main battle cry during the 2019 Lok Sabha election, with its 'chowkidar chor hai' slogan. It backfired. Do you think this sort of upfront attack on the Prime Minister proved counterproductive?**

If you mean the 2019 election results, the 2019 election, unfortunately, got completely incumbent upon Pulwama. A lot of other issues, whether it was Rafale, price rise, unemployment, everything got buried in Pulwama. Let's not use election results as the yardstick to measure whether our message has been transmitted to the people or not. When Pulwama happened, all other issues got sidelined.

**But it is also not a fact that the Congress has not been able to make Rafale corruption a part of the public discourse, like we saw with the Bofors scandal. Why do you think this is so?**

If you ask me, 2019 election was all about Pulwama, but that does not mean our message did not reach the people. We are taking it up with all seriousness. Now with new details out in the public domain, this has become even more serious and I hope people understand what we meant by *chowkidar chor hai*.

petitions were prompted by investigative reports in *The Hindu* by N. Ram, who relied on Defence Ministry documents to highlight inconsistencies in the Rafale deal. The then Attorney General K.K. Venugopal alleged in court that the documents were stolen and, therefore, the court should not consider them. Making a strong rebuttal, Ram said that they had not stolen the documents from the Ministry but got them from reliable sources. He said: "No force on earth can make me or us reveal the source of the documents, because we have given our word. We are fully protected by Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, the fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression and also by the Right to Information Act, specifically 8(1)(i) and 8(2), which override the Official Secrets Act.... There is no question of any national security interest being compromised by it."

#### **FRENCH INVESTIGATION**

While the Supreme Court gave a clean chit to the government on any wrongdoing with regard to the Rafale deal, a report by the French anti-corruption agency found that Dassault had paid more than €1million as bribe to Defsys for the manufacture of 50 models of the Rafale and more than €7 million in secret commissions to offshore ac-

counts and shell companies. It confirmed that Sushen Gupta had supplied classified documents relating to the deal to Dassault even as talks between the company and the Indian Negotiating Team were frozen over the issue of benchmark pricing.

In February 2019, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India tabled its audit report in Parliament pointing out procedural violations in defence procurement. As per the report, Dassault's technical bid was at first rejected but later allowed to incorporate India-specific enhancements that met bid-compliant qualitative requirements. The report also unequivocally stated that the defence acquisition process needed reforms and streamlining.

In France, a judicial investigation was launched in July this year by judges Virginie Tilmont and Pascal Gastineau, indicating that the curtain will not be brought down on the Rafale issue too soon. While 36 Rafale jets were delivered to India more than a year ago and are safely ensconced in Indian territory, the persistence of French journalists and law-keepers might keep the ghost of Rafale alive for the ruling dispensation in India despite the clean chit given by their own investigative agencies. □



# Congress in disorder

With **internal dissension and a floundering leadership**, the Congress is in a state of disarray, unable to mount an effective counter-attack to the BJP's offensive ahead of crucial State Assembly elections. BY **PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI**

ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN CRUCIAL STATES such as Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are just a few months away, but the principal opposition party, the Congress, is yet to move into combat mode. It does not seem to be in fighting fit condition to launch a forceful counter-attack on the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) propaganda blitzkrieg.

More than two years after Rahul Gandhi resigned as party president, the Congress continues to be led by an ailing Sonia Gandhi while senior leaders such as Kapil Sibal have openly questioned the decision-making process within the party. Ever since Rahul Gandhi stepped down as party president, she has been the interim president. But it is no secret that Rahul Gandhi is the one taking all the crucial decisions in the party, without this being announced in as many words. The leadership was also seen to be floundering, especially when a crisis was unfolding in Punjab.

If the state of affairs within the party is any indication, Modi's barb of the Congress being a "divided and confused" party does not seem to be way off, as there are several issues on which there is no clarity within the party, and the leadership question remains at the top of them all.

## PUNJAB CRISIS

Take the Punjab crisis, for example. When a feud broke out between State unit president Navjot Singh Sidhu and the Chief Minister, Captain Amarinder Singh, it was amply clear that Sidhu had easy access to Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi and could convey his views to them directly, while Captain Amarinder Singh, despite being a senior leader, was kept waiting before he could present his side of the story. Besides, he was further humiliated when the party, without consulting or involving him, summoned MLAs from Punjab to Delhi to ascertain their opinion on the state of affairs in the State unit. He tried reaching out to Sonia Gandhi then, without any result. It is in the public domain now that after his unceremonious exit from the post of Chief Minister, all he received from Sonia Gandhi was a curt message of apology: "I am sorry Amarinder."



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**CONGRESS PRESIDENT** Sonia Gandhi and party leader Rahul Gandhi arrive for a meeting with senior party functionaries, in New Delhi on October 26, 2021.



With the Congress high command meting out this kind of treatment to a Chief Minister and veteran leader like Captain Amarinder Singh, it is no wonder that there are rumblings in the party and they are becoming public knowledge.

It is now well known that Sunil Jakhar was the first choice for the top post in Punjab, but Sidhu was strongly opposed to his nomination. As a result, a plethora of names started doing the rounds, including that of Ambika Soni. Eventually, Charanjit Singh Channi emerged from nowhere as the surprise choice. He has carried himself well so far, but such major upheavals in a crucial election-bound State like Punjab do not augur well for the party.

It is another matter that the change of guard in Punjab, in hindsight, has proved to be a smart decision. Channi is the first Dalit Chief Minister of Punjab and his appointment has resonated with the Dalit community in the State, which accounts for a substantial 35 per cent of the population. The Dalit vote, which used to get divided between the Akali Dal and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), is likely to shift substantially towards the Congress.

Senior Congress leaders who spoke to *Frontline* admitted that barring the initial confusion, the Punjab leadership crisis had evolved into a blessing in disguise and the party hoped to form the government once again. The farmers' agitation has also been fuelling the party's optimism in the battle for Punjab.

#### STATE LEADERSHIP ISSUES

Similarly, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan witnessed leadership tussles a few months ago. In Chhattisgarh, MLAs supporting senior Congress leader T.S. Singhdeo camped in Delhi in August demanding that he be made Chief Minister.

Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel was summoned to Delhi for a meeting with Rahul Gandhi, but the leadership issue was apparently not discussed. If Singhdeo is to be believed, Rahul Gandhi had promised a rotational Chief Ministership, halfway through Baghel's tenure, when he completes half of his term in June 2021. Despite several rounds of meetings, the issue has not yet been resolved.

In Rajasthan, senior leader Sachin Pilot took on Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot in July last year, complaining that he was being neglected in the government and the party organisation. When Pilot moved to a resort with his supporters, the government seemed to be in danger of falling. Pilot appeared to be going the Jyotiraditya Scindia way. (Scindia rebelled against the Congress leadership in Madhya Pradesh in 2020 and joined the BJP. The departure of Scindia and his MLAs resulted in the fall of the Kamal Nath government.)

But Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi intervened in time and brokered peace between Pilot and Gehlot. Pilot, who was removed from the posts of Deputy Chief Minister and State party president, was promised a bigger share in the government and the organisation. But

the promises are yet to be fulfilled and discontent continues to simmer in the Rajasthan Congress.

If Pilot has not gone the Scindia way, it is because he does not have enough MLAs in his camp to topple the Gehlot government. A high-powered three-member committee, which was supposed to look into and resolve the crisis then, has not delivered anything yet.

#### IDEOLOGICAL DIRECTION

The question of leadership, whether at the State level or at the central level, is not the only confusion the Congress is grappling with. The party's ideological direction is also confusing observers. Wary of the "Muslim appeasement" tag, which the BJP has affixed to the Congress, party leaders have often leaned towards a "soft Hindutva" stand.



**CONGRESS GENERAL SECRETARY** Priyanka Gandhi Vadra at a rally in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, on October 31, 2021.

Thus, one sees Priyanka Gandhi offering puja at the Vishwanath temple in Varanasi and chanting Durgastuti in public meetings. Rahul Gandhi visited Kedarnath and other temples and his cohorts declared him to be a "jan-eudhaari" (sacred thread-wearing) Pandit.

While the leaders are free to offer prayers wherever they feel like, and are free to visit as many temples as they like, the need to make a public spectacle of it just to prove the BJP wrong is not going down well among observers.

The fault lines in the party organisation became visible once again last year, when a group of 23 senior leaders (now infamously called the G 23) wrote a letter to





**FORMER PUNJAB CHIEF MINISTER** Captain Amarinder Singh (right) with State Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu at a meeting in Chandigarh on August 20, 2021.

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**RAJASTHAN CHIEF MINISTER** Ashok Gehlot with Congress leader Sachin Pilot at a press conference on the BJP's attempts to destabilise his government, in Jaipur on June 12, 2020.

ROHIT JAIN PARAS

Sonia Gandhi, demanding clarity on leadership, the party's vision and ideology. They were immediately blacklisted, removed from key organisational positions and sidelined in key discussions. The issues remain unattended and those speaking openly about them, including Kapil Sibal, have ended up facing the party workers' wrath.

Of late, Sonia Gandhi has tried to strengthen her grip on party affairs, declaring that she is a full-time party

president and that party members should talk to her directly instead of talking through the media.

This becomes all the more important in the context of the Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, which could be an acid test for the party to decide whether it could really pose a challenge to the BJP in 2024. Priyanka Gandhi's event-based activism in Uttar Pradesh, which the BJP has derisively nicknamed political tourism, will not yield results unless there is clarity on whether Priyanka Gandhi, or someone else, would be the party's face in the upcoming Assembly election.

Also, the party needs to identify its target audience and declare its plan of action accordingly. Haphazard reaction-based activism may not yield any benefit to the party, no matter how well attended Priyanka Gandhi's meetings are. Her promise to allot 40 per cent of the party tickets to women candidates in the election could be a politically smart move, but it is too early to say if it will be decisive in a State that votes basically along caste lines even now.

The Mandal-kamandal brand of politics, a heady mix of caste- and religion-based politics practised by its rivals, proved to be the Congress party's undoing more than 30 years ago, and the party still has no equally potent alternative that could swing the voters in its favour. Congress leaders, however, are banking on the idiom, "singhasan khali karo janata aati hai" (vacate the throne, the public is coming to reclaim it). They are hoping that fed up with the unkept promises of the Narendra Modi government, the people, who are suffering because of an unprecedented price rise and intolerance and division in society, will create their own alternative and replace the BJP with the Congress, which is the only national alternative.

Senior Congress leader Meem Afzal said: "History is proof that when people suffer, they create an alternative. Our feedback from the ground is that people will seek their revenge from this government because they are suffering at so many levels."

He added: "We have been raising our voice against price rise, poor law and order, unemployment, corruption and all those issues which directly affect people. Their [BJP's] agenda is to divide and make people fight with one another, kill people in fake encounters, and muzzle dissenting voices by putting them in jail under draconian laws like UAPA. Rahul Gandhi is the only leader who has been exposing this government on all these issues. I feel people will eventually see the truth and create their own alternative."

Besides, he said, it is also a media-created myth that the Congress has failed to present an alternative to Narendra Modi. He said: "When the time comes, people will make their choice clear. I am confident the picture will change in 2024."

Whether the party manages to extricate itself from the cobwebs of confusion and mounts a credible counter-offensive to the BJP's propaganda remains to be seen. But the fact remains that the Congress is the only alternative to the BJP at the national level. □



# Trinamool's game plan

In an attempt to **usurp the Congress' space** at the national level, the Trinamool Congress launches an attack on the party and tries to make inroads into its bases in some States. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**



AFTER HER MASSIVE VICTORY OVER THE Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Assembly elections, West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee immediately set her sights on defeating the Narendra Modi government at the Centre in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. She went to Delhi after a gap of two years and held talks with various political parties, including the Congress, and urged them to put up a united front against the BJP. However, less than three months later, Mamata Banerjee and her party began to train their guns on the Congress, giving rise to fresh political speculation and prompting the Congress to question the Trinamool's motives.

Both Mamata Banerjee and her nephew Abhishek Banerjee, the all-India general secretary of the Trinamool, have not been pulling any punches in their recent statements against the Congress and its central leadership. During a recent trip to Goa, where the Trinamool is trying to establish a political base, Mamata Banerjee

**IN TRIPURA**, as in Goa, the Trinamool Congress' expansion strategy seems to be to tap into dissidence within the Congress and build up a base. Here, party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee (centre) at a rally in Agartala on October 31.

lashed out at the Congress, which is the main opposition in the State. "They contested for 70 years, what have they done? Last time, Congress MLAs went to the BJP to help them form the government. You [Congress] cannot control your MLAs. You cannot take a decision in proper time. You allowed the BJP to form a government. Who can say this won't be repeated? How do we trust you?" she said. Ironically, she herself is trying to build her party in Goa with the support of dissidents from the Congress. Led by former Chief Minister Luizinho Faleiro, these dissidents recently joined the Trinamool.

Faleiro, at the time of his joining the Trinamool, spoke of a "unification of the Congress family" to take on



# 'Mamata is an asset to the opposition'

Interview with **Om Prakash Mishra**, who left the Congress for the Trinamool in 2019. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

IN 2019, at a time when defections from the Trinamool Congress to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were the trend in West Bengal, Om Prakash Mishra, veteran Congress leader and party vice president, joined the Trinamool, claiming that it was the only party that could take on the rising BJP in the State. Mishra, a professor at Jadavpur University, is a member of the Trinamool's core committee and its spokesperson. In an interview to *Frontline*, he talks about the Trinamool's repeated political allegations against the Congress and the cold war between the two parties. "The Congress leadership is either absent or dithers and often fails to take on the BJP juggernaut effectively," he says. Excerpts.



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**There is a perception that the Trinamool is trying to take over the Congress' place as the main opponent of the BJP at the national level. Is this correct?**

India is a very big country with 543 Lok Sabha constituencies. No single political formation is either present or represented throughout the country. The Trinamool is the pre-eminent political party in the third largest State. As such, the ideological and political opposition to the BJP has to be channelised through parties like the Trinamool. We have never claimed to be the only alternative to the BJP. In fact, time and again our leader Mamata Banerjee has called for consistent, cohesive and contributory efforts throughout the country to fight the BJP. As a big party, the Indian National Congress is an important constituent in any such effort that can be organised at the national level. Mutuality and interdependence among parties opposed to the BJP are a necessity that has repeatedly been articulated by the Trinamool. We would like to broaden the coalition on the basis of issues and agendas against one of the most disastrous Union governments at the Centre. Effective articulation, necessary coordination and an accommodative approach can illuminate the path of the opposition to victory in 2024. The Trinamool is willing to play its due role, complement other parties' efforts and help build up synergies.

**So why this war of words?**

Every political party has certain limitations in the political geography of our vast country. We are lacking physical presence in many States, and so is the case with the Congress. In Maharashtra and Jharkhand, the Congress is part of the government led by other political

parties. In West Bengal, it has no representation in the Assembly. In the recent byelections in Assam and other north-eastern States, the Congress could not win a single seat. Unfortunately, the Congress could not sustain its governments in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka. Again, despite having a close shot at forming the government, it squandered away its advantage and

the BJP formed governments in Goa and Manipur. The Congress arrogantly believes itself to be the only opposition. Everyone will agree that the opposition needs to get its act together. Mamata Banerjee has been repeatedly saying this. But we do not see any initiative from the Congress to participate and help build up a coalition of parties opposed to the BJP. As a result, coordination among the parties has become a casualty. Again, why should all the

parties opposed to the BJP not come together? What about CPI(ML) [Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist]? After all, it is part of the Mahagathbandhan led by the RJD [Rashtriya Janata Dal] in Bihar.

**You were a prominent Congress leader before joining the Trinamool in 2019. What are the main differences between the Trinamool's opposition to the BJP, and the Congress?**

The Trinamool is focussed, consistent, and has a much better understanding of ground realities. As Abhishek Banerjee [national general secretary of the Trinamool and Mamata Banerjee's nephew] pointed out, while the Congress has been ceding space to the BJP, the Trinamool has been repeatedly winning against it.

On the matter of leadership, Mamata Banerjee is endowed with exceptional qualities as an administrator and can steer public policy in a most effective way. Unfortunately, the Congress leadership is either absent or dithers and often fails to take on the BJP juggernaut. This weakens the fight of the people of the country against the manifold and staggering failures of the [Narendra] Modi government. The Congress and the CPI(M) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] in Bengal are yet to offer an explanation in the public domain as to how and why they allowed the BJP to usurp the opposition space in the Lok Sabha election in 2019. How come the BJP secured about 40 per cent of the votes? The Trinamool is the only political party in the country which has been consistently increasing its vote share, even in the 2019 election. So, my joining the Trinamool Congress was to strengthen Mamata Banerjee's resolve to take on the BJP.

**Is it realistic at the moment to think of a non-BJP government at the Centre without the Congress?**



The political geography of the Indian parliamentary system does not sit comfortably with this proposition. A coalition of willing political parties is a prerequisite to defeat the BJP. However, the contour of such opposition to the BJP should be located in different States differently. As such, an interdependent matrix has to be evolved, preferably before the election. Mamata Banerjee is best suited to bring different parties opposed to the BJP together. She has repeatedly disowned a leadership role for herself. All the leaders are important, but there are advantages she represents. The Trinamool's success in defeating the BJP in a comprehensive way in Bengal is a national reference point for the people in the country. She has won seven Lok Sabha elections, has served the Council of Ministers under three different Prime Ministers, and the Trinamool has also been elected thrice in West Bengal under her leadership. She is an asset to the opposition and must be cultivated and supported by all right-thinking, liberal, secular people and political parties to usher in a non-BJP government in India. I should add that Mamata Banerjee has been categorical that the question of leadership is not the issue. Building up a coalition against the BJP is the main issue. It is natural for supporters to root for their own parties and believe their leader is the leader of the next government. However, it is a disaster to imprison the much-needed efforts for unity of the opposition parties merely on the basis of a liking or desire for one single party.

**You are talking of coalition and cohesion, but the Trinamool is challenging the Congress in Goa and Tripura.**

Both Tripura and Goa are ruled by the BJP. The Congress squandered its chances in Goa, and in Tripura the Congress could not win a single seat. We are not going to counter the Congress in these two States but the ruling BJP. By definition, political parties tend to expand their base and support. The Congress is fighting us in Bengal, it is fighting the CPI(M) in Kerala, and it fought the RJD in Bihar in the byelection. There can always be cooperation, but let us admit there will be elements of competition too. Can we say that the Congress is trying to mar the pitch for Akhilesh Yadav? Can we ask why the Congress put up candidates against the RJD in the bypolls? Is it not a fact that five BSP [Bahujan Samajwadi Party] MLAs joined the Congress? Kanhaiya Kumar left the CPI [Communist Party of India] for the Congress. Why is only the Trinamool being blamed? After all, we have every right to expand our presence and sharpen our opposition to the BJP like any other political party. This is what we are doing and fortunately there is a dynamism and momentum in the TMC's forward march.

the BJP. But Abhishek Banerjee adopted a belligerent tone as he accused the Congress of being an "armchair warrior" that ought to "hit the streets" like the Trinamool had done. "If the Congress cannot defeat the BJP, the Trinamool will do it," he said.

The statements by Mamata Banerjee and her nephew have been interpreted as a rejection of the Congress in the upcoming fight against the BJP. In fact, their attacks against the grand old party have been as consistent and scathing as their barbs at the saffron party. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, Congress stalwart from West Bengal and Leader of the Congress Party in the Lok Sabha, told *Frontline*: "She is more vituperative against the Congress than even the BJP. Sometimes I am confused as to who her political opponent is. I am really getting dumbfounded."

A section of political observers interprets the Trinamool's moves as nothing more than blatant political expansionism. But the Congress believes they form a concerted effort to destroy the party and thereby help the BJP. Labelling Mamata Banerjee as "the Trojan horse of the Modi government", Adhir Chowdhury said: "Electoral politics is nothing but electoral arithmetic to capture power. I don't know what kind of arithmetic the Trinamool is following. In order to ascend to power we need as many as 273 Lok Sabha seats. I don't know how and by what magic the Trinamool supremo can harness the numbers required to replace the BJP. We can easily come to the conclusion that 63 per cent of the popular votes have been cast against the BJP. Out of the 63 per cent, the Congress alone accounts for 20 per cent, and the Trinamool accounts for around 4 per cent. I don't see the merit of any argument that says Modi can be dethroned without the Congress."

According to Adhir Chowdhury, the Trinamool may be trying to help the BJP by targeting the Congress in order to escape from the clutches of the Central investigative agencies that are looking into alleged malpractices of some Trinamool leaders. "It is intriguing to note that on August 20, the Trinamool supremo attended a meeting with nine parties convened by Sonia Gandhi, and it was unanimously decided that all opposition parties would act together to dislodge the ruling dispensation. The very same supremo had earlier met all the opposition leaders, including Sonia Gandhi. But on September 6, soon after her nephew was examined by the Enforcement Directorate in Delhi, both the nephew and the supremo started hurling diatribes against the Congress without any rhyme or reason. Within a few days the entire Trinamool party started going hammer and tongs at us," said Adhir Chowdhury.

Even a local Trinamool leader like Kunal Ghosh, who has no substantial mass base, took a swipe at Rahul Gandhi on social media, calling him a "part-time politician who has failed to combat the BJP". Ghosh's reaction came after Rahul Gandhi's observation that while the Congress was prevented by the Uttar Pradesh government from visiting Lakhimpur Kheri, the Trinamool and the Bhim Army were allowed. "Rahul Gandhi should



know: @AITCofficial MPs are in Lakhimpur after a long fight. In Tripura, BJP imposed 144 throughout Agartala only to prevent @abhishekaite. INC is a loser in their traditional UP including Amethi. But TMC defeated BJP in Bengal. INC made Punjab a mess,” Ghosh tweeted.

Besides trying to rally together anti-BJP parties for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Mamata Banerjee has also been trying, quite openly, to spread the Trinamool’s influence and strengthen its organisation in States where the Congress has considerable sway. The Trinamool’s forays into BJP-ruled Tripura and Goa are being perceived as a two-pronged attack—to challenge the BJP and at the same time usurp the Congress’ space as the main opposition in these States. In Tripura, too, the Trinamool seems to be relying on large-scale defections from the Congress to build up a base. According to a Congress source, the Trinamool is trying to take advantage of the “present state of the Congress” in different States in order to demolish the organisation completely and replace it with its own organisation. “A section of opportunistic Congress leaders is being enticed with plum positions and Rajya Sabha nominations. They are being misled into believing this is best for their career,” said the source.

In August, Sushmita Dev, former Congress Member of Parliament from Silchar, Assam, and president of the All India Mahila Congress, joined the Trinamool. She was immediately given a Rajya Sabha nomination and important responsibilities in Assam and Tripura.

Birajit Sinha, president of the Tripura Pradesh Congress Committee, does not believe that the Trinamool’s attempts to set up base in other States will succeed. “Mamata Banerjee believes she will be able to make a dent in other States, but hers is a regional party; and a regional party is restricted to its own State. The Congress is her oxygen. She may attack it now, but when the need arises she will seek the Congress’ help,” Birajit Sinha told *Frontline*.

#### ‘WEST BENGAL MODEL’

The well-known political observer and psephologist Biswanath Chakraborty described the Trinamool’s strategy of targeting the Congress in other States as the “West Bengal model”, one which seeks to decimate the Congress and replace it with the Trinamool. “Initially, Mamata Banerjee could not manage to win over a single MLA from the Left. But she broke the Congress and ultimately destroyed the Left. Now she wants to use the same strategy in other States and at the same time question the credibility of the central leadership of the Congress. She has now taken the place that Mulayam Singh



**ADHIR RANJAN CHOWDHURY**, veteran Congress leader, believes that the Trinamool is attacking the Congress in order to strengthen the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Yadav occupied in the 1990s. Just as the Muslims then believed that Mulayam could stop the BJP, they now feel it is Mamata Banerjee who can defeat the Modi-Amit Shah rule. She is virtually representing the minority vote bank of the Congress,” he said. While the strategy may work in the Trinamool’s favour, there is also a chance of it backfiring and working to the BJP’s advantage by splitting the opposition votes. “However, Mamata Banerjee’s politics is very flexible and aimed at maximising her political gains. If this strategy is not working to her advantage, she may very well take a U-turn,” said Chakraborty.

The Congress, for its part, has not only showed restraint about the Trinamool’s repeated barbs,

but also extended an olive branch to it by not fielding any candidate for the Bhabanipur seat in the byelection, which was contested and won by Mamata Banerjee. Amitabha Chakraborty, senior Congress leader from West Bengal, told *Frontline*: “When there are talks of a united front against the BJP, the Congress does not want to rock the boat, and that is the reason it did not even put up a candidate in Bhabanipur. The Congress is looking at the bigger picture here.”

#### THE PRASHANT KISHOR FACTOR

The Trinamool’s election strategist Prashant Kishor, who incidentally met the Gandhi family to discuss Congress’s revival plans earlier this year, also got into the fray. Tweeting on the Lakhimpur Kheri incident, he posted: “People looking for a quick, spontaneous revival of GOP [Grand Old Party] led opposition based on #LakhimpurKheri incident are setting themselves up for a big disappointment. Unfortunately there are no quick fix solutions to the deep-rooted problems and structural weakness of GOP.” Later he was heard saying, in a video of a private meeting in Goa, that Rahul Gandhi was mistaken to believe that the BJP could easily be removed from Indian politics: “That is where the problem lies with Rahul Gandhi. Probably, he thinks it’s just a matter of time that people will throw him [Modi] away. That’s not happening.”

According to Adhir Chowdhury, Kishor is the “bridge” between the Trinamool and the Modi government. “He has been playing the facilitator for the Modi regime to continue. In 2014, the same Mr Poll Strategist had coined the words ‘Acche din’, and the same person in 2021 coined the battle cry for the ruling party of Bengal, ‘Duarey Sarkar’. There is certainly some hidden agenda here, and that is why, in spite of all the oppression mounted on the BJP workers in the State, the central BJP leadership is reticent,” Chowdhury said. □



# Kashmir manoeuvres

No matter the differences between them, the Gupkar leaders need to evolve a calibrated, nuanced and unified strategy if they have to take on the BJP, which is **using whatever tactics it has at its disposal** to ensure that it will reach the magic number of 46 seats in the next Assembly election. BY **ANANDO BHAKTO** RECENTLY IN SRINAGAR



PT/TWITTER IMAGE POSTED BY@AMITSHAH

AS A REPRESSIVE BUREAUCRATIC STRUCTURE tightens its control over Kashmir's polity, civil society and public institutions—stifling dissent with arbitrary use of anti-terror laws, coercing officials into absolute conformity, and intensifying cultural invasion with a name-changing spree of roads and public utilities—there are sporadic manifestations of a yearning in Kashmir for an elected government. Officially, the excuse for the delay in calling elections is that the Delimitation Commission is yet to finish its task of reorganising the Assembly constituencies in Jammu and Kashmir, which have increased to 90 from 87 (effectively 83 as four constituencies in the erstwhile State were in Ladakh, now a separate Union Territory). But hardly anyone buys that claim. General discussions in public underscore the fact that

**UNION HOME MINISTER** Amit Shah being greeted by supporters on his arrival for a public meeting in Srinagar on October 25.

people believe that elections will be held as and when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) so desires.

Against that backdrop, Union Home Minister Amit Shah's actions during his recent, much-hyped visit to the Union Territory, which he used to illustrate his commitment to strengthening 'nationalist' rhetoric and to continue his derision of the two political families of Kashmir, are important indicators of the course the BJP is expected to chart and its definitive aims and objectives. On October 24, at an event in Srinagar's Sher-e-Kashmir Convention Centre, Amit Shah assailed Kashmir's "two



families”, accusing them of corruption and nepotism and perpetuating an anti-India sentiment by calling for dialogue with Pakistan, even as he repeated his party’s fallacious claims of containing terrorism and boosting economic development in Jammu and Kashmir. “Today, we have succeeded in replacing guns with pens even in the militancy hotbed of Pulwama and other districts of Kashmir,” he said. He then retired to a Central Reserve Police Force camp in Pulwama and spent the night with security personnel.

The takeaways are not hard to discern. There will be elections and there will be an elected government in Jammu and Kashmir, as Amit Shah himself has reiterated, but as the BJP continues to circulate the idea that it is on its way to remaking Kashmir into something resembling its idealised past, hope of political inclusion is dim. The BJP will vehemently oppose any return to the old days when New Delhi’s “allies”, the National Conference (N.C.) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), rotated power between themselves and New Delhi was content with managing matters pivotal to law and order and national security through remote control. By using Kashmir as a theatre to whip up Hindu nationalist sentiments, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government has gone too far in its discourse to restore comity, no matter Modi’s assertions of mitigating “*dil ki doori*”. Both Modi and Amit Shah know that any staple of politics that does not promise to place the social and political hegemony of the Hindus at its core will be seen as a compromise.

The coming days will see the BJP attempting to consolidate its position in Jammu by vehement expositions of muscular nationalism. In the valley, its immediate task is to weaken its biggest challenger, the N.C. Apparently, a blueprint has been drawn to splinter the N.C.’s top ranks and facilitate the rebels’ entry into either Sajad Lone’s Peoples Conference (P.C.) or the Apni Party led by Altaf Bukhari. Both the P.C. and the Apni Party are perceived to be the vehicles of the BJP in the Kashmir valley. It is imperative for the BJP to have that covert arrangement as defections of Kashmir-based leaders directly into its fold would discredit them. During the District Development Council (DDC) elections in November-December 2020, Apni Party candidates were flanked by security personnel and armoured vehicles even as several People’s Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) candidates were restricted from campaigning on the pretext of security threat.

#### BID TO WEAKEN NATIONAL CONFERENCE

The BJP is hopeful of its “proxies” in the Kashmir valley clinching enough seats to help it reach the magic number of 46 in the 90-member House. Both the P.C. and the Apni Party deny any complicity with the saffron forces. When contacted, a P.C. spokesperson ascribed such a notion to a “discourse floated by the National Conference”. But a spate of developments suggests otherwise. Devender Rana, once the N.C.’s heavyweight leader from Jammu, and Hilal Rather from Budgam have quit the party. Rather joined the P.C. Ishfaq Jabbar, an N.C.



**FAROOQ ABDULLAH**, N.C. president, and Omar Abdullah, party vice president, talking to the media in Srinagar on June 26 on their return from New Delhi after attending an all-party meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Right from the time Farooq and Omar Abdullah were released from detention in March 2020, the N.C. has been making the mistake of believing that New Delhi would realise the cost of its impulsive actions, repair ties with it and work on areas of agreement.

leader from Ganderbal, sent the alarm bells ringing when he resigned from key party portfolios on November 4.

The N.C. could be facing more crises, as *Frontline’s* interactions with various stakeholders and informed sources indicate. Interactions with them give one the sense that the BJP allegedly has an armoury of tactics to engineer more defections. Some N.C. leaders are being offered plum portfolios in the Lieutenant Governor’s administration, while others have investigation agencies knocking on their doors over “shady business enterprises” they were involved in while in power. Emissaries of New Delhi are also in touch with the N.C.’s potential candidates from Pahalgam and Kokernag; some were allegedly warned that if they did not quit the N.C., their constituencies would be reserved for Scheduled Tribes. If these reports are true, it points to a blatant subversion of the Delimitation Commission. An erstwhile member of the administration who joined the N.C.’s ranks is being cajoled into shifting loyalties, and heirs of two well-known N.C. leaders are “under duress”.

It is unlikely that the N.C., led by seasoned politicians such as Farooq and Omar Abdullah, is unaware of what is brewing in its backyard. In fact, according to party insiders, long before Devender Rana quit the





S. IRFAN/PTI

party, Farooq Abdullah had alerted a colleague in Banihal to guard himself against him. But what is unsettling is that despite early information about sabotage, the N.C. was unable to thwart it.

But that is not the N.C.'s only worry. Right from the time Farooq and Omar Abdullah were released from detention in March 2020, the N.C. has been making the mistake of believing that New Delhi would realise the cost of its impulsive actions, repair ties with it and work on areas of agreement as international scrutiny of the situation in Kashmir becomes intense, geopolitical contours realign to India's disadvantage, and the obliteration of the middle ground pushes the region to the precipice of an anti-India implosion.

It is learnt that Omar Abdullah on several occasions (rightly) warned that New Delhi would not retreat even an inch, but the overwhelming sense in the party was different. This not only persuaded the N.C. to avoid a collision course with New Delhi but made the party appear reconciliatory each time Modi hoodwinked it with signs of relenting. For instance, ahead of the Prime Minister's meeting with Jammu and Kashmir leaders on June 14, Farooq Abdullah distanced himself from Mehbooba Mufti's call for dialogue with Pakistan. "Mehbooba Mufti has her own agenda. We have our own agenda. We do not want to talk about Pakistan. We will talk to our own PM," he said.

#### NATIONAL CONFERENCE'S ADVANTAGES

Despite these mistakes, the N.C. has at least two advantages. One, wide-ranging discussions with a cross section of people across the Kashmir valley suggest that there is a rising sense of panic and frustration over the political vacuum in Kashmir and a yearning for leadership. This

stems from an overwhelming sense that the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh's ideological experimentation in Jammu and Kashmir—of realigning the region's demography and making Hindus numerically superior—will continue. In this anxious climate, the resistance the mainstream actors offer is expected to find a reception even if it is without the glamour of widespread public adulation.

Two, however hard the BJP may try to prop up a battalion of proxies, it is improbable that they will withstand the test at the hustings. The BJP's howling campaign to vilify the Abdullahs and the Muftis and its preferential treatment of the Apni Party, and now also the P.C., has made its game plan obvious. This may prompt people to vote against defectors simply because that would be the only consistent way to register protest. The DDC elections of 2020 pointed to that. Several candidates who were either former legislators or Ministers and had defected to the Apni Party lost to the PAGD.

History tells us that any candidate who smacks of "Indian-ness" will be rebuffed in the Kashmir valley. In the 1977 Assembly election, in spite of popular discontent over the Indira Gandhi-Sheikh Abdullah accord, the N.C. soundly defeated Janata Party candidates, no matter the resources made available to them and the then Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, travelling all the way to Srinagar to helm the electioneering. Perhaps, the BJP senses this. Informed sources say that the Union Home Minister, despite the optics he set in Srinagar and Pulwama, was not particularly happy with his assessment of how things are moving in Kashmir. All the same, the N.C. needs to get its act together. As the BJP's primary challenger in Jammu and Kashmir, it has to articulate people's fundamental concerns regarding the onslaught on their identity and berate Modi and his alleged proxies in public.

In August 2020, Omar Abdullah signalled that he would not hesitate to confront New Delhi. He said: "We will fight using the legal means at our disposal, which are two: one is the power that the Constitution gives us to challenge the decisions in the court, and the second is forums available, including Parliament, the media, social media and public meetings." That combative assertion has to be renewed and it has to translate into concrete action to reinvent his party's politics in the fractious Himalayan region.

According to sources in the N.C., Farooq Abdullah is in favour of an electoral alliance among the PAGD parties, but that idea cuts little ice with most of his colleagues, who contend that the PAGD has proved helpful only to Mehbooba Mufti. That said, wherever there is a keen contest with the P.C. or the Apni Party, the N.C. and the PDP have to ensure that they do not fragment each other's votes. The onus for that understanding is largely on Mehbooba Mufti, who has been charting an independent belligerent course aimed at erasing the stain of her alliance with the BJP. She must resist the temptation to make it all about her political resurrection and let a calibrated, nuanced and unified strategy evolve among the Gupkar leaders. And that has to happen now. □



# Thickening plot in Maharashtra

Unable to accept the MVA government in Maharashtra and desperate to reclaim lost ground in the State, the BJP stoops to new lows by **hatching plots and launching raids** to bring down Ministers and persecute officials. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

A SUPPOSED TERROR PLOT INVOLVING A CAR bomb parked near the residence of industrialist Mukesh Ambani in Mumbai in February this year has ended up as a case that has exposed not just a deep rot in the State administration but a new low in the no-holds-barred politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The bomb scare appears to be yet another attempt by the BJP to destabilise the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government, a coalition government of the Shiv Sena, the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

Such has been the success of the bomb story that former Home Minister Anil Deshmukh was forced to resign; he is now under arrest. Former Mumbai Commissioner of Police Parambir Singh is missing and Sachin Vaze, a former Assistant Police Inspector, encounter specialist and lead investigator of the bomb case, is in jail. Several other lower-level government and police officials are also in the net.

## GUNNING FOR MVA

Ever since 2019, when the BJP severed ties with its long-term ally Shiv Sena, the party has relentlessly tried to bring down the MVA government led by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray. Using dubious strategies and with the advantage of being in power at the Centre, the saffron party created chaos even during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Maharashtra was grappling with the highest number of cases in the country.

Former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, who is now the leader of the opposition in the State, has used every opportunity to needle the government, to the point

**FORMER MAHARASHTRA HOME MINISTER** Anil Deshmukh being taken to a special court for remand by Enforcement Directorate officials, in Mumbai on November 6, 2021.



PTI



where citizens' groups in Mumbai had to tell him that the government should be allowed to govern in these difficult times without having to fight ridiculous fires set off by the opposition.

So, why is the BJP finding it so difficult to accept a coalition government of unlikely partners and function as a responsible and mature opposition? The reason is not far to seek. Political analysts said that the BJP is exhibiting such desperation because it is critical for the party to reclaim lost ground in Maharashtra if it wants to win the 2024 general election. After Uttar Pradesh, it is Maharashtra, with 48 seats, that sends the largest contingent of elected representatives to Parliament. In 2019, the Shiv Sena-BJP combine won 41 Lok Sabha seats, of which the BJP won 23.

In 2019, the BJP won 105 out of the 288 Assembly seats but was unable to form the government following the break-up with the Shiv Sena. Analysts said that the party will seemingly stop at nothing to secure victories in the elections to Parliament and the Assembly in 2024.

#### USE OF CENTRAL AGENCIES

The attack by the opposition comes in many forms. The most blatant is the use of Central agencies to target the MVA leaders. In the case of the bomb scare, within days of the alleged explosives being discovered, and before the MVA government could even begin to understand the 'conspiracy', Central agencies plunged into an investigation. An NCP leader told mediapersons that it was not possible for Central agencies to work at such speed in Maharashtra without sanction from the top.

The probe seemed less about the bomb scare than about going after MVA leaders. Sources said that Anil Deshmukh was an easy target: Parambir Singh was known to be in the good books of the MVA and the agencies used him to bring down the former Home Minister.

Harshvardhan Patil, a veteran Congress politician who defected to the BJP in 2019, made a revealing comment recently when he said that he was getting "sound sleep" as he did not need to fear "inquiries" from Central agencies ever since he joined the party.

Obviously, in a case where the Police are complicit in a crime, the Home Minister will face the flak and has to take responsibility. It is speculated that Anil Deshmukh's proximity to NCP leader Sharad Pawar, who the BJP is unable to touch even though it has tried to, was the reason for his being on its radar.

#### THE CASE OF ANIL DESHMUKH

NCP insiders said it was Sharad Pawar who handpicked Anil Deshmukh to be the Home Minister. By tarnishing Anil Deshmukh, the BJP seems to have succeeded in hurting Sharad Pawar. The NCP strongman has repeatedly said it is a case of political vendetta and has not budged from his support to the former Minister.

The 71-year-old Anil Deshmukh began his career as an independent MLA, cutting his teeth in the State Cabinet by aligning with the Shiv Sena-BJP combine from



#### FORMER MUMBAI POLICE COMMISSIONER

Parambir Singh talking to mediapersons after taking charge on February 2, 2020.

1995 to 1999. He then joined the NCP and held ministerial positions during the Congress-NCP coalition period between 1999 and 2009.

Anil Deshmukh, who resigned on April 5, could not be apprehended for almost seven months. The Enforcement Directorate (E.D.) arrested him in Mumbai on November 2 on charges of extortion and money laundering. The move came after the Bombay High Court refused to cancel an E.D. summons sent to him. With few legal avenues left, Anil Deshmukh had no option but to turn himself in for interrogation.

Anil Deshmukh's downfall began soon after the bomb plot unravelled. Sachin Vaze was reportedly put on the job to investigate the crime on Parambir Singh's

The shenanigans of the police and politicians were exposed in September when a CBI report giving Anil Deshmukh a "clean chit" was leaked to the media.



instructions. When the Mumbai Police discovered that Sachin Vaze was allegedly the mastermind behind planting the bomb, Parambir Singh could no longer continue as Mumbai's Commissioner of Police, as the incident supposedly took place in Mumbai under his watch. He was shunted to the Home Guards. Unhappy at losing a prestigious position, he retaliated by writing a letter to Uddhav Thackeray accusing Anil Deshmukh of orchestrating an extortion racket that included setting a target for police officials to collect Rs.100 crore every month from hoteliers and restaurant owners.

Following these allegations, the Bombay High Court directed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to conduct a preliminary enquiry into the case.

Soon after Parambir Singh's letter, Sachin Vaze, who was in custody of the National Investigating Agency (NIA), wrote a letter to the agency claiming that Anil Deshmukh had demanded Rs.2 crore to reinstate him. Sachin Vaze was suspended from the police force in 2004 for 16 years for his involvement in a series of encounter killings. The State government asked him to rejoin the police force in 2020 in order to help with the overload owing to the pandemic. He also accused Anil Deshmukh of asking him to extort money from a gutka trader.

Although the special NIA court investigating his case did not accept his letter, Sachin Vaze's allegations, along with those of Parambir Singh, caused significant damage to the Home Minister's image.

Both Parambir Singh and Anil Deshmukh dropped out of sight for several months. Parambir Singh continues to remain elusive.

In the E.D.'s remand application to the court, the agency stated that after conducting raids and speaking to Anil Deshmukh's contacts, including family members, in different parts of the country, it had discovered that he was linked to several money laundering operations. The E.D. alleged that he had floated at least 14 shell companies to conduct benami transactions. The agency said that inspection of the companies' balance sheets and other documentation showed that little real business has been conducted and that they seemed to have been created to funnel ill-gotten gains. The agency booked the former Minister under several sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA).

In June 2021, the E.D. arrested Anil Deshmukh's



**SACHIN VAZE, A FORMER POLICE OFFICER**, being taken by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for a hearing in connection with the recovery of explosives near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's house, in Mumbai on March 14, 2021.

personal secretary Sanjeev Palande and personal assistant Kundan Shinde following search operations at Anil Deshmukh's residences at Nagpur and Mumbai. At the time of their arrest, the E.D. said that there was proof to show that the duo was involved in collecting and rerouting Rs.4.7 crore from beer parlours in Mumbai. The money was allegedly transferred through the hawala route to various companies, including a non-governmental organisation called Sai Shikshan Sanstha, which is run by Anil Deshmukh's family members. Shinde was on the Sanstha's board.

Anil Deshmukh and the MVA have maintained that the investigation was politically motivated. The E.D., however, said that Anil Deshmukh was an "important cog in the wheel" and the "prime beneficiary of the proceeds of crime". Additionally, the agency said it was looking for "international links" in the case.

However, the shenanigans of the police and politicians were exposed in September this year when a CBI report giving Anil Deshmukh a "clean chit" was leaked to the media. The CBI said someone had paid a bribe to one of its officials to get the report. But the NCP pointed out that the agency had not denied the authenticity of the report.

#### INTENT TO HARASS

At the time of Anil Deshmukh's resignation, Sharad Pawar said that the BJP was harassing him out of frustration and that it was a "new trend of using power by those in power". He added that the coalition would not buckle.

Incidentally, the E.D. had attempted to persecute Sharad Pawar before the 2019 Assembly elections with a case but dropped it very quickly. NCP insiders said that although Anil Deshmukh might have skeletons in his closet, this case was not about that.

After Anil Deshmukh, the Centre's next target was NCP leader and Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar. In October this year, the Income Tax Department raided several businesses, a sugar factory in Satara as well as the homes of Ajit Pawar's sisters following allegations by BJP leader Kirit Somaiya. Ajit Pawar said that he was completely in the clear as he pays taxes on his business interests. The BJP had accused him in 2019 too in an irrigation scam. Interestingly, the BJP had made Ajit Pawar Deputy Chief Minister when it made a bid to form the government in 2019. □



# Searching for scams

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and others have been targeted by the BJP using Central agencies as part of its persistent **attack on the MVA government.** BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

THE SPOTLIGHT IS ONCE AGAIN ON AJIT Pawar, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and senior Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader. Although he prefers to avoid the limelight, his mercurial temperament ensures that he is thrust into public focus on and off. His last shock appearance was in 2019 just before the tumultuous post-election government formation in the State. Despite being a senior NCP Minister and nephew of the party supremo Sharad Pawar, Ajit Pawar joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and took oath as Deputy Chief Minister in the Devendra Fadnavis government in a swearing-in ceremony held after dawn on November 23. His alliance did not last long because he was brought back to the NCP fold within 78 hours.

Within a week, the newly created Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), a post-election alliance of the Shiv Sena, the NCP and the Congress, formed the government. Ajit Pawar took his ministerial oath for a second time as Deputy Chief Minister with additional charge as Minister of Finance and Planning, this time in the government led by Shiv Sena leader Uddhav Thackeray. The BJP was understandably angry with Ajit Pawar not only because his exit from the Fadnavis government cost them the State but also because during his 78-hour alliance with the BJP he had managed to have his name cleared in at least nine cases relating to the Rs.70,000-crore irrigation scam in which he was allegedly involved. This then is the background to the current situation.

Ever since it lost power in 2019, the BJP has concentrated its energy on hitting out at the MVA government. In June 2021, the party's State executive meeting passed a resolution stating that an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) will be sought into allegations of financial manipulation by Ajit Pawar in his companies.

## SUGAR MILL ATTACHED

On July 1, a month after the resolution was passed, the Enforcement Directorate (E.D.) announced that under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) it had attached a sugar mill valued at Rs.65.75 crore, which was allegedly linked to a scam in the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank (MSCB). The mill was the Jarandeshwar Sahakari Sakhar Karkhana in western Maha-



**AJIT PAWAR**, after he was sworn in as Deputy Chief Minister in the Uddhav Thackeray-led MVA government in Mumbai on December 30, 2019.

ashtra's Satara district. In a statement the E.D. said: "The assets are currently held in the name of Guru Commodity Services Pvt Ltd (an alleged dummy company) and leased to Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills Pvt Ltd.... Sparkling Soil Pvt Ltd is holding majority shares of Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills and investigations revealed that the former firm is a company related to Ajit Pawar, deputy chief minister of Maharashtra and Sunetra Ajit Pawar [his wife]."

The E.D.'s action was based on an ongoing investigation. In 2019, the Mumbai Police's Economic Offences wing had registered a first information report (FIR) under orders of the Bombay High Court, which claimed that Jarandeshwar was undervalued and sold by the directors of the MSCB to their own people and relatives without following the provisions of the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest (SARFAESI) Act. The Act allows banks to sell assets to recover loans.



A statement from the E.D. had said: "Ajit Pawar was one of the prominent and influential members of Board of Directors of MSCB at the relevant time. The Sahkari Sugar Karkhana [SSK] was purchased by Guru Commodity Services Pvt. Ltd. and was immediately leased to Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills Pvt. Ltd., which is presently operating the Jarandeshwar Sahkari Sugar Karkhana." Officials allege that a large part of the funds used to purchase Jarandeshwar came from Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills Pvt. Ltd. which, in turn, got the money from Sparkling Soil Pvt. Ltd.

The statement also said: "Further, the SSK has been used as a vehicle by Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills for obtaining loan to the tune of Rs.700 crore from Pune District Central Cooperative Bank & others during the period from the year 2010 till date. Thus, the assets held in the name of Guru Commodity Services Pvt. Ltd. (leased to Jarandeshwar Sugar Mills Pvt. Ltd.) in the form of Land, Building & Structure, Plant & Machinery of Jarandeshwar SSK, being proceeds of crime, the same has been provisionally attached under PMLA."

On October 7, the Income Tax Department conducted simultaneous raids at the Daund Sugar factory in Baramati, the Jarandeshwar sugar factory in Satara, the Ambalika sugar factory in Ahmednagar and the Schreiber Dynamix Dairy in Baramati, Pune. All the companies are supposed to be associated with Ajit Pawar and his three sisters. The normally quick-tempered Ajit Pawar maintained his cool and issued a statement saying that the Income Tax Department had a right to conduct raids but he, being the Finance Minister was "very well acquainted with income tax rules and [had] always maintained stern fiscal discipline. Hence, [his] companies have never defaulted on paying taxes". He was, however, upset that his sisters were dragged into what he hinted was a politically motivated action.

"One of my three sisters stays in Kolhapur and the other two in Pune. They were married 35 or 40 years ago. If the raids were conducted because they are my sisters, then the people of Maharashtra should think about the low level of politics being played out and the misuse of Central agencies," he said.

The BJP said the raids were part of an investigation by a Central agency and was not political vendetta.

Rallying around the leader, the NCP held a show of strength in Pune staging protests at various locations, including the E.D.'s office and the local BJP office, against the raids.

In Baramati, Sharad Pawar spoke openly in support of his nephew and nieces and tried to make light of the situation referring to the income tax officers as "guests". He said, "Guests have been visiting Ajit Pawar. We are never scared of guests." But at a public meeting in Sol-

apur, he reminded the Central agencies about the reaction of the people when the E.D. sent him a notice in 2019, ahead of the State Assembly election in September. "I was sent a notice by the E.D. [regarding alleged irregularities] in the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank. I had nothing to do with the bank. All of Maharashtra reacted to this accusation, the BJP was made a fool of," he said. Pawar had then been issued a summons by the E.D. and he had been willing to visit its office but NCP workers gathered at the location in large numbers forcing the Mumbai Police and the State government to tell Pawar to cancel his visit as they feared a law-and-order situation could emerge. The NCP performed very well in the Assembly election subsequently, especially in its own stronghold of western Maharashtra.

Pawar also remarked that the raids were an "excessive use of power" and said that perhaps they were a reaction to his comments condemning the October 3 violence in Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh, in which four Sikh farmers were killed, likening it to Jallianwalla Bagh.

Ajit Pawar, like his uncle had done earlier, appealed to his Pune supporters to let the "guests" do their work. He said: "I don't want to disturb the guests. Let them complete their duty. We did not get any notice before the raids. I follow all rules and comply with tax-related formalities. Later I will speak with evidence over the deals of the sugar factories and the people behind their sale."

#### ASSETS LINKED TO AJIT PAWAR'S FAMILY

On November 2, the Benami Wing of the Income Tax Department declared that it had served an attachment order and provisionally attached assets linked to the Ajit

Pawar family under the Prohibition of Benami Property Transactions Act (PBPTA), 1988. The list included the Jarandeshwar sugar mill valued at about Rs.600 crore, a Rs.250-crore resort in Goa, an office in Mumbai belonging to Ajit Pawar's son and valued at about Rs.25 crore, and a Rs.20-crore residential flat in New Delhi. The list included 27 lots of land across Maharashtra valued at Rs.500 crore. The department also revealed that it had found unaccounted income of about Rs.184 crore after searching the premises of two real estate company offices.

In a statement, the Income Tax Department said: "The preliminary analysis of the flow of funds indicated that there has been an introduction of unaccounted funds in the group by way of various dubious methods like introduction of bogus shares premium, suspicious unsecured loans, receipt of unsubstantiated advance for certain services, collusive arbitration deals out of non-existent disputes." While no specific name was mentioned, the statement said, "It has been observed that such suspicious flow of funds has taken place with the involvement of an influential family in Maharashtra."



**ASHOK CHAVAN**, Public Works Department Minister, is also under the scanner.

THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES





**MAHARASHTRA** Governor Bhagat Singh Koshiyari flanked by Devendra Fadnis and Ajit Pawar, who were sworn in as Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister respectively, in Mumbai on November 23, 2019.

The Pawar family has been given 90 days to show that its members are the legitimate owners of the properties. There is also the E.D. probe into the Jarandeshwar Sahakari Sugar Karkhana for an alleged Rs.750-crore mismanaged mortgage.

On November 3, Ajit Pawar's office said that none of the properties were linked to him and that the Central agency had not sent any notice on this count. His office also said that reports of attachment of assets were planted in the media and were "baseless, inconsistent with facts and motivated by slander.... Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar has nothing to do with the action of the Income Tax Department.... We appeal to the media to check their facts before reporting any news and not fall prey to any propaganda."

#### THE MOTIVATION

While due process will reveal the truth in these allegations, what needs to be explored is the motivation behind them. They seem to be meant to hit out at Ajit Pawar personally and the entire Pawar clan as also other Ministers. The final goal seems to be to oust the MVA from power, and what better way to do this than hammer away at Sharad Pawar who is not only the architect of the MVA but also the glue that keeps it together.

The alleged accusations can be seen in the context of the upcoming local body elections. The case against senior NCP leader and former Home Minister Anil Deshmukh, who is being investigated by the E.D. and the CBI in extortion and money laundering cases, has provided more fuel for the opposition.

Ashok Chavan of the Congress, who is the Public Works Department Minister, is also under the scanner. In October, the Income Tax Department questioned offi-

cials of the Buldana Urban Cooperative Credit Society over suspected irregularities in loans given to a sugar factory linked to Ashok Chavan. On November 7, the Income Tax Department froze 54 crore deposits in the credit society citing irregularities in adhering to KYC norms. A press note issued by the Central Board of Direct Taxes said: "The Chairman, CMD and the manager of the branch, could not explain the source of cash deposits and accepted that these were done at the behest of one of the directors of the bank, who is a prominent local businessman engaged in trading of grains. The account opening forms were filled in by the bank staff and they have put their signature or thumb impression."

In the rarefied world of the Pawars and various government investigative agencies, the battle over alleged irregularities can possibly be sustained for long. But the implications of the machinations are immediate and severe for sugarcane farmers who sell their produce to the mills.

Attaching the Jarandeshwar mill could mean uncertainty for the 50,000-odd sugarcane farmers in the region. Will the sugar factory accept their produce? Will it be allowed to crush the cane sold by them? The Jarandeshwar mill has a crushing capacity of 7,500 tonnes a day. This capacity was recently increased to 10,000 tonnes a day. In the last season, more than 14 lakh tonnes were crushed. This season, the mill was registered to crush 20 lakh tonnes. There is, however, a problem with payment. In the last season, the total fair and remunerative price to be paid to all cane growers was Rs.420 crore but the factory paid only Rs.402 crore. This led to the Sugar Commissioner withholding the crushing licence. The payment could not be made because the E.D. had attached the bank accounts of the mills. □



# Goa expedition

The Trinamool Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party are both aiming to gain a foothold in Goa, but they may not find it easy to **convince the Goan voter** even though the electorate is fed up with the Congress and the BJP. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

MASSIVE HOARDINGS OF TRINAMOOL Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal can be spotted along the highway that connects Goa's southern and northern parts. For a State where the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dominate the political landscape, it is nothing short of shocking for local residents to see political parties from other parts of the country attempt to gain a foothold in Goa, where the Assembly election is scheduled to be held in February 2022. However, within days the hoardings, particularly the faces of the leaders, were blackened. It could have been either the handiwork of local residents or a petty message from rival political parties, but a resident told *Frontline* that those who know Goa will realise that the main message is: outsiders are not welcome.

The people of the State are fiercely proud of their identity and will not easily allow non-Goans to make inroads. The TMC and the AAP may have a plan by coming to Goa, but unless their strategists understand the unique ethos of the tiny coastal State, they will struggle to open their account.

A senior political leader of a national party who is based in Panaji said: "Goa, with its 40-seat Legislative Assembly, is considered an easy State to break into. Constituencies are small, therefore it will not require huge resources to fight an election. This is why the TMC and the AAP are looking at Goa. It's a State that will help realise national ambitions without too much effort, or so they think. Until now, neither party has found a credible Goan face to lead it in the State. This is crucial for victory."

He added: "Goa certainly needs a shake-up. The Congress and the BJP are doing nothing for the State and the people are frustrated with politicians hopping from party to party. Even now the Congress, which has a huge support base, has not put a face to its leadership in Goa."

**WEST BENGAL CHIEF MINISTER** Mamata Banerjee with veteran tennis player Leander Paes, who joined the TMC, at a press conference in Panaji on October 29.

The pandemic has taken its toll on the economy, especially tourism. Change is required, but it has to be from a genuine and solid party. Unfortunately, in Goa it has come down to a numbers game and that is what these other players are exploiting."

Analysts said that even if the TMC did not win a large number of seats, just gaining recognition as a political party in Goa would help it in its aspirations to become a national party ahead of the 2024 general election. The TMC needs to be recognised as a State party in at least four States before it can qualify as a national party. Also,



PTI





ATISH POMBURDEKAR

**DELHI CHIEF MINISTER** Arvind Kejriwal addressing a public meeting in Panaji on May 22, 2016.

it must secure 6 per cent of the total vote polled in each of the States where it contests elections. The analysts said that Goa's small size may help the TMC achieve this condition.

In the case of the Delhi-based AAP, the party could play kingmaker similar to the way Goa Forward (GF) and the Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP), two

prominent regional parties, have done in the past, since Goa is a State where every seat matters. The AAP has been looking at expanding its national footprint, and Goa and Gujarat appear to be the two States targeted for this plan.

#### THE TMC OPTION

It was after her spectacular victory in West Bengal that Mamata Banerjee announced the TMC's pan-India expansion plans, which includes Goa, Tripura, Assam, Meghalaya and Uttar Pradesh. She was categorical about wanting to fight in the national arena and claimed that the TMC was the only hope against the BJP juggernaut. In late October, Mamata Banerjee landed in Goa on a three-day tour. Local residents said that most of the hoardings featuring her had been taken down by then. Mamata Banerjee did refer to the vandalism, saying it was pettiness shown by an insecure BJP.

Naming the Goa campaign for the 2022 Assembly election as "Goenchi Navi Sakal" (Goa's new dawn), Mamata Banerjee in her first address to the people of Goa said: "I am not an outsider and I do not want to become CM.... I am here to help you." Apparently, the TMC's strategist, Prashant Kishor, who steered the party to its outstanding win in West Bengal, and a team from his organisation I-PAC (Indian Political Action Committee) are camping in Goa to do demographic groundwork, recruit candidates and eventually launch the TMC's campaign.

Yatish Naik, a newly inducted member of TMC-Goa, told *Frontline*: "The people of Goa are fed up with the BJP. There is a complete collapse of administration, the economy is in poor condition, and unemployment levels are increasing. They are looking for a credible alternative and the TMC is here to give that."

He added: "The older parties have betrayed the people of the State. They have lost their shine. We need fresh blood. Obviously, we have to work very hard to earn the trust of Goans and to find the right candidates, but we are not outsiders as the narrative is being spun. By that logic, even the Congress and BJP are outsiders."

The TMC's big catch is Congress veteran and former Chief Minister Luizinho Faleiro. He has some influence in South Goa but is not seen as a tall leader.

The actor Nafisa Ali made a big splash by joining TMC-Goa and the party expects her star power to have an effect on voters. Analysts said that with Prashant Kishor at the helm, one could be sure that the party's choice of candidates in the run-up to the election would be decided cleverly and carefully. Yatish Naik said that the TMC was in the process of forming its organisation in Goa. The party would reveal more about its election plank in the coming weeks, he added.

#### THE AAP'S PROMISES

The AAP will definitely contest 15 to 17 seats out of the 40, an AAP insider told *Frontline*. In 2017, the party contested 36 seats but won none. It did, however, win 6.3 per cent of the vote share, which was more than GF,







**LUIZINHO FALEIRO**, former Goa Chief Minister and Congress veteran, joined the Trinamool Congress in the presence of senior TMC leader Subrata Mukherjee and general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, in Kolkata on September 29.

which won three seats. The source said: “The strategy this time would be to invest in constituencies where they stand a good chance. If they win up to 10 seats, they could turn out to be kingmakers, a role coveted by the regional parties.” Antonio D’Silva, a party worker in Parra village in North Goa district, said that the AAP’s approach was to poach disgruntled Congress and BJP politicians who felt neglected by their parties. In the past few months, the AAP has managed to rope in Dayanand Narvekar, a former Deputy Chief Minister; Puti Goankar, leader of the Goa Mining People’s Front; and Dominic Gauncar, a well-known rights activist and zilla parishad member. Antonio D’Silva said: “There are many local politicians who are looking to see which would suit them better—the TMC or the AAP.”

Meanwhile, Kejriwal appears to have his own strategy. On recent visits to the State, he made a bunch of populist promises that did not seem to have received the response he expected. At a press conference in November, Kejriwal said that if voted to power, the AAP government would sponsor pilgrimages to Ayodhya for Hindus, Velankanni for Christians, Ajmer Sharif for Muslims and Shirdi for anyone who wished to visit. He said that he had introduced the pilgrimage scheme in Delhi and claimed it was a success.

In September, Kejriwal promised 80 per cent reservation to local people in private companies. He also pledged a monthly allowance of Rs.3,000 to any family where no member is employed. Furthermore, he promised each household 300 units of free electricity under his administration. More recently, Kejriwal said that he would provide better education and health care in Goa.

A social worker pointed out that Goa was much more progressive than Delhi and had already achieved a high level of education, health care and electricity in its vil-

lages. He said that Kejriwal ought to work on employment and the economy. A Goan political journalist said: “To begin with, neither the TMC nor the AAP has a strong ideology. And other than a few veteran Goan Congress politicians, neither does the Goan politician. They are generally opportunistic and everyone believes he can be the Chief Minister. The vision and leadership that was present in former Chief Minister Pratap Singh Rane’s period is seriously lacking. They may go on about outsiders but in the end it will be a numbers game, with regional parties such as the MGP and the GF playing kingmakers as we witnessed in 2017. Moreover, in this effort to defeat the BJP, they are weakening the Congress or splitting that vote. In Goa, it would be advisable to work with the Congress if you want to beat the BJP.”

#### NUMBERS GAME

In 2017, the Congress won 17 seats, the BJP 13, the MGP three, the GF three, independents three and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) one. Although the Congress won the public mandate, the BJP reacted quickly by coopting the MGP and GF to cross the halfway mark. It formed the government with the regional parties and the independents, but kicked them out two years later when it managed to poach 10 Congress MLAs. It had also won three byelections in 2019 and thus had a brute majority in the House.

Vijay Sardesai, leader of the GF, who was reeling from the back-stabbing, proclaimed that he would work towards destroying the BJP, which he said had done nothing for the State but play dirty politics. There were strong rumours that Sardesai would join the TMC, but he is still holding his cards close to his chest. A businessman in Goa said: “Sardesai apparently is the one to watch out for. He has a vendetta but he is also a shrewd and competent politician.” □



# Ready to plough on

The agitation demanding the repeal of three contentious farm laws, which began at Delhi's borders on November 26, 2020, is not only the longest peasant struggle in the history of India but also a secular, democratic, pan-India movement that has managed to hold its ground for an entire year. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI



MANVENDRA VASHIST/PTI

**A RAIL ROKO** by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha in Bahadurgarh, Haryana, on October 18. Farmers blocked the railway tracks demanding the dismissal and arrest of Union Minister Ajay Mishra in connection with the October 3 violence in Lakhimpur Kheri.

ON November 26, the farmers' protest against three farm laws—Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act and Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020—will complete one full year. For the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), the broad front leading the protest from the borders of Delhi, it marks a major milestone. The SKM itself comprises around 500 peasant and farmer organisations across the country.

There has been no other peaceful movement of a pan-India nature with a strong secular and democratic character in recent times that managed to hold its ground for a year. Farmer leaders said that there is no evidence of a similar movement either in pre- or post-independent India. The five protest sites on national highways at Singhu, Tikri, Ghazipur, Palwal and Shahjahanpur have become synonymous with the farmers' movement. The movement has drawn visitors and sympathisers from all over the country and abroad. It would not be incorrect to say that the protest would not have sustained itself without a fair degree of support from the local populace. It also has the support of all the opposition parties, which is a unique feature in itself.

The siege of Delhi that began with a Dilli Chalo campaign last



November against the three farm laws, the Electricity (Amendment) Bill and the Ordinance on Air Quality Management in the Delhi-National Capital Region has had its share of vicissitudes and ups and downs. The protest was never intended to be a siege in the first place. All that the farmer and peasant organisations wanted to do was to march to Delhi's Ram Lila grounds where large-scale protests are normally held but they were not allowed to do so. The decision for a "Dilli Chalo march" was taken in view of a widespread and cumulative resentment against the three farm laws.

The protests began first in Punjab from June 2020 onwards, spearheaded by various factions of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). Soon, it spread to neighbouring Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, with the BKU and the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) spearheading the protest there. Farmers in Uttarakhand and later eastern Uttar Pradesh joined in. Madhya Pradesh followed suit. In Maharashtra, where the AIKS had conducted successful struggles in 2018 and 2019, including the long march of one lakh farmers from Nasik to Mumbai, the farm laws posed a fresh challenge which the farmers were ready to take on. Farmer and peasant organisations affiliated to parties such as the Nationalist Congress Party and the Shiv Sena also lent their support.

#### UNITED AND DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

This is the longest peasant struggle in the history of India, said Hannan Mollah, general secretary of the AIKS. It symbolises one of the most united and democratic of movements. On core issues, 500 organisations came together. A general body meeting (GBM) was held on October 27, 2020, at Gurdwara Rakabkanj for two days. Every movement develops fissures, but it did not happen in this case. Any struggle or movement also risks turning violent. Yet, despite the size and duration of the movement, there was no violence. Hannan Mollah said: "We faced a series of attacks right from the begin-

ning. They labelled us as Khalistanis, Pakistanis, communists, Maoists, Pakistanis, Chinese. Nothing was left to the imagination. The *Annadaatas*, or the feeders of the nation, were called everything under the sun. Not only the country but the whole world knows that this was just propaganda."

On January 26, the SKM decided that it would take out a kisan parade to mark their protest. Tractors with colourful bunting were prepared. The routes were discussed with the Delhi Police and mutually agreed upon. Yet, a contingent of farmers was mysteriously allowed to reach Red Fort where some of them hoisted a flag of a religious denomination. This was the trigger. The nationalist media, along with the Bharatiya Janata Party leadership, lost little time in decrying the incident and hinting that the farmers were anti-national. It was a setback to the protest as it conveyed an impression that the farmers' movement was unruly and prone to violence. The leadership also got temporarily demoralised as they were unsure of what this would lead to. The event became the pretext to evict farmers from the sites of protest, a move that backfired badly. When a huge posse of policemen descended on the protesters, threatening to evict them, BKU leader Rakesh Tikait tearfully appealed to farmers in western Uttar Pradesh to join in large numbers at the Ghazipur protest site. The tide turned as hordes of farmers along with their families responded to Tikait's call and arrived at the Ghazipur site while the Punjab unions sent food and human reinforcements from Singhu and Tikri to "strengthen" the Ghazipur border.

Hannan Mollah said: "We faced several conspiracies too. One was the event of January 26 which farmers had nothing to do with. The gentleman who hoisted a religious flag on the Red Fort was found photographed with top BJP leaders of the country. The person who was responsible for killing a Nihang at Singhu border was found photographed with a senior minister."

The farmers' movement got sup-



port from all the 10 Central trade unions, including during the three Bharat bandhs. Workers and peasants fought unitedly for the repeal of the farm laws since their adversary was the same, a government that was pro-corporate sector. There were other meeting points too. The industrial class and unorganised sector workers have been opposed to the labour codes and the farmers against the farm laws. In both instances, it was felt, favours to the corporate sector and big industry was involved. Hannan Mollah said: "The movement received support from Pravasi Indians and four to five heads of state. Some of them discussed it in their Parliaments, but our government could not do so."

#### 'GOVERNMENT DECLARES WAR ON US'

"When we declared we'd come to Delhi, the government declared war on us," said Hannan Mollah. The SKM had decided it would march to Ram Lila grounds but would not confront the government. "But the government didn't allow us. It blocked the entry points to Delhi and attacked us with water cannons, lathis and even dug up the national highway so that tractors wouldn't be able to go through," he said. Images of farmers removing huge cement blocks with makeshift tools and





SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

**WOMEN FARMERS** commemorate “International Working Women’s Day” at Tikri border in Delhi on March 8. The breaking of gender barriers has been one of the biggest achievements of the farmers’ protest, and women of all age groups have actively participated in all Samyukta Kisan Morcha programmes.

tractors were aired on television. It was an unequal battle, with the SKM at a huge disadvantage. It faced three hostile governments—the BJP-led State governments of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, and the Central government—determined not to let them reach Delhi. “We decided wherever they stopped us, we’d sit there,” he said. Pitching tents was not easy. The farmers endured close to zero degrees in winter, 45 degrees centigrade in summer and almost 22 days of rain during the monsoon. Nearly 650 to 700 farmers have died since the agitation began. But, Mollah said, not a word was uttered in Parliament by the treasury benches.

Yet, in order to sustain the momentum the protest had to evolve. There were three Bharat bandhs, two rail roko campaigns and several district and block-level programmes throughout the year. Hannan Mollah said: “We had no example to go by on how to conduct and sustain this movement. We had to innovate to maintain the tempo. That is why it is historic. This movement also challenged the identity politics pushed by the BJP-RSS. In 2013, the worst communal riots took place in Muzaf-

farnagar. Sixty-seven people were killed. Jats and Muslims were pitted against each other. They became enemies. In this movement we have seen an unprecedented coming together of both communities. At the largest ever rally held in Muzafarnagar, in October, they admitted that they were victims of a conspiracy. They said they’d never allow such riots to take place and reasserted their identities as farmers and peasants and not as Hindu or Muslim. A democratic secular identity emerged from this movement which was historic.”

The SKM was formed on October 27. Yet prior to that, another broad front called the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC) had been at the forefront, flagging issues of loan waivers, indebtedness among farmers, and so on. The killing of six farmers in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, in 2017 spurred the formation of the AIKSCC. That year, farmers’ organisations met in Delhi at a national convention and decided that individual struggles would not lead to any results and that a more coordinated effort was needed. In June 2017,

the AIKSCC was formed. Some 250 organisations joined in. From organising joint protests in Delhi, including a farmers’ parliament, it moved a private members’ Bill too for legislating the minimum support price (MSP), farm support and agricultural loans. When the three ordinances that went on to become the farm laws were passed in June 2020, the AIKSCC conducted protests even as the 32-odd farmer organisations in Punjab began their own independent agitation.

It was a meeting of two broad fronts, said Hannan Mollah. “The demands were the same; the adversary was also common. It was meaningless to do it separately. It was felt a joint programme would make it stronger. On October 27, we took the initiative to organise a meeting in Delhi at Gurdwara Rakabganj. The Punjab unions joined in. It was here that we decided that a common platform needed to be there. That was the birth of the SKM,” he said. The government meanwhile projected that it was only a north India-based movement, confined to a few States and led by big landed farmers. Mollah said that the decisions of the SKM were also implemented by States other than those whose farmers were leading the protest at the borders of Delhi. Farmers had realised everywhere that they were not getting the MSP for their crops. “The expression of their protest has been different but they are part of the SKM,” he said. It was no longer a “north India” protest.

#### **APOLITICAL STRUCTURE**

The SKM does not invite political leaders on its stage. Neither has it endorsed any political party. Its organisational structure is also unique. It does not have posts like president, general secretary, and so on. All decisions are taken by a core group of ten members, discussed further in a general body meeting and then conveyed for execution. Maintaining political equidistance, it has declared that it will not campaign for any particular party in the forthcoming Assembly elections but will exhort its members not to vote for the BJP,



who it says is the main culprit behind the *kaailey kanoon* or “black laws”.

Joginder Singh Ugrahan, who spearheads the largest contingent of peasants, agricultural workers and women at the Tikri border, said that the peaceful nature and the unity of so many sections of society is one of the unique features of the movement. “It has become a symbol for the struggles of all oppressed sections. It is not a farmers’ movement alone. It has become a people’s movement,” he said. The repression by the government and resistance to it was the second unique feature. “The government didn’t leave any stone unturned in failing the movement. But none of its plans worked. Caste and communal fissures were sought to be planted. They also tried to lure farmers by claims of a higher MSP which also failed,” he said.

The government has to date not uttered a word for the farmers who died. Leave alone compensation, he said, not a word of sympathy was uttered. Instead the government had harassed people who helped set up *langars* (community kitchens), he said, referring to the cancellation of long-term visas of some Persons of Indian Origin as well their Overseas Citizens of India cards. “We used to only hear that the BJP was like this but after the Lakhimpur Kheri [Uttar Pradesh] incident, we know this government and its leaders are capable of anything,” he said. No action, he said, was taken against the statements of the Haryana Chief Minister who was on record exhorting people to respond in tit-for-tat fashion or for that matter of Ajay Kumar Mishra, Union Minister of State for Home, who had issued threatening statements a few days prior to the Lakhimpur Kheri incident.

#### **FARMERS NOT AVERSE TO DIALOGUE**

For ten long months, the SKM has had no meeting with the government even though it has expressed its desire for a dialogue to resolve the imbroglio. Hannan Mollah said: “We were for negotiations from day one. The government only does propaganda to show that it is sympathetic.

But has shown little interest in talking to us. It wants to defeat the movement by prolonging it. When everything failed, they have now begun to resort to physical annihilation,” he said referring to the killings in Lakhimpur Kheri, Karnal in Haryana and Darang in Assam. On October 3, a day after Gandhi Jayanti, four protesting farmers and a journalist were mowed down by a convoy that belonged to Ajay Kumar Mishra in Lakhimpur Kheri.

Meanwhile, the crisis for the farmers and the agrarian community continues. Recently, a section of the media was agog with data on declining farmer suicides released by the National Crime Records Bureau’s (NCRB) report on Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India. It said that there were 302 suicides in 2019 and 257 in 2020. Sukhpal Singh, Principal Economist at Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana, debunked this. He said it was an underestimation. His own study, with combined efforts from three universities in Punjab, for an earlier period, did not show any such trend. The situation had, if anything, only worsened.

According to the NCRB itself, each day, 28 people dependent on farming died by suicide but it did not give the reasons for the suicides. While the 2015 NCRB report, he said, had mentioned reasons for the farm suicides, the recent one did not do so. The PAU-led study was based on the census of six districts of Ludhiana, Moga, Bhatinda, Sangrur, Barnala and Mansa. He said that as per the NCRB report, between 2014 and 2018, there were 1,082 suicides of farmers and agricultural labourers in Punjab. The PAU door-to-door study had found that the number of suicides in the six districts studied was three and a half times higher (3,740) than the all-India figure given by the NCRB for the same period. There were 12,729 villages in Punjab and the PAU study was based on 2,518 villages. “Had we done the study for the whole of Punjab, the figures would have been much higher,” he said. Sukhpal Singh said: “Declining farm productivity is one

of the prime reasons for the suicides of farmers and agricultural labourers. The widening gap between income and expenditure due to the rising costs of cultivation and comparatively lower crop prices are pushing farming families towards economic distress. Many small and marginal farmers have quit farming. Each day 2,500 farmers are being pushed out of farming,” he said. The NCRB data, he said, were based on police records, which were not representative of the actual numbers. To avoid legal complications, cremations were performed without post-mortem.

#### **MARCHING ON**

To observe one year of their agitation, the SKM has given a call to strengthen all five sites of protest and to hold big gatherings in all State capitals. The trade unions also have decided to observe the first anniversary of their Bharat bandh on that day. On November 29, the farmers have planned a march to Parliament. The struggle for a legal guarantee of procurement and to give a legal framework to the MSP continues. The farmers know that the two are inseparable. Legalising the MSP would mean nothing if there was no guaranteed procurement. Their struggle, one could say, is for “Bread and Roses”, a song that exemplified the struggle of women textile workers in Massachusetts, United States, more than a century ago, wherein they appealed for fair wages and better working conditions. The workers, they sang, must have bread but roses too.

The farmers’ protest will undoubtedly have an impact in the forthcoming round of Assembly elections next year. It is possible the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government might do some damage control before that, although politically, things might have reached a point of no return owing to its own intransigence. The farmers, on their part, are in no mood to give up, having come this far and having lost several of their compatriots. Which way all this will turn out is anybody’s guess. □



# Against the grain

The Narendra Modi government's grandiose plan to distribute rice fortified with iron through the public distribution system is all set to take off **despite the concerns** about its efficacy, cost-effectiveness, toxicity due to excess iron, dietary diversity, and conflict of interest.

BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

IN his Independence Day speech on August 15, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged malnutrition as a major impediment to the development of women and children and declared that rice would be fortified under various government schemes by 2024. The plan is to initially distribute fortified rice through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Mid Day Meal (MDM) scheme and later expand it to the entire public distribution system (PDS). In 2018, the Food and Safety Standards of India (FSSAI) had issued standards for fortifying five staples—wheat flour, rice, milk, oil and salt—with iron and other micronutrients.

Of late, however, the focus has shifted to iron deficiency, on the basis of a comparative study of the prevalence of anaemia in the fourth and fifth National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). As 65 per cent of the Indian population consume rice, fortification of rice with iron has taken centre stage.

Although public health experts, paediatricians and clinicians agree that anaemia poses a serious challenge to health, there are doubts as to whether iron-fortified rice is the best way to go about it. It has also been pointed out that if the decades-old iron tablet supplementation programme has not worked, there is little reason to believe that food fortification will, given the challenges in-

volved on both demand and supply sides. Therefore, some argue that rather than mass fortification of cereals, the Anaemia Mukta Bharat programme (Anaemia-free India) and the Poshan Abhiyaan (Nutrition campaign) under the National Health Mission should focus on dietary diversity, animal protein, and easy access to affordable diet. This initiative is also expected to boost the

cultivation and consumption of millets, which are richer in micronutrients and other vitamins than rice and wheat.

The grandiose plans for rice fortification are to take off despite the several concerns raised about the efficacy of its implementation, cost-effectiveness, toxicity due to excess iron, conflict of interest, and dietary diversity.



PICHUMANIK.

**AT A RATION SHOP** in Shenoy Nagar, Chennai, in January. The government's plan is to initially distribute fortified rice through the Integrated Child Development Services and the Mid Day Meal scheme and later expand it to the entire public distribution system.



Significantly, pilot schemes for iron fortification launched by the Food and Public Distribution department were not successful. Sudhanshu Pandey, Secretary, Department of Food and Public Distribution, admitted this at a webinar organised by the Bharat Krishak Samaj, an advocacy-based farmers' organisation, on October 25. Arun Singhal, the Chief Executive Officer of FSSAI, too, accepted that the pilots had not taken off.

#### PILOT STUDIES

The Centrally sponsored pilot scheme for fortification of rice and its distribution through the PDS was launched in 2019. This was for a period of three years with a budgetary outlay of Rs.174.6 crore. One district each in 15 States was identified and five States started the distribution of fortified rice. In November 2020, it was decided to scale up the programme to include all districts. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) was tasked with developing a comprehensive plan for the procurement and distribution of fortified rice in all districts under the ICDS and MDM scheme from 2021-22, with special emphasis on 112 aspirational districts.

According to a Press Information Bureau release, a meeting was held at the NITI Aayog on November 3, 2020, involving government departments and private stakeholders such as Tata Trusts, World Food Programme, PATH and Nutrition International to discuss supply chain and other logistical requirements to scale up rice fortification and distribution for the ICDS and MDM scheme in the aspirational districts.

At this meeting it was agreed that in order to achieve the goal, there was a need to increase the supply of fortified rice kernels (FRK), whose availability at that time was a meagre 15,000 metric tonnes (MT) a year.

**MIDDAY MEAL** at a school in Dharwad, Karnataka, a file picture. A few experts disagree with the government's push for rice fortification saying that the biggest myth was to equate under-size with under-nutrition.

To cover the 112 aspirational districts, nearly 130 lakh MT of fortified rice would be required; for this the FRK supply capacity in the country needed to go up to nearly 1.3 lakh MT. If the entire PDS (National Food Security Act) rice supply of about 350 lakh MT had to be fortified, an uninterrupted supply of 3.5 lakh MT of FRK was required.

According to the PIB release, nearly 28,000 rice mills in the country needed blending machines to mix FRK with normal rice. The FCI was

asked to tie up with rice mills in different regions for investments in this regard. The FCI's operational readiness was expected to help increase procurement and supply of fortified rice in a phased manner from 2021-22.

However, the pilot studies for the fortification programme, which were meant to evaluate efficacy and toxicity, were a failure. There were design issues and communication strategy gaps. Therefore, the outcomes of nutritional deficiency levels



SURESH L.N.



and iron toxicity were unknown. Stating that there were fundamental problems with the pilot studies, both logistical and on the supply side, Sudhanshu Pandey said at the webinar that “one did not have the luxury of time to fix all collateral problems and then take a decision”. Many people, he said, had given advice but none had offered a solution. The government had to take a decision, he stated.

The pilot programme, which began in 15 districts of 15 States, was

eventually scaled down to 11 districts in 11 States. He said an ecosystem was necessary for the supply of micronutrient mix and the production of FRK. Besides this, the equipment for fortification and blending had to be standardised. Moreover, the fortified kernels had to look as natural as the local rice; otherwise it would be identified as a foreign element and removed while cleaning the rice before cooking.

If FRK manufacturing had gone up from 15,000 MT a year ago to 1.6

lakh MT now, Sudhanshu Pandey said, it was because of “certainty of policy”. Even though the pilot projects had not taken off, there was enough data on the shelf life of the rice and the efficacy of the programme, he said. In his presentation he made it clear that the government wanted to, in its “certainty of policy” framework, give a clear indication to both pre-mix suppliers about the quantities they were required to produce and FRK manufacturers about the kind of investment required of them.

Arun Singhal said as sufficient time had elapsed, a change of strategy was necessary. Even though rice was the staple for 65 per cent of the population, only 3.5 per cent of the rice produced had been fortified. By 2024, all rice in the PDS would be fortified according to the new initiative, he said, under the new policy initiative. He went on to say that he had not come across any documented cases of iron toxicity anywhere in the world. FSSAI, he said, had established science-based standards and fixed levels of fortification to avoid any toxicity. Even if there was, it could be clinically managed, he said at the webinar.

#### IN DEFENCE OF FORTIFICATION

Defending the policy at the webinar, NITI Aayog member Ramesh Chand argued that the decline in per capita consumption of cereals was not offset by an increase in consumption of nutrients elsewhere. He admitted that per capita consumption of cereals and pulses had declined and said that if the incomes of the poor went up, they were most likely to spend them on food that was not necessarily nutritious. Fortification was the only solution in the short term, he said, as improving nutrition by creating awareness could take time. Besides, producing the 30 odd millet varieties developed by the Indian Council for Agricultural Research could take up to a decade. Neither the FSSAI nor the NITI Aayog specified how short this term would be although others speculated that it would not be less than five years.





According to Arun Singhal, there was no evidence of diet improving despite rising incomes. Supplementation, he argued, was targeted and had a limited reach, whereas fortification was short term but had a wider impact; and dietary diversity was long term but it was the most sustainable. "We cannot give up fortification as an approach," he said categorically. He said the FSSAI had been advocating fortification of cereals in the ICDS and MDM programmes. It was also the Women and Child Development Ministry's goal to make fortification mandatory in both schemes by March 2022.

#### WHAT INDIANS EAT

The general assumption was that Indians were not eating right and not eating enough and the only way to address this problem was to fortify rice with iron and possibly with other micronutrients such as zinc and selenium. Dietary diversity was at the bottom of the solution pyramid.

However, no comparative studies have been done to determine the difference in efficacy between those who consumed fortified rice and those who did not. Nor were there any toxicity studies. The only evidence was that anaemic levels were worsening.

The National Nutrition Monitoring Bureaux, with their extensive networks across the country, had been done away with several years ago. Therefore, policymakers had little idea of what or how much India ate except that they thought under-nutrition and over-nutrition were the two sides of what they knew as malnutrition.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Ajay Jakhar, chairperson of the Bharat Krishak Samaj, said: "It needs a wider range of consultation not only to get the counter-views but also to decide the transition. The science is still grey, there are two points to consider. If the government is of the opinion that it is a transition, then what is the design to ending the transition? Whether it should be targeted or universal also needs to be discussed."

According to T. Nand Kumar,

former Secretary to the Government of India and ex-chairperson of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), fortification could be one of the options. The ICDS and MDM schemes were probably more appropriate instruments to address child nutrition, he said, but then it could be addressed in the form of dietary diversity. "The logical thing would be to look at impact studies. This will tell us whether the intervention was correct or not. It is only rational to look at the results of the pilot, not to reject them, but to improve the design," he told *Frontline*.

The primary commodities distributed through the PDS are rice and wheat. Wheat flour or *atta* can be fortified, but there are logistic issues as the entire quantity of wheat has to first go through *chakkis* (flour mills). Storage is also an issue. Said Nand Kumar: "Many people prefer to grind the wheat themselves. Rice then becomes the typical candidate for fortification. If one looks at the poverty profile of States, you will see most of them are rice-eating States. There is a colour difference also between varieties of rice. The Odisha variety is not like that of Punjab. If people see rice of different colour, it will most likely be regarded as foreign matter and thrown out. I do have reservations both on the science and the efficacy of implementation."

He also expressed concern about the usage of the term "continuity of business" in fortification discussions. "We keep hearing this now and then. If this is the case, one will not wait for pilot studies to come through. But this should not be a matter of weightage as one is addressing an issue of under-nutrition. I am against mandatory fortification though am sure we are heading towards that," he said. In his opinion, mandatory and large-scale fortification would ultimately be irreversible.

In Nand Kumar's opinion, the fortification of milk and edible oils would also be problematic because it would eventually lead to branded products, and most poor people, the intended beneficiaries of the fortification, did not buy branded milk or packaged oil. He said the govern-

ment could reintroduce pulses and edible oils in the PDS in order to ensure dietary diversity. "Pulses can be given [through the PDS] or a cash subsidy, just as the gas subsidy," he said.

#### DOCTORS' OBJECTIONS

H.P.S. Sachdev, a leading paediatrician, disagrees with the government's push for rice fortification. The biggest myth, he said, was to equate under-size with under-nutrition. Some countries use cast iron utensils to reduce anaemia, he said. Extra iron, he claims, will only harm the vulnerable poor who are already at risk because of their elevated serum ferritin levels. "As a clinician I will not prescribe iron to those suffering from haemoglobinopathy, infections or thalassemia. The sub-clinical harm of fortified rice has to be looked at," he said.

According to the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey, he said, children in the 5-19 age group had shown biomarkers indicative of early non-communicable diseases. In an article titled "When the cure might become the malady", which was published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in July 2021, Sachdev, along with Anura V. Kurpad of the St. John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru, Arun Gupta, a leading paediatrician, and others, argues that while food fortification has its place in alleviating specific nutrition deficiencies, it may be overdone in response to the apparent failure of other interventions. The authors contend that nutrients, like medicines, can be harmful if ingested in excess. Before supplying more iron, it was important to understand why the iron supplementation programme had not worked, he said.

According to the authors, the layering of multiple intervention programmes may emerge from incorrect measurements of the risk of nutrient inadequacy in the population or incorrect biomarker cut-offs used to evaluate the extent of such deficiencies. For example, using potentially higher universal haemoglobin cut-offs to diagnose anaemia among In-





THE HINDU ARCHIVES

**DOCTORS** examine a pregnant tribal woman for anaemia, at the public health centre in Pittabongaram, Adilabad, Telangana, in June 2020. Public health experts, paediatricians and clinicians agree that anaemia poses a serious challenge to health, but doubts remain as to whether iron-fortified rice is the best way to combat it.

dian children and adolescents may not be the correct marker as it could be much lower than the level recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). With the proposed cut-off, they say, anaemia prevalence among children would fall from the current 30 per cent to 11 per cent. Capillary or finger-prick blood samples to estimate anaemia could underestimate HB levels compared with venous blood samples. This, they argue, explained the wide difference between the anaemia prevalence rates (in children 1-4 years) between the NFHS 4 and the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS), which was 56 and 44 per cent respectively. Both Sachdev and Kurpad are members of the NITI Aayog's National Technical Board on Nutrition and on FSSAI expert committees.

According to the researchers, the lack of response of anaemia to iron fortification was not uniform and could be because of other nutrient deficiencies and inflammation. The study also estimated the cost of iron fortification to be around \$350 million a year which was in addition to the \$130 million per fiscal for the Anaemia Mukh Bharat programme. The authors argue for a dietary diversity programme with high-quality foods along with limited fortification

if a supplementation programme did not exist concurrently. They warn of three dangers: one, a fixation with a nutrient rather than a broader appraisal of the entire food system; two, an urge to simplify coverage operations and make fortification mandatory and universal; and three, a lack of will to roll back interventions when things improve.

#### COCHRANE REVIEWS

The WHO guidelines on rice fortification with minerals and vitamins as a public health strategy viewed it as a challenge because most iron powders used in food fortification were coloured, resulting in differences between fortified kernels and unfortified ones. According to a Cochrane systematic review of 16 studies, conducted from 2012 to 2017, and cited in the WHO guidelines, rice fortified with iron and other minerals increased iron content but had no effect on anaemia in the general population of those over the age of two. Cochrane reviews, Sachdev said, were recognised internationally as the gold standard for high quality and trustworthiness.

The proponents of fortification argue that as most of India cannot afford a healthy diet and a good number of the population a nutrient-adequate one, fortification of cereals

was the only way out to arrest anaemia. At the webinar, a World Food Programme representative, citing the State of Food Insecurity Report 2020, argued that the cost of a healthy diet was 60 per cent higher than a nutrient-adequate diet and five times the cost of an energy-sufficient diet. Around 78 per cent of India's population could not afford a healthy diet and 39 per cent a nutrient-adequate one. There were, she said, "huge affordability issues".

Across the globe, mandatory rice fortification is prevalent in eight countries and in ten it is voluntary; mandatory wheat fortification is prevalent in 19 countries while in 11 it is voluntary. As many as 67 countries fortify more than three commodities. No public health policy was set in stone, she said, and implementation should begin.

It is well known that there is no recent data on dietary intake. The last dietary intake survey was conducted by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau (NNMB) in 2012. The rice fortification pilot studies were unsuccessful, yet the implementation for the programme is being pushed, more so perhaps because the Prime Minister made the clarification announcement.

Given a range of unresolved issues, it is unclear why the FSSAI and the government were keen to push rice fortification. The FSSAI has a Food Fortification Resource Centre which works with donor and partner organisations. According to Arun Gupta, a paediatrician by training and convener of Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest, some of the donors and partners of those organisations had links with the food and nutrients industry.

It is evident that there is nothing short term about the rice fortification plan. It simply cannot be short term given the huge investments that would be made by units preparing the pre-mix and those manufacturing blenders to mix the fortified rice kernels and regular rice. One of the big questions therefore in the fortification debate is "Cui Bono", or who benefits, the answers to which will emerge gradually. □



## One billion doses



AS the Cover Story (November 19) points out, the extravagant celebrations on the country reaching the milestone of administering over one billion cumulative doses of COVID-19 vaccines was part of an attempt to whitewash the government's monumental failures in handling the pandemic.



This pandemic cannot be controlled with just face masks and social distancing or one billion doses. The government should give clarity about the safety of vaccines because hesitancy and doubts about it among the people prevent them from getting vaccinated, leading to an increase in the number of coronavirus patients.

Instead of solving this issue, the government always comes up with platitudes. Misinformation, in particular, can erode people's confidence in vaccines.

India must study the mistakes it made in the process of achieving the one billion-dose milestone and review the performance of its vaccination drive.

**KARAM HUSAIN KHAN**  
MALAPPURAM, KERALA

I AM an 18-year-old student and have not been vaccinated although I travelled about 3,500 km from Uttar Pradesh to Kerala. The government celebrating the 'milestone' in vaccination was brazen and bizarre political propaganda. It will not be an exaggeration to say that this extravagant celebration was a total farce. It is a bit surprising that fear of the vaccine lurks in the country still. The government should shore up stocks of promising antivirals. Despite the fall in the number of COVID-19 cases, India must focus on improving vaccination and treatment for children and youngsters.

**UZAIR AHMED**  
SANJHAK VILLAGE, UTTAR PRADESH

## Hunger index

BY going into denial mode without accepting the hard fact of the country's plummeting rank in the Global Hunger Index, the Indian government is not going to achieve anything ("Hungry nation", November 19). The ameliorative measures the Centre and the States took during the pandemic were too little, too late. The Central government did not even collate credible data on the number of people who had lost their jobs or were driven to penury during the crisis, so its



attempts at chest-thumping are irrational, indeed.

**AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH**  
ARANMULA, KERALA

## Aryan Khan case



NARCOTIC substances have been used in India since the Vedic times ("Stranger than reel life", November 19). Two intoxicating drinks, Soma and Sura, are believed to have been popular during the Vedic age. In these days of turmoil and intense mental conflict, it is not surprising that young people imbibe small quantities of drugs at informal social gatherings. When the government's draconian drug law has failed to break the nexus between the drug trade, Bollywood, politics and the underworld, it is surprising that the Aryan Khan case has been blown out of proportion.

Besides, he was not in possession of drugs and only a small quantity of drugs was recovered from a friend of his. The government openly sells liquor. Bhang, a preparation of cannabis, is sold throughout the country in government-authorised shops. Many countries and some States in the U.S. have legalised marijuana. With Aryan Khan's case drawing unwanted publicity and Sameer Wankhede's investigation methods drawing flak, the Narcotics Control Bureau is losing its credibility.

It is high time the narcotics Act was tweaked to decriminalise the possession or use of a small quantity of drugs.

**KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN**  
CHENNAI

## ANNOUNCEMENT

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



COLUMN

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ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES



C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

# The gaping holes in climate finance

The claim that private capital is “available” to help countries meet their climate change goals not only diverts attention from the problem of inadequate public funding but also drains public funds and, if that happens, it **can harm the climate cause.**

**T**HE world leaders who spoke at the inaugural sessions of the United Nations climate conference in Glasgow (the 26th Conference of the Parties, or COP26) were all on the same page when it came to recognising the urgency of curbing carbon emissions and limiting the level of global warming. But when it came to the nitty-gritty of deciding what needs to be done and by whom, multiple differences emerged.

Principal among those differences was on how much must be mobilised to finance mitigation and adaptation efforts globally by rich countries, which, en route to attaining developed country status and thereafter, are responsible for an overwhelmingly large share of cumulative carbon emissions. Associated differences were on issues relating to the source, forms and use of that finance. Finally, little has been de-



**MARK CARNEY**, the U.N. Special Envoy for Climate Action and Finance, at COP26 on November 3, which was billed as the Finance Day of the climate summit in Glasgow.

livered in Glasgow by way of advance on the quantity or quality of climate finance. Most disappointing was the declaration by developed countries that they would not be able to deliver even on the minimal pledge made in Copenhagen in 2009 of ensuring climate finance to the tune of \$100 billion a year starting from 2020. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that developed countries delivered close to \$80 billion in 2019. The target set for 2020, which was not achieved, has now been pushed to 2023.

This delay will mean that there is no way that over the period 2020-25 developed countries will make available the promised \$600 billion even while all concerned agree that what is needed is not billions but trillions of dollars. This is despite the fact that pledges by individual developed countries are way below what a fair

DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS/AFP



contribution from them should be. According to the Joe Thwaites and Julie Bos of the World Resources Institute: “Three major economies—the United States, Australia and Canada—provided less than half their share of the financial effort in 2018, based on objective indicators such as the size of their economies and their greenhouse gas emissions.”

Developing countries have in fact demanded that the goal should be for developed countries to mobilise \$1.3 trillion annually by way of climate finance. But there is no hope that the gap, however large, is likely to be bridged. Although the 12-year-old promise of \$100 billion by 2020 has not been met, developed countries still seem reticent to beef up volumes. This came through in discussions on a mandated new “collective quantified goal” that was to take that annual figure to significantly higher levels starting from 2025.

In an effort to postpone substantive discussion to fora where the pressure to yield would be lower, developed countries dodged specifying an enhanced figure at COP26 and diverted the discussion to defining the process through which that figure and its contours should be decided. In fact, a number of developed countries do not want the long-term finance agenda to continue under the COP.

The low financing figures reported may themselves be inflated. Some of the climate-specific flows are being delivered by repurposing conventional overseas development assistance and are therefore not additional flows being provided as part

of developed countries’ responsibility to contribute a fair share to global mitigation and adaptation expenditures. Moreover, there is little transparency in identifying how much, if at all, the supported projects contribute to the emission reduction effect even though investment in or lending to them is listed under climate finance contributions. Overall, the definition of climate finance is still in question, with widespread disagreement on what should be included under that head.

Besides quantitative figures—faith in the sanctity of which has been shaken by the failure to meet even the minimal \$100 billion in 2020—there are many other ways in which progress on organising the finance needed to address global warming has fallen short. Most developing countries are stressed by the burden of external debt they currently carry, which rose during the COVID-19-induced crisis, making restructuring or default unavoidable in many cases. This would mean that flows of climate finance cannot be in the form of debt, especially on commercial terms. Grants and concessional finance must constitute a dominant share. But despite the disappointingly small quantity of finance made available, the grant component of that finance remains low. Bangladesh, for example, underlined the fact that even in the case of vulnerable least developed countries as much as two-thirds of climate flows take the form of debt.

Finally, the share of finance for adaptation projects in total climate finance flows is way below the re-

commended 50 per cent. For the poorest among developing countries, which in any case are near-negligible carbon emitters, adaptation and making up for or minimising loss and damage are the real challenges. But the global effort at putting in place mechanisms that assess adaptation requirements and those required to avert, minimise or address loss and damage and direct resources in those directions is severely wanting. In sum, if climate finance trends are indicative, there is little evidence of ambition and real commitment to limit warming to less than 2 °C and as close to 1.5 °C as possible.

## TURNING TO PRIVATE FINANCE

A troubling signal from Glasgow is that, to make up for this huge shortfall in publicly committed (even if not fully publicly funded) climate finance, there is an attempt to shift attention to the major role that private finance can play in the climate space. This highlighting of private finance is surprising, not least because given the likely low returns in a lot of climate spending outside commercially promising areas like renewables, private players are likely to be investment shy. But citing limits to the volume of public finance that can be mobilised and to what it can do, a major role for private finance is seen as unavoidable. So, demonstrating that private finance is willing to step forward is crucial for developed governments reticent about contributing their fair share to address the task at hand.

Almost on cue, on the sidelines of the Glasgow conference, Mark Carney, the U.N. Special Envoy for Climate Action and Finance, attempted to inject an element of optimism into the downbeat conversations inside the venue. The Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ) that he has put together, he declared, has

**MOUNTAINS DEFORESTED** to make way for massive limestone quarries in Ipoh, Perak State, Malaysia, on November 5. Cutting trees both adds carbon dioxide to the air and removes the the earth’s ability to absorb existing carbon dioxide.



AP/PTI





DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS

**ACTIVISTS DRESSED AS WORLD LEADERS** protest against rising water levels, in the Forth and Clyde Canal near Glasgow on November 9 while the COP26 climate summit was under way in the city.

now attracted the support of around 450 private financial institutions that have between them \$130 trillion worth of assets under management. The eagerness of these private players to jump on to the net-zero bandwagon is surprising to say the least.

At the start of 2020, capital with firms committing to the net-zero emissions agenda was just \$5 trillion. That has now risen to \$130 trillion. Given the pledge of these firms to support the climate cause, Carney's claim is that these assets, amounting to about two-fifths of the assets of the global financial system, can now be redirected to deliver at least as much as \$100 trillion of investments that would help ensure a global transition to net zero by 2050. This was not of course a decision of the parties negotiating in Glasgow but an off-conference parallel promise.

It did not take long for sceptical voices to question Carney's claim, alleging that the GFANZ initiative provided a platform for "greenwashing" enthusiasts. Flagging assets under management of financial firms, which are under pressure in the new environment to declare that they are

climate conscious, is deeply problematic. Adding up assets being managed by each is likely to involve double counting since some firms recruit others to identify and make investment decisions on their behalf. In an integrated financial world, the same funds can show up in the books of more than one entity. Even available funds cannot be reallocated at will to climate-friendly projects, given the many considerations that determine the choice of an investment manager's portfolio and the likelihood that some investments are in effect locked in for relatively long periods.

And, finally, private investors looking for yields, even if they are backers of sustainable development goals, are unlikely to back climate-friendly projects if returns elsewhere are better. And, at the moment, high-emission projects in the fossil fuel industry do look attractive. With coal supply short of demand and oil and gas prices rising sharply, it was clear, even as COP26 was under way, that there is much to be gained from investing in carbon-emitting fossil fuels despite the long-term risk of being saddled with stranded assets.

Not surprisingly, the Rainforest Action Network found that 93 banks that had signed the GFANZ pledge had provided \$575 billion of lending or underwriting support to the fossil fuel industry in 2020. And a *Financial Times* investigation found that banks such as BNY Mellon, Barclays and Deutsche Bank have all watered down their pledges to combat climate change and continue their financing of the fossil fuel industry.

The danger here does not stop with "greenwashing". Once private finance of the magnitudes being cited are declared as available, the effort will be to ensure that it flows in directions that align with the goals of the Paris Agreement. Since there are risks involved in climate finance, "de-risking" such investments to attract private capital becomes an acceptable objective. That often involves providing public guarantees or first-loss capital from public funds. As a consequence, a chunk of the even limited funding could be used to mobilise private financing, which unless subject to monitoring and regulation may not actually deliver much on climate goals. "Available" private capital becomes not just a claim that diverts attention from inadequate public funding but is also a drain of public funds. That, if it happens, can harm the climate cause. □



# Churches under attack

More than 300 cases of anti-Christian violence have been reported in India this year, with Uttar Pradesh faring the worst. BY ZIYA US SALAM

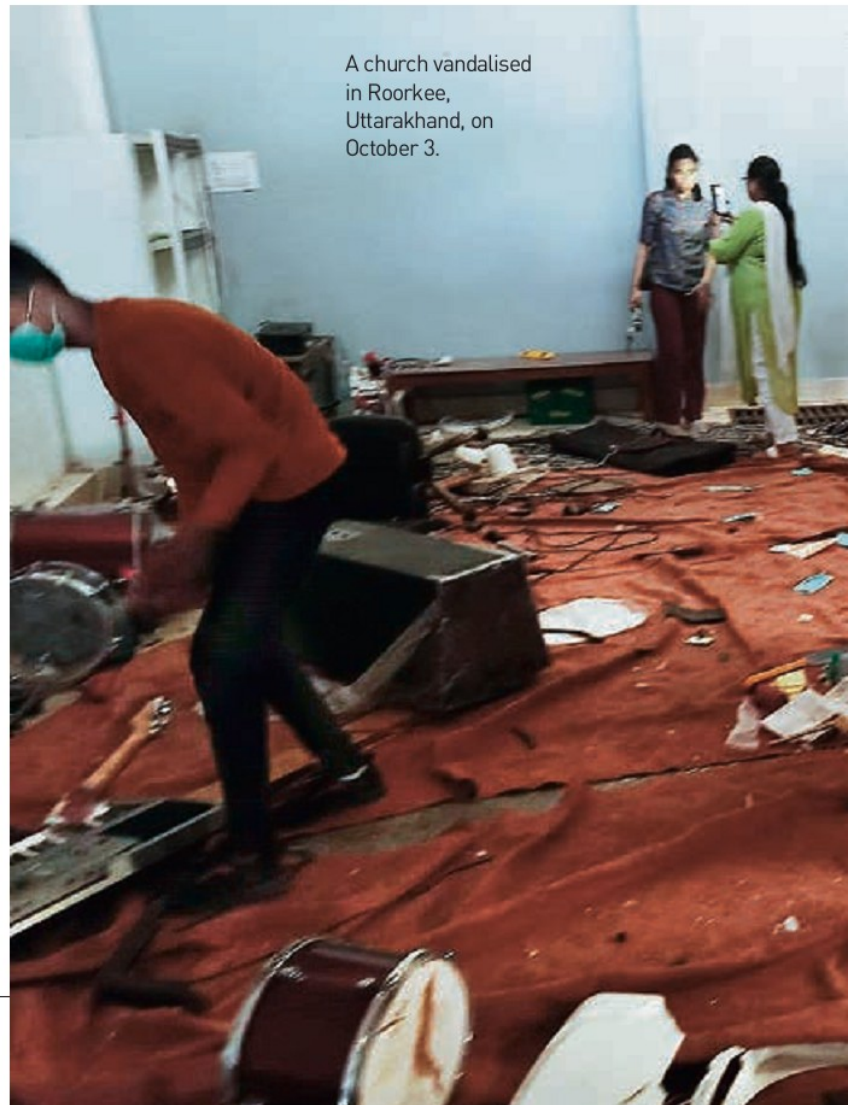
IT is a template that was crafted back in 2015, when the first instance of lynching was reported from Dadri in western Uttar Pradesh; it has now been expanded to include minority Christians. Back then, following allegations of cow slaughter, goons dragged Mohammed Akhlaq, who was sleeping in his home, out on to the road and lynched him. The police booked the assailants but also filed a first information report (FIR) against Akhlaq for cow slaughter. In almost every subsequent case, that has been the police strategy: file an FIR against the attackers and the victims. The same tactic is now employed to intimidate church-goers.

Almost invariably, a right-wing mob wielding lathis, iron rods and tridents disrupts a prayer service, damages property and injures worshippers. The police file a complaint against the attackers, but also another against the victims, accusing them of being involved in religious conversion. According to data available with the United Christian Forum (UCF) helpline, 305 such incidents have been reported this year in India. Uttar Pradesh fares the worst, with cases reported from cities and towns as diverse as Varanasi, the Prime Minister's constituency, Prayagraj (Allahabad), Noida, Ayodhya, Rampur, Bahraich and Lakhimpur Kheri. The most recent of these attacks have been in Mau district in Uttar Pradesh and Roorkee in Uttarakhand.

Said the activist John Dayal: "The common factor in Uttar Pradesh is that the anti-conversion law for Muslims includes Christians too. People come to churches wielding

lathis, accompanied by a local photographer and videographer and often by the police. They disrupt the prayer service, beat up the pastor, and if it is in a building, they attack the building, desecrate the Bible, etc. As in Roorkee. The police are almost always mute witnesses although in Roorkee they did take action because

the local people also acted. Even if the police register a case against the Bajrang Dal or the Hindutva brigade, a case is also filed against the victims, including pastors. The victim is penalised. It is the same template. Be it the pastor or the maulvi, cases are registered against them too though the Bible or the Quran might



A church vandalised in Roorkee, Uttarakhand, on October 3.



have been desecrated by the attackers.”

#### THE ROORKEE INCIDENT

In Roorkee on October 3, more than 200 people allegedly barged into a church, vandalised property and attacked those gathered for Sunday prayers. Only 12 people were present in the church at the time. A 50-year-old man who led the mob held the pastor's daughter by the shoulder while another man allegedly molested her. Women in the group slapped the girl and snatched her mobile phone.

Rajat Kumar, a helper at the church, suffered serious injuries on his head after being hit with an iron rod. “They dragged me by my neck to the ground floor while raining blows on my face and back. I became unconscious after I was hit with a rod

on my head,” he told a team of activists from human rights organisations such as the United Christian Forum, United Against Hate and the Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR).

The mob alleged that the church was functioning unlawfully on private property. The pastor dismissed the allegations, pointing out that they were affiliated with the Full Gospel Fellowship of India registered under The Societies Registration Act. He shared the land deal document with the fact-finding team to buttress his claim.

Incidentally, the church reported suspicious activity “at least four times before the mob attack”. Said the pastor's daughter: “We received hateful anti-Christian threats by unknown men. They accused us of conversion and threatened violence. I



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

**JOHN DAYAL**, activist. “The police .... register complaints against the attackers under milder provisions of the law.”

had sent an e-mail to the Superintendent of Police, visited the police station and registered a formal complaint on October 2 with the Civil Lines police. They assured us of security but no help came. Even on the day of the attack, we kept calling the police but they came only one hour after the mob had done the damage.”

Incidentally, the police station is less than a kilometre from the church. Before the police arrived, the mob destroyed CCTV cameras, vandalised religious symbols and chanted slogans of ‘Jai Shri Ram’ and ‘Har Har Mahadev’ inside the church premises.

#### THE MAU INCIDENT

It was worse in Mau, where a Hindutva mob, some of whom claimed to be Bajrang Dal and Hindu Yuva Vahini activists, attacked a regular prayer service on October 10. The attackers allegedly forced the worshippers, including the priest, to accompany them to the police station. An FIR filed by a Radheyshyam accused the worshippers of conversion and violating the COVID-19 protocol.

Elsewhere in Mau on the same day, Bhanu Pratap Singh, the district in charge of the Hindu Jagran Manch, filed a complaint with the police that a pastor had organised a prayer meeting at a private residence



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT





BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**A FACT-FINDING COMMITTEE REPORT** on violence against Christians being released by the Association for Protection of Civil Rights, United Christian Forum and United against Hate, in New Delhi on October 21.

in order to convert local people. The police arrested Pastor Abraham Sha-keel Ahmad, his wife Pratibha, and Vijendra Rajbhar and Geeta Devi, the couple in whose house the prayer was held. Despite their statements to the contrary, they were booked under the Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020.

In another instance in Mau, on October 12, a Hindutva mob thrashed two nuns, accusing them of being engaged in conversion activities, and dragged them to the police station. Sister Gracy Monteiro, a school principal belonging to the Mirpur Catholic Mission and her colleague, Sister Roshni Minj, was waiting in a car when the mob attacked them and their driver. Speaking to the fact-finding team, Sister Monterio said: "There were just the three of us. I was accompanying Sister Minj, who was going home to Ranchi to visit her father. At Mau bus stand, Sister Minj went to ask about the vehicle while the driver and I stayed in the car. Then a mob came and attacked the driver, dragged him out, and forced us to walk to the police station."

What happened in Roorkee and Mau was a continuation of a series of assaults and unsubstantiated allegations of conversion that began on January 3 when right-wing extremists attacked a group of about 20 Christians who had gathered in Shahjahanpur in Uttar Pradesh. Shockingly, after damaging property and injuring the worshippers, they

informed the police about alleged conversion. The police arrested the pastor and three other worshippers.

Later in the month, in an eerily similar manner, religious extremists disrupted a church meeting in Kanpur. They accused the pastor, Pankaj Malik, of conversion and offering financial incentives to convert to Christianity. Yet again, the perpetrators called the police, who took the pastor into custody.

A month later, the walls of a Methodist Church in Bareilly were defaced. In February, when Pastor Anjeet Kumar was conducting his Sunday fellowship at his home in Ambedkar Nagar some villagers stormed in, hurled abuses at him and accused him of indulging in conversion. The police prohibited the pastor from inviting anyone for prayers though he was allowed to continue with his private worship.

In Prayagraj a few days later, where Pastor Jitendra Varma was leading a prayer service, a mob arrived with a police constable and started abusing the worshippers. Allegations of forceful conversions surfaced once again. Similar incidents were reported from Kanpur, Agra, Bijnore, Azamgarh, Rampur, Gonda, Raebareli, Auriya, Maharajganj and Jaunpur.

Significantly, the media ignored most of these attacks. And whatever came to public notice was the police version of what happened. Said John Dayal: "The media have toed the government line. The government says

these are sporadic attacks, unconnected with one another. It is an utter lie. The Prime Minister objects, everybody objects, to a single Sikh attacked in Canada or a Hindu attacked in New York. The media goes to town. Tens of hundreds of cases of attack on Christians and Muslims are taking place back home in India but they do not interest the media much. The issue of attacks has not even been raised in Parliament in recent days. Even the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha has not talked of these attacks though the issue was raised in Chhattisgarh [Assembly]."

Attacks against Christians now seem to be the latest in a chain of attacks on minorities. According to the APCR report, "The violence against Muslims in India which has now become pan India needs to be seen with the violence and vendetta against Christians. Unfortunately, the media tend to ignore the violence against Christians. Human rights groups have been recording cases of violence against Christians by Hindutva groups."

The APCR, along with groups such as United Against Hate and the UCF, held a press conference recently. Among the 305 incidents of violence reported in the first 273 days of this year in India, Uttar Pradesh fared the worst followed by Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. Attacks were reported from Karnataka and Gujarat too.

Minakshi Singh, president of Unity in Compassion, a non-profit organisation, said, "The Christian community is being accused of carrying out conversions on a large scale but numbers state otherwise. Over the years, a reduction in Christian population has been noted."

It is a point of view that suggests a systematic attempt to incite anti-conversion sentiments, thus facilitating attacks on the innocent. "It is the same modus operandi. The goons attack the minorities' symbols, a cross, a Bible, a Quran, then the police take the maulvis and pastors into custody while registering complaints against the attackers under milder provisions of the law," summed up Dayal. □



# Targeting namaz

Muslim worshippers in Gurugram, Haryana, struggle to offer Friday prayers at the site allocated for the purpose as Hindu right-wing volunteers disrupt them. BY ZIYA US SALAM



ON November 5, the Sanyukta Hindu Sangharsh Samiti, a body of 21 Hindu outfits claiming to uphold the interests of local Hindus, held Govardhan puja in Gurugram, the satellite township on the outskirts of Delhi, at the exact spot in Sector 12 where members of the Muslim community had offered Friday prayers a week earlier. The puja was attended among others by Kapil Mishra, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader better known for issuing an ultimatum to the Delhi Police to remove the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protesters from Jafraabad in Delhi, and barely hours later north-

**MUSLIMS** conduct namaz at an open site with police protection following protests by residents and members of various pro-Hindu organisations, at Sector 12 in Gurugram on October 29.

east Delhi went up in flames in the last week of February 2020.

Yati Narsinghanand, who had made a series of provocative statements against the Muslim community, including upholding an attack on a 10-year-old boy who had entered a temple in Dasna in western Uttar Pradesh for drinking water, was supposed to keep him company. Narsinghanand could not make it owing to a prior engagement, but that did not dissuade Kapil Mishra

and others, including senior Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Surendra Jain, from organising an elaborate puja at the site designated by the local administration for Friday prayers. The puja concluded with the chanting of provocative slogans.

Surendra Jain felicitated the 26 people who had been arrested a week earlier for disturbing Friday prayers. In his address, he hailed them as crusaders and equated public namaz with terrorism. "Due to the struggle



of these crusaders, the administration cowed down. This will not become a second Pakistan. Those who want to offer namaz in public places can go to Pakistan. Blocking roads to offer namaz is jihad. It is jihad against Hindus, against law and order, against humanity.... It is terrorism," he said. It was an unabashed expression of majority triumphalism, with many members of the right-wing outfits reading in the Friday prayers "a jihad against the Hindu community". Several people were heard warning Muslims that Gurgaon (as Gurugram is known locally) was merely a trailer.

Elsewhere, Home Minister Amit Shah carried forward the message. Speaking in Uttarakhand, Amit Shah said: "Earlier, when I came here during the time of the Congress government, some people came to meet me. My convoy was stopped. I asked, what happened? They said, Sir, don't you know today is Friday. I asked what happens on Friday? They informed me that on Friday there is permission to block the National Highway to perform namaz. Highways are closed...."

It gave a new twist to the Friday prayer controversy. For weeks on end, Muslim worshippers had struggled to offer the mandatory weekly prayers at the site allocated for the purpose as Samiti volunteers would come to the venue with drums, microphones and a rumbustious crowd shouting slogans to disturb the prayer. The administration provided police protection for the worshippers to prevent untoward incidents.

#### DEARTH OF MOSQUES

Incidentally, Gurugram has a dearth of mosques, with only 13 mosques functioning for a population of five lakh Muslims, forcing many Muslims to offer Friday prayers in public parks and barren stretches of land. Some private offices offer their parking lots for the purpose. After speaking to representatives of Muslim and Hindu communities, the State government in 2018 earmarked 37 sites for the weekly congregation. A truce was arrived at. It



**THE GURUGRAM** Police detain members of pro-Hindu organisations who staged a protest against Friday prayers at Sector 12.

held until February this year when the Samiti volunteers started arriving at one of the sites and started mobilising resident welfare associations and local residents to object to Muslim prayer. On the last Friday of October, the police arrested 26 protesters for attempting to block Friday prayers. A day after the Govardhan puja, Haryana Home Minister Anil Vij in a statement reinforced the argument of prayers to be offered at religious places only. "Everybody should hold their religious functions at their religious places only. Without the administration's permission, such events should be avoided."

A couple of days before the Govardhan puja, the district administration withdrew permission for Friday prayers from eight sites, including the spot where the puja was held. It was claimed that it was done in consultation with members of both communities. "Permission to offer prayers at eight previously identified sites has been cancelled," the Gurugram police said. With reference to other prayer spots, they said "permis-

sion to offer prayers will be cancelled there as well" if residents at those places raised objections.

The claim of cancellation following mutual consultation was met with suspicion by members of the minority community. They claimed that members of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh's (RSS) Rashtriya Muslim Manch were used as representatives of Muslim worshippers; thousands of them do not stay in Gurugram but work in the corporate sector in the area. Many of them drive down from Delhi every day; some even come from as far as Faridabad and Noida. They contended that they had to pray in the open, under the scorching sun in summer and brave the cold of the National Capital Region (NCR) in winter, only because waqf properties were encroached upon in the State. If the properties could be thrown open to the community, the instances of offering prayer in public places would reduce significantly, and the administration would not have to designate prayer spots every so often.

The community formed a 21-





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member committee under the chairmanship of former Rajya Sabha member Mohammed Adeb to interact with the local administration and the State government about Friday prayers. It got a shot in the arm in the form of support from members of the Gurgaon Nagrik Ekta Manch, a citizens' forum, which demanded legal action against the right-wing groups that were disrupting Friday prayers. The manch said that Hindu extremist groups showed up at namaz locations and intimidated the imams and other worshippers. They pointed out that the prayers had been frequently disturbed since March 2020.

Zafarul Islam Khan, former chairman of the Delhi Minorities Commission, tweeted about the disturbance and sought reopening of closed mosques. He wrote: "Return 19 closed mosques plus the one built in 2016, sealed by the administration. Earlier, Friday prayers offered at 125 places, the admin reduced it to 37, and now to 29 under goons' pressure. No open prayer if closed mosques are returned, construction of new mosques and additional floors allowed."

The noted academic-activist Apoorvanand lent his weight to

those offering prayers at designated places and blamed the administration for cutting down on the number of prayer places. In a series of tweets, Apoorvanand said: "The Chief Minister said that namaz should not be in the open. Another Minister said it was a ploy to capture land. The administration started squeezing the spaces available to Muslims. Earlier, they used to gather at more than 100 spots. For years there was never any problem to the local non-Muslims. They used to be there for hardly an hour. After the namaz, they dispersed to their respective work spaces. After repeated attacks by goons, the administration tried to give security to the praying Muslims." According to him, the problem started in 2018 when the Sanyukta Hindu Sangharsh Samiti emerged and started attacking Muslims offering namaz. "This was how the Jumma namaz was turned into a law-and-order issue."

#### WAQF PROPERTIES

Representatives of the Muslim community feel the issue can be resolved if the waqf properties are returned to the community and mosques are allowed to be built on the waqf land. Back in May 2018, the Haryana Waqf Board had submitted a list of 19 mosques/properties lying unused because of local opposition or encroachments. Its Estate Officer, Jamaluddin, had then demanded the removal of encroachments at the waqf properties and expressed readiness to build mosques at these places to handle the increased volume of worshippers on Fridays. He had also referred to an over two-acre plot acquired by the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) in Palam Vihar where the Punjab and Haryana High Court had directed the Authority to provide land to the Board in lieu of the plot.

According to the list submitted by the Board, seven mosques have been allegedly encroached upon in Dhankot, Wazirabad, Jharsa, Badshahpur and other places, while six mosques in places such as Khurrampur, Dhankot and Bhondsi were not used for Friday prayers because of

opposition by local elements. Jamaluddin claimed, "Our attempts to build a mosque on Waqf Board plots in Jharsa, Jharsa-Fazilpur, Naurangpur and Meoka have been thwarted by the locals", leaving only a handful of mosques and the Eidgah for Friday prayers in Gurugram.

The National Waqf Academy, a unit of the Zakat Foundation of India, has collected data on the subject. Says Syed Zafar Mahmood, president of the foundation: "The Justice Sachar Committee Report made a list of mosques and tombs that are waqf properties but are in the control of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which does not allow namaz there whereas such a ban is against the law. The purpose of entrusting a heritage property in the custody of the ASI is to have the property protected and preserved, but the level of the ASI's neglect is to be seen to be believed. Such waqf properties under the ASI's control are widely encroached, and these mosques and tombs are desecrated."

According to Mahmood, a monument must retain its original character under the ASI. Section 5 (6) of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958, says that "nothing shall affect the use of any protected monument for customary religious observances". Section 16 of the Act provides that "a protected monument maintained under this Act, which is a place of worship or shrine, shall not be used for any purpose inconsistent with its character".

He characterised as understandable the Haryana Chief Minister's statement that if some people have an objection to people offering prayers by the roadside that must be given serious consideration. He added: "But waqf properties belong solely to Muslims. They may offer their prayers there and if someone creates trouble against offering namaz at these properties, then the Chief Minister must simultaneously take action against those who create such disturbance."

Meanwhile, every Friday comes with the foreboding of social tension and conflict in Gurugram. □



# An Act of bias

Nine months after Karnataka passed an Act completely banning cattle slaughter and empowering cow vigilantes, a report looks into how the law has impacted **lives, livelihoods and the diet** of marginalised communities, who are the main consumers of beef. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

LAST December, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in Karnataka introduced a Bill in the Legislative Assembly that sought to replace a 1964 Act banning cow slaughter in the State with a draconian law that had a wider ambit. The Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Act (KPSPCA), 2020, was initially promulgated as an ordinance in January this year before it was passed in the Legislative Council in February (where it was introduced in December 2020) by a voice vote amid opposition protests (see “Fallout of a slaughter ban”, *Frontline*, January 29, 2021). Under the Act, a person can be imprisoned for up to seven years for cattle slaughter. It prohibits the slaughter of all bovine animals (except buffaloes over the age of 13 years), severely penalises transporters of cattle for slaughter, and empowers cow vigilantes.

A complete ban on cattle slaughter has figured in BJP manifestos in Karnataka. With the passage of this law in February 2021, the BJP in Karnataka has emulated similar laws passed by BJP-ruled States across the country.

Two Bengaluru-based independent researchers, Sylvia Karpagam, a doctor who works in public health, and Siddharth K.J., civil society activist, have compiled a detailed report on the adverse impact of the law. Titled “Criminalising Livelihoods, Legalising Vigilantism” (CLLV), the 71-page report provides a sense of

how devastating the ban has been for a variety of stakeholders—farmers, transporters, slaughterhouse workers, skin- and hide-curing units, butchers and street vendors and beef consumers—who are part of the value chain underpinned by cattle trade. The report has relied on government data, field surveys in Bengaluru and other parts of Karnataka, and questionnaire-based responses to understand the consequences of the law. Through this, the report attempts to “challenge the claims and ‘facts’ used by the Karnataka government to justify the KPSPCA, by placing in the public domain, the overt and covert impact

of the cattle slaughter ban...”.

Cattle play an important role in Karnataka’s agricultural economy. Relying on National Sample Survey Office data, the report states that 86.94 per cent of households that owned livestock were of landless, marginal and small farmers. They use livestock for milk, manure and as draught animals. But what happens when a draught animal becomes unproductive? Before the KPSPCA came into effect, aged cattle were sold in cattle markets where they were slaughtered for meat. According to data from the Karnataka Animal Husbandry Department for 2019, 20,000 cattle were



**B.S. YEDIYURAPPA**, the then Chief Minister, worshipping cows and feeding them at his residence on February 9, the day after the cattle slaughter Bill was passed in the Legislative Council. With him are Prabhu B. Chauhan (left), Minister for Animal Husbandry, and Basavaraja Bommai (right), then the State Minister for Home.

THE HINDUPHOTO ARCHIVES



slaughtered in Karnataka, accounting for 6.83 per cent of meat production in the State. The ban has effaced the cattle meat industry and affected the incomes and lives of farmers.

While latest data after the KPSPCA came into effect is still unavailable, the reduction in the number of cattle markets is a pointer to the recent decline in cattle trade. According to J.M. Veerasangaiah, State working president of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), there were around 3,000 cattle markets in the State earlier, which have reduced to "around 100 after the passage of this law [KPSPCA]". Speaking to *Frontline*, Veerasangaiah said: "Farmers are already in a dire economic situation. This law makes owning cattle itself a problem, especially for dairy farmers." These cattle markets have now become spaces only for the sale and purchase of productive bovines for milk or draught animals, and the ban has made unproductive cattle useless. "An animal bought for Rs.40,000 used to have a resale value of Rs.25,000. Who is going to give us Rs.25,000 now?" Veerasangaiah asked.

The report states that the number of farmers participating in the surviving cattle markets has come down significantly. There were only a third of the usual number of farmers at a cattle market in Ginigera in Koppal taluk of Koppal district, the report states. According to testimonies included in the report, both farmers and traders are suffering. A farmer called Gajagandra from Nedungudu village in Hosapete taluk said: "We bring sick, old and lame cattle to the market. From seven years, the animal can start getting unproductive and by eight or nine years, many are not productive. They keep telling us to protect these animals. Now who will take care of these animals when they are sick? The cost of everything is going up. Even to take the cattle for short distances for treatment, we have to pay a minimum of Rs.500."

A clause in the KPSPCA offers impunity to "persons acting in good faith" in implementing the law. The authors of the report argue that this is "mischievous" and has em-

boldened self-appointed cow vigilantes belonging to Hindu right-wing organisations. According to Khasim Shoaiburrehman Qureshi, the Bengaluru-based president of the All India Jamiat-ul-Quresh (Karnataka), which is a representative organisation of beef butchers in the State, harassment of transporters has increased considerably since the KPSPCA came into effect. Even the transportation of legitimately procured cattle from other States, which is not illegal under the Act, has been affected. "We incur huge losses when our vehicles get seized even when we have the required documents," Qureshi told *Frontline*. According to the report, 58 cases have been registered for various offences, including "illegal" transport of cattle, since the KPSPCA came into effect four months ago.

#### IMPACT ON JOBS

The report has also looked at the impact the ban has had on jobs. People working in slaughterhouses have lost jobs. Employment in ancillary industries dependent on cattle slaughter has been affected because of the dearth of hides, animal skins and carcasses. Khaleemullah is the owner of a curing unit in D.J. Halli, the densely populated hub of skin-curing units in north-east Bengaluru where Muslims and Dalits live. He said: "There used to be 250 [curing] units here [D. J. Halli and neighbouring K.G. Halli] about two years back. Now there are only 10-15 units. Skins of at least 250 animals would be brought every day earlier. Now it is 10-15 a day."

According to data from the Department of Animal Husbandry, the estimated market value of cattle meat produced in Karnataka in 2018-19 was Rs.270.6 crore. With the slaughter ban, hundreds of beef butcher stalls and streetside eateries which thrived in areas like Shivajinagar and D.J. Halli in Bengaluru have shut down. Since only buffalo meat of animals older than 13 years is allowed to be sold now, there has been a considerable decline in the sale of beef in Bengaluru. This is corroborated by evidence such as that

provided by the Shivajinagar chapter of the Beef Merchants Association: there were around 150 beef stalls in the area before the ban, but more than 50 shops have permanently shut down now.

#### IMPACT ON CONSUMERS

In the section on the impact on consumers, the report points out that 15 per cent of India's population, or 180 million people, consume beef. Beef is one "of the cheapest nutrient dense foods and ... 100 gm of lean beef provides 54 per cent of the daily protein requirement," the report says. According to data from the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2019-20) for Karnataka, only 12.8 per cent of children within the age group of 6-23 months received an adequate diet, while 35.4 per cent of under-five children were stunted and 32.9 per cent were underweight. In these circumstances, the authors of the report ask if it is justified to deny adequate nutrition to consumers of beef, considering that they usually belong to the marginalised sections of society such as religious minorities, Dalits and backward castes. The price of beef, at Rs.250 a kilogram (before the ban), was also cheaper than that of mutton, which was around Rs.700 to Rs.800 a kg in the State.

The report draws attention to the discriminatory nature of the KPSPCA. "The politics around beef by the current BJP governments at the Centre and the State should be viewed in the larger context of targeting minorities economically, socially and politically.... The cattle slaughter ban in Karnataka is perceived by many as a concerted effort by a right-wing government to bring the Muslim community to economic destitution," the report states.

R. Mohanraj, State convener of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (Bheem Vada), who offered his insights in the preparation of the report, told *Frontline*: "The law is an encouragement for murdering people by vigilantes. It is encouraging communal unrest. The targets of the law are the religious minorities, but it has affected Dalits the most." □



# Rooted in conservatism

Notwithstanding the decriminalising of homosexuality, the government continues to maintain that same-sex marriages are incompatible with **traditional morality** in India. BY **DIVYA TRIVEDI**

IT is three years since homosexuality was decriminalised in India, but public morality around same-sex relationships continues to be a thorny issue.

In October, FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) company Dabur India Ltd was forced to roll back an advertisement celebrating lesbian love during Karva Chauth, a festival where traditionally some Hindu women observe a day-long fast for the long life of their husbands.

The ad, created for the beauty product Fem, a bleach cream, showed two women fasting for each other on the occasion of Karva Chauth. The Fem logo was shown in rainbow colours with the hashtag “glow with pride”, implying a celebration of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual) movement.

The ad achieved the rare feat of irking people from both left-wing and right-wing politics. Hindutva supporters on the right waved the spectre of hurt sentiments and demanded that the ad be withdrawn, while people on the Left felt that the ad promoted patriarchy and racism.

Madhya Pradesh Home Minister Narottam Mishra of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was among those to warn the company of dire consequences if the ad was not removed. He threatened to sue the company because according to him, the ad hurt Hindu sentiments and if not

checked “in future, they will show two men taking *feras*” (a Hindu ritual of marriage where the couple walk around a holy fire). Dabur India succumbed to the pressure and not only withdrew the ad but also apologised “unconditionally for unintentionally hurting people’s sentiments”.

Until 2018, homosexuality was considered a crime in India. In September that year, when the Supreme Court ruled that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was unconstitutional, it was hoped that the reading down of the archaic law would lead to the grant of certain freedoms to people on the LGB-



FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/REUTERS

**MEMBERS OF THE** LGBT community rejoice at the Supreme Court’s verdict decriminalising gay sex and revocation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, in Mumbai on September 6, 2018.



TQIA+ spectrum. While the change in law paved the way for same-sex couples to lead a more dignified private life than was possible before, the judgment stopped short of allowing same-sex couples to marry or be entitled to have rights that are available to heterosexual couples in India. This left open a window of doubt around homosexuality and allowed for incidents such as the one with Dabur to recur in the public sphere. The defining boundaries of queer rights remained vague and dependent on the prevalent value system of the day.

Now, the Delhi High Court has an opportunity to rectify the situation and end the debate once and for all. The final hearing on a batch of petitions arguing for the legalisation of same-sex marriages has been fixed for November 30 by a bench of Chief Justice D.N. Patel and Justice Jyoti Singh. The bench has granted time to the parties to file replies and rejoinders in the matter.

The pleas under consideration have been filed by activists Abhijit Iyer Mitra, Gopi Shankar M., Giti Thadani and G. Oorvasi; Vaibhav Jain and Parag Mehta; Dr Kavita Arora; Mario D'penha; Joydeep Sengupta, a Canadian citizen and an OCI (overseas citizen of India) card holder, and his partner Russell Blaine Stephens, a citizen of the United States. Vaibhav Jain and Parag Mehta got married in 2017 at a court in Washington, D.C., and two years later formalised their wedding in front of families and friends through a Jain ceremony, *sangeet* and reception. In 2020, when Vaibhav Jain's parents came down with COVID and he and Parag Mehta wanted to travel together to India, the Indian consulate in New York refused to register their marriage on the grounds of homosexuality. The couple then approached the Delhi High Court seeking recognition of their marriage under the Foreign Marriage Act of 1969.

Similarly, Joydeep and Russell got married in New York. In the absence of legal recognition of their marital status in India, they were not entitled to travel as a couple to the

country during the pandemic, they said.

During the hearing of the plea, Joydeep and Russell's Advocate, Karuna Nundy, reasoned that since Section 7A(1)(d) of the Citizenship Act, 1955, does not distinguish between heterosexual, same-sex or queer spouses, a person married to an overseas citizen of India, whose marriage is registered and subsisting for two years, should be declared eligible to apply as a spouse for an OCI card.

#### **PLEA SEEKING RECOGNITION OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

The petition filed by Abhijit Iyer Mitra, Gopi Shankar M., Giti Thadani and G. Oorvasi contended that despite the Supreme Court's decriminalisation of homosexuality, same-sex marriages were still prohibited. They sought recognition and registration of same-sex marriages under the Hindu Marriage Act (HMA).

Abhijit Iyer Mitra is a vocal member of the LGBTQIA+ community, Gopi Shankar is a Tamil Nadu-based intersex activist who contested the 2016 Assembly election, Giti Thadani is the founder member of Sakhi Collective, and G. Oorvasi is a transgender activist. They argued that the language used in the Hindu Marriage Act is gender neutral and does not explicitly prohibit the marriages of same-sex couples. Nowhere in Section 5 of the Act is it mentioned that the two Hindus getting married must be a Hindu Man and a Hindu Woman, said the petition, adding that despite there being no statutory bar under the Hindu Marriage Act and the Special Marriage Act against gay marriage, the gay marriages are not registered anywhere in the country.

The petition filed through Advocate Raghav Awasthi and Mukesh Sharma stated that it would be against the constitutional mandate of non-arbitrariness if the right of marriage was not extended to homosexuals. It would be tantamount to discrimination against one community.

A third plea was filed by Dr

Kavita Arora, who wants to get married to her long-time partner Ankita Khanna under the Special Marriage Act. It is her case that the fundamental right to choose one's own partner for marriage under Article 21 of the Constitution extends to same-sex couples as well. She challenged the provisions of the Special Marriage Act for not providing for same-sex marriages.

Represented by Senior Advocate Maneka Guruswamy, lawyers Arundhati Katju, Govind Manoharan and Surabhi Dhar, Dr Arora said in her plea that she and her partner had been living together as a couple for eight years, they were in love with each other and shared the highs and lows of life. But they were unable to marry as they were a same-sex couple. Dr Arora sought a direction to be issued to the Marriage Officer, South East Delhi, to solemnise their marriage under the Special Marriage Act. Aged 47 years and 36 years, the couple said that not being allowed to get married had denied them several legal rights and protections in matters of owning a house, opening a bank account, succession, taxation, insurance, maintenance, pension, health and marital privileges.

The petitioners added that they did not seek the right to be left alone, but the right to be acknowledged as equals and to be embraced with dignity by the law. They said that the Navtej Johar judgment held that sexual orientation places a positive and negative obligation on the state, which includes non-discrimination under Article 15 of the Constitution. "The right to choose a marital partner is a positive obligation of the state to be fulfilled through its existing marriage laws. Excluding same-sex marriage from a legislation governing civil marriage outside personal law renders the SMA violative of constitutional guarantees of dignity, liberty, and equality."

The BJP was in power in 2018 when homosexuality was decriminalised. Contrary to popular assumption, however, the Central government has steadily opposed legalising same-sex marriages in court. In February, the government



submitted an affidavit to the court that categorically stated that there was a “legitimate state interest” in limiting recognition of marriage to persons of opposite sex only. The affidavit said judicial interference would cause “complete havoc with the delicate balance of personal laws” and added: “The acceptance of the institution of marriage between two individuals of the same gender is neither recognised nor accepted in any uncoded personal laws or any codified statutory laws. The question as to whether such a relationship be permitted to be formalised by way of a legal recognition of marriage is essentially a question to be decided by the legislature and can never be a subject matter of judicial adjudication. The Hon’ble Constitutional court can analyse the existing rights but cannot create a new right by the process of judicial adjudication. The prayer made by the petitioner before this Hon’ble Court, is, therefore, wholly unsustainable, untenable and misplaced.... Considerations of social morality are relevant in considering the validity of legislation and it is for the legislature to judge and enforce such social morality and public acceptance based on Indian ethos. In our country, despite statutory recognition of the relationship of marriage between a biological man and a biological woman, marriage necessarily depends upon age-old customs, rituals, practices, cultural ethos and societal values.”

In October, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta appeared before the court and said that spouse meant husband and wife and marriage was permissible between a biological man and a biological woman only. He clarified that there was a misconception with regard to the case of *Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India* that decriminalised consensual homosexual acts between adults. He said: “The issue here is whether marriage is permissible between homosexual couples. Your Lordships have to decide that. There is some misconception of petitioners regarding the Navtej Singh Johar case. It merely decriminalises.... It does not talk about marriage.”

## Religious leaders continue to oppose same-sex marriages on the grounds of right to religious freedom.

To this, senior advocate Saurabh Kirpal, representing one of the petitioners, said that while the Supreme Court judgment did not expressly allow same-sex marriage, the inevitable implication favoured recognising it and that this is how constitutional jurisprudence works. (Saurabh Kirpal, who is openly gay, was unanimously recommended for elevation as a judge by a collegium of the Delhi High Court in 2017. Yet, four years after the recommendation was made, his elevation is stagnant. Widespread homophobia is being cited as the reason for this inordinate delay.)

### CHANGING ATTITUDES

But attitudes seem to be changing. Recently, in September, Justice N. Anand Venkatesh of the Madras High Court made an unexpected and welcome statement while hearing a protection plea filed by a same-sex couple. He issued a number of guidelines banning the attempt to cure individuals of their sexual orientation and admitted that he was not fully “woke” to the concept of same-sex relationships. He said that he would undertake an education session with a psychologist in order to understand same-sex relationships better. These comments by a High Court judge were lauded by a large section of the progressive society.

Social attitudes towards homosexuality are an evolving phenomena in which legislative maturity and judicial intervention go hand in hand. The revocation of Section 377 led to an increase in acceptance of homosexuality in India by 22 points between 2014 and 2019, according to

Pew Research Centre, but social attitudes towards same-sex relationships remained sharply drawn. Religious representatives continue to oppose same-sex marriages on grounds of constitutional right of religious freedom.

When Pope Francis was reported to have shown support to homosexuals by saying that “they are children of God and have a right to be in a family”, the Indian Christian community went out of its way to clarify these remarks. The Catholic Bishops Conference of India said that the pontificate was “misunderstood and misinterpreted” when he spoke about same-sex civil unions in the film *Francesco*, adding that there was no change in Church doctrine on same-sex marriages.

According to Pew Research Centre, the global trend indicates that religiously unaffiliated adults are more likely than those who identify with a religion to say homosexuality should be accepted by society. But the pattern is not universal. For example, in Sweden, about equal shares among the religiously unaffiliated (96 per cent) and those who identify with a religion (93 per cent) say homosexuality should be accepted by society.

The landmark judgment of the United States Supreme Court granting same-sex couples a constitutional right to marry had a mixed reception. While some religious groups, including the Reform and Conservative Jewish movements, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (USA), moved to allow same-sex couples to marry within their traditions, many Conservatives opposed the ruling stating it threatened their religious liberties.

Currently, the Thai Cabinet approved a draft Bill to sanction same-sex marriages. If passed, the law will become the first law of its kind in the South East Asian region.

India must take a leaf out of these countries’ experience to restore the personhood of members of the LGBTQIA+ community and make it another stepping stone towards universalisation of dignity to all minorities. □



# Shock to farmers

The Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company's **unconventional proposal** to get sugar mills to recover around Rs.41,000 crore in unpaid power bills of farmers raises eyebrows. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

THE sugarcane industry in Maharashtra has just been delivered a googly by the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (MSEDCL). Faced with a surge in the number of defaulters, the MSEDCL is adopting unconventional methods to recover unpaid

power bills of about Rs.41,000 crore from the agriculture sector; Rs.10,000 crore of this is from about 12 lakh sugarcane farmers.

In a nutshell, to recover its dues it has asked sugar mills to deduct the amount from the payment they make to the sugarcane growers. Although

touted as voluntary, the plan has raised eyebrows. The MSEDCL has even offered sugar mills 10 per cent of the recovered amount as reward. This offer was made to the mills at a recent online meeting between the MSEDCL, the Sugar Commissioner, sugar mill directors and managers of



**MEMBERS** of the Rayat Kranti Shetkari Sangathan at a rally demanding Fair and Remunerative Price for sugarcane, in Karad, Maharashtra, on November 1. In order to recover electricity dues, the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Limited has asked sugar mills to deduct the amount from the payment they make to the sugarcane growers.



mills in Solapur, Pune, Kolhapur, Satara and Sangli.

The mills, however, are in no hurry to comply with the MSEDCL's wishes, and they have a valid reason for that. Mills are supposed to pay the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) that is set for sugarcane growers, and apparently they have no say in the matter. The MSEDCL is pushing its case by pointing out that mills often deduct crop loan dues from the amount they pay cane growers. However, that is done only after farmers give their written consent. The mills generally are hesitant to get involved in this unorthodox method of retrieving dues.

While it is true that farmers have run up huge arrears in electricity bills, it is pertinent to ask why the MSEDCL is not chasing the defaulters directly.

#### **VICTIMS OF STATE POLICY**

The other side of the argument is that to some extent the MSEDCL is also a victim of state policy. On November 19, 2020, the Maharashtra Cabinet cleared a proposal for a one-time settlement scheme for farmers' unpaid power dues. It was part of the election promise made by all three parties—the Shiv Sena, the Nationalist Congress Party and the Congress—that make up the Maha Vikas Aghadi. The amnesty scheme was expected to recover Rs.41,000 crore in farmers' unpaid electricity bills for running agricultural pumpsets. The government said it would waive the interest and penalty and provide a rebate as well on the actual amount pending prior to 2015. The State also announced it would provide two lakh new connections by the end of 2022 and eight hours of

power supply to all farmers within three years. A budget of Rs.1,500 crore has been earmarked for these plans.

When the issue of arrears against bills for operating agricultural pumpsets was discussed in the Cabinet meeting, Ministers were informed that the MSEDCL was yet to recover dues on this count for the last two years and that the amount had risen to around Rs.41,000 crore.

Figures show that only about 8 per cent of farmers pay their electricity bills regularly. Many delay payments in the hope of benefiting from amnesty schemes that are announced from time to time. A State energy department official described the situation as “a vicious circle” and “self-defeating”. He said the arrears mounted to about Rs.6,000 crore every year. Realising that it was practically impossible to retrieve this money, the State declared the amnesty scheme.

Under the November 2020 scheme, for bills pending after 2015, the penalty would be waived, but half of the interest would have to be paid. Rebates of 100 per cent, 30 per cent and 20 per cent were to be granted to those who paid their pending bills in the first, second and third year, respectively, after the declaration of the scheme.

The government scheme seems to be well thought out in that most of the recovered money is ploughed back into rural welfare. As much as 33 per cent of it is to go to the gram panchayat, which has to utilise it to improve the local electricity network. Another 33 per cent is to go to the district administration for the same purpose. The remaining 34 per cent will go to the State government to

enable it to purchase power. Keeping the money for local circulation is meant to be an incentive not only for farmers to pay up but also for local gram panchayats to persuade farmers to clear their dues.

#### **HUGE DEFICIT**

But the plan does not seem to have translated into reality as is apparent from the huge deficit of Rs.41,000 crore. The sugar mills are aware of the problems this creates for the MSEDCL but have so far stood firm and ask as to which law requires them to deduct the dues from what they pay farmers.

Farmers are furious at the MSEDCL's decision to use the Sugar Commissionerate and mill owners to extract dues. Farmer leader Raju Shetti has joined the fray and opposed the proposal. He and the mill owners are on the same side of the fence, which is a highly unusual situation.

Raju Shetti is an old warhorse who has been fighting for farmers' rights since his days in Maharashtra's Shetkari Sanghatana, an organisation formed by the late Sharad Joshi that has successfully represented farmers on issues of electricity, irrigation, pricing, and so on. After Shetti broke away from the Sanghatana he formed his own political party, Swabhimani Paksh, which has a wing called the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS). His political party formed an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014 and Shetti served two terms as a Member of Parliament from the south Maharashtra constituency of Hatkanangle. The SSS is one of the few active bodies for farmers' rights and has consistently fought for the rights of cane farmers.

Raju Shetti has warned sugar mills that they have no authority to give anything less than the FRP without the written consent of farmers. He has also raised the issue of faulty power bills that are being issued to farmers.

Clearly something needs to be done on both sides as the stalemate remains: the MSEDCL needs to give accurate bills and farmers need to pay them. □

Figures show that only about 8 per cent of farmers pay their electricity bills regularly. Many delay payments in the hope of benefiting from amnesty schemes that are announced from time to time.



# DEALS WITH DEMONS

Prime Minister Imran Khan's failed standoff with the Army over the appointment of the ISI chief and his giving in to the demands of extremist groups have highlighted the vulnerability of his increasingly unpopular government. BY JOHN CHERIAN



**AT A TEHRIK-E-LABAIK** Pakistan (TLP) rally in Karachi on October 24.



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS HAVE underlined the political vulnerabilities of the Pakistan government led by Imran Khan. The first was the open standoff between the government and the powerful Pakistani security establishment on the appointment of a new chief for the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. The Prime Minister, whose closeness and indebtedness to the Pakistani military is well known, suddenly decided to question Army chief Gen. Qamar Bajwa's selection of a new ISI chief. The Army announced its nominee, Lt Gen. Nadeem Ahmad Anjum, for the post in mid October, apparently without keeping the Prime Minister's Office in the loop.

Imran Khan, to the surprise of many, including senior members of his own party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), decided to assert himself on the issue, letting it be known that it was the prerogative of the Prime Minister to select the candidate for the post. Lt Gen. Faiz Hameed, the current chief of the ISI, played a key role in propelling Imran Khan to the Prime Minister's Office. He is said to be the Prime Minister's preferred candidate for the post of Army chief when Gen. Bajwa retires in 2022.

The Prime Minister had initially stated that he would decide on the appointment of the new ISI chief after interviewing three candidates put forward by the military. After a brief standoff with the military establishment, he caved in. Lt Gen. Anjum will now take office on November 20. The opposition believes that Imran Khan's actions were motivated by self-interest and not by the intention to end the Army's domination of the politics of the country. Imran Khan had made no effort to mobilise opposition parties to build a popular movement against the Army. At the same time, the opposition parties seemed keen to undermine his political standing and were not overly critical of Gen. Bajwa's act of overriding his authority.

On many previous occasions, when the civilian administration tried to interfere in the administrative affairs of the Army, the result was either an outright military coup or regime change orchestrated from military headquarters. Nawaz Sharif lost his prime ministership on two occasions because of his efforts to tame the Army leadership and bring it fully under political control. The first time, he was the victim of an outright coup. The second time, the Army and its intelligence wing undermined him politically by brazenly propping up Imran Khan and his party.

According to many Pakistani analysts and commentators, these days the Army is trying to distance itself from the increasingly unpopular PTI-led government.

Another important development that has further diminished the image of the government is the deal it made with the "banned" Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party in early November. The TLP has gained support in

rural areas, especially in Punjab, the country's most populous province, by calling for the strict implementation of "blasphemy laws". The laws are frequently used to target the Ahmadi sect and other minorities. Those accused of violating them can be sent to the gallows. The TLP has said that the sole punishment for blasphemy should be "decapitation".

#### TLP'S SUPPORT FOR TASEER'S ASSASSIN

The party came to prominence when it organised huge rallies in 2011 in support of Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of Salman Taseer, the then acting Governor of Punjab. Qadri was the policeman assigned to protect Taseer. Taseer's crime in the eyes of the fundamentalists was his support for a Christian woman who had been jailed on alleged blasphemy charges.

The mobilisation capabilities of the party became evident after it paralysed Islamabad in 2018 when Nawaz Sharif's party, the Pakistan Muslim League (N), was in power. According to reports in the Pakistani media, the Army facilitated the TLP's massive sit-in in Islamabad at the time.

The issue then was a minor change in the wording of the oath-taking ceremony for MPs, which describes the Prophet Muhammad as God's final prophet. The government quickly reversed the changes, but the TLP had scented blood, confident that it could in future pressure other governments to do its bidding. The party also decided to contest elections after that and is now doing better than the established Islamic parties in the country like the Jamaat-i-Islami. The TLP draws its support from followers of the Barelvi school of Islam. The majority of the Sunni population in the country are adherents of this school. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), or Pakistani Taliban, was earlier critical of the TLP but has now changed its stance and expressed its support for the TLP. After a confrontation between the TLP and the Pakistan government in April of this year, the TTP said: "We stand by those who sacrificed their lives for the honour of the Prophet."

#### DEMAND FOR ACTION AGAINST FRANCE

In September 2020, the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* republished a controversial set of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. After a Chechen militant beheaded a teacher in France for showing one of these caricatures in a classroom in October 2020, protests erupted in many Muslim countries demanding action against the French government. The protests led by the TLP were one of the biggest in the Islamic world. Protesters cut off the motorway connecting Islamabad and Lahore, and six police personnel lost their lives in clashes with them. The protesters demanded that Pakistan boycott French goods and that the French Ambassador be expelled from the country.



**PRIME MINISTER**  
Imran Khan.

SAIYNA BASHIR/REUTERS





MOHSIN RAZA/REUTERS

**TLP SUPPORTERS** during a protest in Lahore on October 22.

Imran Khan had strongly condemned the republication of the offensive cartoons. At the same time, he warned that an open diplomatic rupture with France would be detrimental to national interests as around half of Pakistan's exports were to the European Union. The protests ended when the government promised, among other things, to discuss the possible expulsion of the Ambassador in the National Assembly.

In April 2021, the TLP cadre, prone to violence, went on the rampage in Lahore because the issue had still not been debated in the Assembly. They succeeded in cutting off the Grand Trunk Road, the country's busiest highway that connects many important cities. Punjab province was almost completely paralysed with supply lines choked and businesses shut down. Four police officers were killed this time and more than 114 officers wounded. Many of the protesters were armed. The government was forced to call in paramilitary forces to quell the protests.

The government proscribed the TLP, describing it as a "terrorist" organisation, and arrested Saad Hussain Rizvi, its leader, and other TLP leaders under the country's tough anti-terrorism laws. The protests were only called off after the PTI government gave an assurance that the issue of expelling the French Ambassador would be put to the vote in the National Assembly and that the imprisoned TLP leaders would be granted an amnesty. The government signed an agreement with the TLP, but the details were kept secret from the opposition.

The government, however, consulted the opposition on the feasibility of putting the issue of the expulsion of the French Ambassador to vote in the parliament, which, in fact, began debating it before better political and diplomatic sense prevailed. The government did not put the issue to the vote, and the TLP leaders continued to be incarcerated. The consensus within the political parties and the powerful military establishment was that the

issue should be put on the back burner. Even more galling for the TLP leadership was the fact that their top leader was in jail and the ban on the party remained. In the last week of October, the TLP took to the streets again, announcing a "long march" to the capital via Lahore and Rawalpindi in another attempt to make the government bow to its demands, which included the release of its imprisoned leaders, the lifting of the ban on the party and the expulsion of the French Ambassador to the country.

#### **PROWESS IN ORGANISING PROTESTS**

The TLP has shown its prowess in organising protests. This was the sixth time the party had ordered its followers to march on the capital.

Again, the PTI government, which had vowed to take a tough line against the TLP, capitulated meekly, unable to control the violent protesters who were hell-bent on marching on the country's capital. Mufti Muneebur Rehman, an influential conservative cleric, brokered the latest deal between the government and the extremist Islamic grouping. While addressing a press conference flanked by some senior Ministers, including Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the cleric said that the new agreement "was not a victory or defeat for any side".

Talking to the media after the agreement was reached, Interior Minister Sheikh Rasheed said that Saad Rizvi was still insistent on the closure of the French Embassy and that the issue should be put forward in the country's parliament. Sheikh Rasheed said that the government had agreed to all the TLP demands except those pertaining to the closure of the French Embassy and the departure of the Ambassador. Just a few days before the agreement was signed, some senior government functionaries were alleging that the TLP was being secretly supported by India's intelligence agencies.

The government on its part agreed once again to





ANJUM NAVEED/AP

**PAKISTAN ARMY TROOPS** at a hilltop post on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Khyber district in August. Before the Imran Khan government initiated “direct face-to-face talks” with the banned Pakistani Taliban, the Army had launched an offensive in North Waziristan, the group’s stronghold, forcing its fighters to flee into Afghanistan.

release the jailed leadership of the TLP and lifted the ban on the party from participating in the coming elections. In the first week of November, an anti-terrorism court in Lahore granted bail to several prominent leaders of the party. The government said that all the details of the agreement would be revealed only at “an appropriate time”. The opposition parties have unitedly demanded details of the agreement from the government and expressed surprise at the fact that the services of an individual were used to broker a deal between the state and a banned organisation.

Around the same time, the Imran Khan government initiated “direct face-to-face talks” with the banned TTP in a bid to end the militancy of more than a decade and a half. After the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, the TTP has continued to stage attacks inside Pakistan. The Taliban leadership in Kabul has been trying to persuade the TTP to enter into talks with Islamabad since it came to power in August. Before the talks began, the Pakistan Army had launched an offensive in North Waziristan, the stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban, forcing their fighters to flee into Afghanistan.

#### **CEASEFIRE WITH PAKISTANI TALIBAN**

On November 8, the Pakistan government announced that it had agreed to a one-month ceasefire with the TTP. Fawad Chaudry, the Pakistan government spokesman, admitted that the Afghan Taliban had facilitated the agreement. He said that both sides had agreed on a “complete ceasefire”. Before the agreement was signed, government sources told the media that they were only contemplating the release of a few foot soldiers of the TTP, not the senior or mid-level commanders. Imran Khan had expressed the hope that they would surrender their arms in exchange for a general amnesty. The TTP had initially rejected the amnesty offer saying that their

fight was for the introduction of Sharia rule in the country.

Many Pakistanis are unhappy with the government’s decision to negotiate with the TTP. The group has been responsible for horrific crimes, including attacks on schools and hospitals. Military bases have not been spared. Relatives of those killed in Taliban attacks have protested against the government’s move to grant amnesty to Taliban fighters. Opposition parties too have criticised the move, saying that they had not been consulted or informed about the secret negotiations.

The Pakistan government has sought to justify its move by saying that if the United States could negotiate with the Afghan Taliban after two decades of war, Pakistan could also do so. Critics of the government’s move point out that the U.S. was an occupying power in Afghanistan and the Taliban was fighting to liberate the country. The Pakistani Taliban, on the other hand, they point out, has been fighting against the legitimate government of Pakistan and its terror campaigns, which have claimed the lives of thousands of innocent people, are acts of sedition.

The Pakistan People’s Party said the government’s move was akin to “sprinkling salt on the wounds of martyrs’ families” and questioned why the government did not take the National Assembly into its confidence “on such sensitive issues”.

Interestingly, the Pakistan government while willing to offer an olive branch to “terrorist” groupings, such as the TTP, responsible for widespread atrocities, treated with an iron fist a peaceful protest movement such as the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement (PTM). The government has spurned the PTM’s repeated requests for talks. Senior Ministers have said that for talks to begin members of the PTM should follow a “Pakistan agenda” and not cast aspersions on the Pakistan Army. □



# On the brink of a civil war

Ethiopia is on the brink of a full-blown civil war, with the rebels' recapture of Tigray province and a new U.S.-backed alliance of nine ethnic parties led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front encouraging other ethnic groups to raise the banner of **revolt against the Abiy Ahmad government**. BY JOHN CHERIAN

THE STRATEGICALLY LOCATED HORN OF Africa region has, in recent months, been witnessing a great deal of turmoil. Ethiopia is on the verge of an all-out civil war again after more than three decades. The much-heralded transition to democracy in the Sudan is in tatters after the Sudanese Army staged a coup in late October. A fragile peace holds in war-torn South Sudan, with tensions simmering between the two main ethnic

groups, the Dinka and the Nuer. The situation in Somalia continues to be grim. It is only the presence of foreign forces in the major Somali cities that has prevented the radical Islamist group known as al-Shabab from taking over the country.

The situation in Ethiopia is critical and has the potential to plunge the entire region into turmoil. Ethiopia is, after all, the second most populous country in the African



**A PRO-GOVERNMENT RALLY**, with a poster of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmad, to denounce the Tigray People's Liberation Front and Western interference in Ethiopia's internal affairs, at Meskel Square in Addis Ababa on November 7.





continent. The government in Addis Ababa, led by the young Prime Minister Abiy Ahmad, had declared victory over the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) last year. The Ethiopian Army was ordered into Tigray province in November to quell the rebellion there, which has been going on for more than three years.

The Ethiopian Army was helped considerably by the government of Eritrea in their initial military campaign against the Tigrayan forces. The Eritreans and the Tigrayans have been at daggers drawn since the partition of the country more than 30 years ago. They were allies in the long guerrilla war against the communist government in Addis Ababa. After they emerged victorious in 1991 and the country was partitioned, the two sides led by authoritarian leaders became implacable enemies.

Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, was captured by the Ethiopian federal forces within a week of fighting. The Ethiopian government convinced the international community as well as its own people that it had militarily quashed the battle-hardened Tigrayan forces for good. The international community started focussing more on the need to give humanitarian assistance to the Tigrayan people. The province has been under a military blockade by the Ethiopian Army since end 2020 as the Tigrayan rebels refused to surrender and disarm.

The federal government had kept humanitarian agencies and the international media out of the province.

**CAPTIVE SOLDIERS** of the Ethiopian Army get their water ration in a prison in the outskirts of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray region on July 7.

The attack on Tigray created one of the worst humanitarian problems the African continent has faced in recent times. More than 1.7 million people were displaced and famine spread through much of Tigray province, affecting more than 9,00,000 people.

#### **TIGRAY RECAPTURED**

Therefore it came as a surprise to most observers when the TPLF recaptured their capital in a swift counter attack in the last week of June. As Tigrayan troops advanced, Ethiopian Army units began to either retreat from the province or surrender. An entire Ethiopian Army unit surrendered in Mekelle. The Ethiopian Army is one of the biggest on the continent and is reputed to be well-equipped and trained. However, thousands of Ethiopian Army soldiers were captured and paraded by the Tigrayans. The TPLF, far from being defeated as the government in Addis Ababa would like the international community to believe, soon established control over most of Tigray province and started making forays into neighbouring provinces populated by the Amhara and other ethnic groups with whom they had territorial disputes.

Ethiopia seems to have once again degenerated into a





GIULIA PARAVICINI/REUTERS

full-blown civil war. Before the TPLF was ousted from the corridors of power in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Army was dominated by officers and soldiers from the Tigray region. They had managed to retain a lot of the weaponry and munitions that belonged to the federal army after their split with the Abiy government. The present government is dominated by the Oromo ethnic group, followed by the Amhara. The Tigrayans constitute less than 10 per cent of the population but have dominated the government and the Army since 1991. Ethiopia is a patchwork of around 80 ethnic groups and 10 regional governments.

The recent Tigrayan successes on the battlefield has encouraged other ethnic groups to raise the banner of revolt against the federal government. The TPLF, which has now branded itself as the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), has said that it will take all steps necessary to “degrade the capabilities” of its enemies, including marching all the way to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, if necessary. The Eritrean Army had withdrawn from the fighting within months after the fall of Mekelle. Many of the atrocities committed during the initial campaign against the Tigrayans were blamed on the Eritrean Army. However, there are new reports that the Eritrean government has once again started deploying its battle-hardened troops to help the Ethiopian government fend off the new threat from the TPLF and its allies.

By late October, the Tigrayan forces had launched a wider offensive that for the first time put the Ethiopian Army on the defensive. Two cities, Dessie and Kombolcha, in the Amhara-dominated north-east of the country, less than 325 kilometres from the capital, fell to the Tigrayan forces, sending the Abiy government into panic mode. The cities are located on the main highway connecting Addis Ababa to Djibouti. Much of the country’s exports are routed through the port of Djibouti. The Tigrayan Army spokesman said that the TPLF was ready “to march to Addis Ababa” if that was necessary to break the government siege on their province.

The Prime Minister’s spokesman, while accusing the rebels of spreading “an alarmist narrative that is creating much tension among various communities, including the international community” declared a “state of emergency”. The government said that it was determined to win the “existential war” and urged all able-bodied citizens to take up arms to defend the country. Under the emergency laws, the government has sweeping powers, including the power to detain citizens, curb media freedoms and impose curfews. Many Ethiopians are however angry with the Abiy government for misleading them by claiming that the TPLF was a defeated force and that the threat from the TPLF had been extinguished forever.

The TPLF remains a deeply unpopular party in the country. Ethiopians will take a long time to forget the brutal and authoritarian TPLF rule, which ended only in 2018. Elections used to be routinely rigged, the press thoroughly gagged and dissent ruthlessly suppressed. Abiy had come to power promising pluralism and a more open society. Abiy was only recently re-elected by a landslide to serve a second five-year term as Prime Minister. Foreign observers of the election, held in June, described it as one of the fairest held in the country. Abiy claimed that it was the freest election ever held in the country so far. Some opposition parties boycotted the election saying that their candidates were not allowed to campaign freely. The election could not be held in the embattled Tigray province.

#### U.S. THREATENS SANCTIONS

Even as the Ethiopian government was trying to rally the public and raise the morale of the army, the Joe Biden administration announced the suspension of duty-free access to Ethiopian exports to the country. Washington warned that it would be imposing further sanctions unless the government started peace talks immediately with the rebels. Washington has accused the Abiy government of “gross violation of internationally recognised human rights”. Abiy’s international reputation as a peacemaker has been dented by the blowback from the conflict in Tigray. In 2019, Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in ending the conflict with Eritrea and restoring diplomatic ties.

Ethiopia’s economy is already under strain because of the year-long war it has been prosecuting against the recalcitrant TPLF. The external debt has mounted along



with unemployment and inflation. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the country's woes. Before the Tigray conflict began, Ethiopia's economy was the fastest growing on the African continent.

A joint investigation by the United Nations human rights office and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission released in the first week of November concluded that all the parties to the conflict had committed grave war crimes that could be interpreted as "crimes against humanity". The Ethiopian Prime Minister claimed that the U.N. report "clearly established the claim of genocide as false and utterly lacking in factual basis".

However, the U.N. Human Rights chief Michelle Bachelet has said that the Ethiopian government refused to grant full access to the investigating team to the worst affected parts of Tigray, including the city of Axum. Michelle Bachelet said that she was concerned by the "troubling lack of transparency" surrounding the investigations conducted by the Ethiopian government institutions.



Jeffrey Feltman, the Biden administration's envoy to the Horn of Africa region, warned that the continuing conflict could have "disastrous consequences" for Ethiopia's unity and its ties with the U.S. After the overthrow of the left-wing government in 1991, Ethiopia has been one of the U.S.' staunchest military allies in the region. The Abiy government sees the current U.S. stance as a betrayal by a country with which Ethiopia has had a "special relationship" for more than three decades. Ethiopia had sent its forces to Somalia on the request of Washington when the government in Mogadishu had fallen under the control of al-Shabab. Now, however, almost all the other countries in the region, including Sudan, have become close to Washington.

Prime Minister Abiy, in a speech delivered after the Biden administration's threat to impose sanctions, said that the country had "more allies than the people that turned their backs on us". Abiy's statement came immediately after the TPLF leadership announced that it was

forming a new alliance with eight other ethnic parties to oust the government from power. The representatives of the nine groups made their announcement in Washington in the first week of November. At the time, Biden's special representative to the region, Jeffrey Feltman, was in Addis Ababa trying to convince the Ethiopian government to accept a ceasefire with the advancing Tigrayan forces.

The fact that the Tigrayans and their new-found allies were allowed to hold a press conference in Washington by the Biden administration sent a strong message to the government in Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian government considers the TPLF a "terrorist" force and has refused to negotiate with it. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, however issued a statement in early November, urging the Tigrayan forces to halt their advance to the capital. He also called on the Ethiopian government to stop the military campaign against Tigray and the mobilisation of ethnic militias. The Ethiopian government considers calls for negotiations as outside interference in the internal affairs of the country. The government stated that it would like to resolve the country's problems without the interference of third parties. Abiy had earlier described Washington's threats to impose sanctions as an illustration of the West's "neocolonial bias".

The new opposition coalition, known as the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist and Confederalist Forces, under the leadership of the Tigrayans, announced that they planned a regime change in Ethiopia either through force or negotiations. The other groups in the coalition like the Agaw Democratic Movement, the Oromo Liberation Army and the Somali State Resistance, are much smaller movements with little firepower. But the military reverses suffered by the Federal government has no doubt emboldened many of the separatist groups. The government has sought to downplay the significance of the new military and political alliance.

Ethiopia's attorney general, Gideon Timotheos, said that the formation of the alliance was a "publicity stunt". Many of the groups that are part of the alliance "are not really organisations that have any traction," he said.

Speaking a day after declaring a nationwide "state of emergency", Prime Minister Abiy urged his countrymen to defend the capital "with their blood and bones" in order "to bury the enemy and uphold Ethiopia's dignity and flag". In a very combative speech, he said that the enemy was "digging a deep pit". He pledged that Ethiopia would not be allowed to disintegrate and said that "the enemy will be buried" in the "deep pit".

Ethiopia is also facing external threats. It is locked in a territorial dispute with Sudan. Egypt has joined Sudan in protesting against the commissioning of the Grand Renaissance Dam by the Ethiopian government to harness the waters of the Blue Nile, which originates from the Ethiopian highlands. The waters of the Nile are crucial to downriver countries such as Egypt and the Sudan. Both Cairo and Khartoum are using belligerent rhetoric against Addis Ababa, threatening to resort to force if the dam becomes fully operational. □



# One law, many problems

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa sets up a task force to look into eliminating personal laws, inviting widespread condemnation, but the move is a ploy to deflect attention from the **economic crisis** worsened by a bungling regime.

BY R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN



LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/AFP

IN AN OCTOBER 26 GAZETTE, SRI LANKAN President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared that “no citizen should be discriminated against in the eyes of the law” and hence, he was establishing a task force that would “study implementation of the concept [of] one country, one law” and prepare a draft legislation. He appointed Galagodaaththe Gnanasara, a controversial monk, to head this task force. Gnanasara is general secretary of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist organisation. The 13-member task force, comprising nine Sinhalas and four Sri Lankan Muslims (who have publicly aligned with President Rajapaksa), will study the material prepared by the Justice Ministry and make recommendations by February 2022. According to the gazette, the task force will “study the draft Acts and amendments that have already been prepared by the Ministry of Justice in relation to this subject and their

**PRESIDENT GOTABAYA RAJAPAKSA** addressing the nation during Sri Lanka’s 73rd Independence Day celebrations, in Colombo on February 4, 2021.

appropriateness, and if there are suitable amendments, to submit proposal for the purpose and include them in such relevant draft as is deemed appropriate”.

The ‘one country, one law’ concept was a campaign slogan of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the 2019 presidential election. Soon after he won, the Cabinet decided to amend Muslim personal laws. Sri Lanka also has the Kandyan and Thesavalamai personal laws for Sinhala Buddhists and Tamils, respectively.

## AN ANTI-MINORITY MONK

Gnanasara, known for his anti-Muslim rhetoric, was accused of instigating the 2014 Aluthgama riots that



targeted Muslims. His utterances after the April 2019 bomb blasts (“Distress and divide”, *Frontline*, July 5, 2019) were Islamophobic in nature and a presidential commission wanted his outfit, the BBS, banned. The BBS came into the limelight during the latter part of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s presidency, which ended in 2015. After a brief lull during the presidency of Maithripala Sirisena (2015-2019), it has gained in strength.

However, these issues did not seem to be of any consequence to Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who panders to the Sinhala chauvinist elements among the electorate, when he decided that Gnanasara would head the task force. In Gnanasara, Gotabaya Rajapaksa has found the perfect tool to widen the yawning rift among the three ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka: the Sinhalas, the Tamils, and the Muslims.

Gnanasara’s appointment has raised suspicion among the minorities since he has repeatedly made anti-minority statements and has been accused of inciting Buddhists to attack minorities, Muslims in particular. He was also convicted and imprisoned on four charges of contempt of court, but later pardoned by Sirisena—a move that shocked the liberals across the island nation.

Sri Lanka has a variety of laws, some of which are archaic and need reform. But President Rajapaksa is going about dealing with the issue in a simplistic manner. The presidential proclamation said that under fundamental rights, no citizen should be discriminated against in the eyes of the law or given any special treatment on the grounds of nationality, religion, caste or others. Apart from this, the ‘one country, one law’ concept also contains very lofty aims as it promises a method of implementing nationally and internationally recognised humanitarian values that would ensure that all citizens are treated alike under the law.

#### PROTESTS AGAINST THE LAW

In a letter to President Rajapaksa on November 2, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) questioned the need for this concept when the existing laws serve its stated objective. It said: “The Constitution itself provides a framework for the legislative process, which is supplemented by other laws and by the Standing Orders of the Parliament. There already exist, within the framework of the Constitution, the law and standing orders and adequate mechanisms for the purpose.”

The BASL said: “Whilst there is no doubt that the concepts of equality, fairness, non-discrimination, the protection of the law and nationally and internationally recognised humanitarian values are all laudable principles, it is doubtful if the process set out in the gazette and the



creation of the task force can make any meaningful contribution to upholding these values.”

*The Island* newspaper, in an editorial, put it more simply: “It defies comprehension.”

Opposing Gnanasara’s appointment, Tamil National Alliance MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam said: “Does a country make a common law by appointing a person who violates the constitution and spreads racism and religious bigotry?” Manjula Basnayake, a journalist, asked on Twitter: “Can a person who has been imprisoned for threatening a judge in court lead a ‘one country one law’ enforcement programme?”

The BASL also said that “no useful purpose would be served by the creation and appointment of the task force” which would “usurp the functions of many institutions established under the constitution and the law, including Parliament and the Ministry of Justice”.

Sri Lankan bishops have called upon the government to abandon its “one country, one law” plan. Bishop Winston Fernando of Badulla, president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka, said in a statement issued on November 2 that the omission of Tamil, Hindu, Catholic, and other Christian minority groups from the task force was a lost opportunity.

He added: “The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka, following a meeting with Catholic Parliamentarians both from the government and the opposition, wishes to express its deep concern



**GALAGODAATHTHE GNANASARA,** a Buddhist monk known for inciting sectarian hatred, will head the new task force on legal reforms.

LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/AFP





GETTY IMAGES

**AT A STORE** selling milk powder at government-controlled rates, in Colombo on October 19. Sri Lanka plunged into a serious economic crisis in the wake of the pandemic after exports dried up and inward remittances came to a standstill, leading to a foreign currency shortage that hindered imports.

about the erosion of the democratic principles and values in our country. Despite the promise made by the President and the government before and after the elections, the formulation of a new Constitution for the country is put on the back burner with the adoption of the unholy, manipulative 20th Amendment to the Constitution.” He also said that this was “being exploited beyond its limit to the detriment of the well-being of the country”.

Some 24 Muslim organisations issued a joint statement strongly condemning the appointment of Gnanasara.

However, Rajapaksa’s supporters said that a common law was the need of the hour as they feared Islamic sharia law would be implemented sooner rather than later amid a rising Saudi Arabian and Iranian influence in the country and promote Islamist extremism. After the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide attacks on churches and hotels, which killed nearly 300 people, animosity towards Muslims as a group has grown stronger in Sri Lanka.

#### PERSONAL LAWS

Sri Lankan laws are largely based on Anglo-Roman-Dutch laws. But when it comes to personal laws, there are a plethora of laws for specific communities. They include the Thesavalamai law or a collection of the ‘Customs of the Malabar Inhabitants of Jaffna’; the Jaffna Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance; the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act; the Muslim Intestate

Succession Ordinance; the Kandyan Marriage and Divorce Act; the Kandyan Succession Ordinance; and the Kandyan Matrimonial Rights and Inheritance Ordinance. Then, there is the Mukkuva law, which governs the fishermen community of Tamils in the east, specifically in Batticaloa. In Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s view, all these need to go.

#### DISTRACTION FROM CORE ISSUES

Gotabaya Rajapaksa is under siege from many quarters. The Sri Lankan economy has all but collapsed after the COVID-19 pandemic because tea exports, a mainstay of the economy, plummeted. Remittances from overseas also came to a standstill. Tourism, a major source of revenue, has been devastated. With the economy in doldrums, the bloated Sri Lankan state could not even pay salaries to government staff on time.

The precarious balance of payments position forced Rajapaksa to reach out to India; Sri Lanka even ended up having a currency swap deal with Bangladesh. The country then took the unprecedented step of massively curtailing most imports, leading to a scarcity of many commodities. The well-off sections were concerned and decried the move, but the poor actually bore the brunt as they were forced to pay more for food, particularly ‘pang’ (bread), a staple food.

High food prices are usually sufficient to topple a government, but the fact that the United National Party, the main opposition party, lacks unity and a leader of national stature to take on Rajapaksa is helping the President. Under these circumstances, it is the workers across the country who are voicing opposition, demanding answers from the government.

Rajapaksa’s ill-advised, ill-conceived and poorly implemented organic farming push across the country worsened the economic crisis. There is growing unrest and protests in rural areas by paddy farmers, who are demanding chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The President has rolled back this disastrous move, but the farmers are worried that the same policies will be back once the current crisis is over.

The stage is set for draconian anti-strike laws and possible incitement of majoritarian communalism, raising the bogey of Tamil militancy and jihadi terror. The Sinhalese media and social media are adding fuel to the fire. This is an old playbook: every Sri Lankan government since the country’s independence has conveniently used anti-Tamil rhetoric whenever it was faced with a crisis.

President Rajapaksa’s latest rebuff to India on October 5, after a meeting with Foreign Secretary Harsh V. Shringla where he categorically refused to discuss settling the national question or Tamil rights based on the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, is yet another instance of the extreme hard-line approach the Sri Lankan establishment is taking to steer the discourse in an entirely different direction.

When a problem appears insurmountable, minorities have always been a useful target for the government in Sri Lanka, then and now. □



# An economist as an iconoclast

Janos Kornai (1928-2021), the Hungarian economist, provided the first systematic and structural understanding of the **flaws in the centralised command economy** as well as the fallacy of the assumed equilibrium of the capitalist economy. BY **RAKESH BATBYAL**

WITH the passing away of Janos Kornai on October 21 at the age of 94, the world has lost yet another link to the intellectual world that struggled to shape the 20th century amid its great upheavals. While the city of Vienna produced grand theorists of world economy before the two World Wars, which included Alfred Hayek, the icon of neoliberal thought, it was Budapest, the capital of neighbouring Hungary, that produced one of the most insightful economists, Janos Kornai. This Hungarian provided the first systematic and structural understanding of the flaws in the centralised command economy as well as the fallacy of the assumed equilibrium of the capitalist economy.

## 'ECONOMICS OF SHORTAGE'

Piercing the ideological ways of looking at the socialist economy by Western economists, Kornai, through his celebrated research that included his doctoral work *Overcentralisation in Economic Administration* (1959), and later *Economics of Shortage* (1980), provided clues to the problem of shortage in the socialist (and centrally planned) economies which, as we know today, became their nemesis. He was the first to point out that this perennial shortage was not because of the problem of target or laxity on the part of the managers to



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carry out instructions properly; it was structural and embedded into a centralised command economy like that of the socialist economy.

It was after the Hungarian revolution of 1956 that Kornai became determined to delve deeper into the profession of economics. He began his self-instruction in the application of mathematics in economic modelling. It brought him to the study of linear programming. He was self-

taught and arrived at a state of modelling where he needed a mathematician to suggest the next step. Here, he was introduced to Thomas Liptak, a brilliant mathematician at the Hungarian Academy of Science who would soon land in prison in those early days of post-1956 communist restoration.

The paper, written from Budapest at a time when Kornai himself had just lost his job, was published in



*Econometrica*, the reputed journal of mathematical economics, and immediately attracted worldwide attention towards the authors and the Hungarian economy.<sup>1</sup>

#### KORNAI-LIPTAK DECOMPOSITION MODEL

The paper tried to present a two-sector model to ascertain in precision what has become famous as the Kornai-Liptak decomposition model, that is, simplifying the large problem of resources and profits by decentralised firms. It tried to help understand the price-sharing mechanism, not through what Kornai later said, 'property relations or institutional design' but from the rate of profit sharing and incentives. Thus, incentives and the relation between principal and agent, on the one hand, and incentive and its direction to production, on the other, can be understood differently from the kind of economic modelling done by the Marxist economist Oscar Lange, who identified the central planning board (CPB) with providing space for adjustment of both output and incentive. Kornai's was the first open difference with an effort to bring precision into forecasting, which might or might not have accorded the supreme place to the planning commission.

Incidentally, Lange had a deep interest in Indian planning and was quite influential in India's planning decision. Kornai, too, was keen on India's planned development, and in fact visited India in 1975 and interacted with one of India's foremost economists on planning, Prof. Sukhamoy Chakravarty, and some political leaders, including those from the communist parties. His disagreements with many of those he met were that they were not ready to give the running democracy in India its due just because it was falling short of their expectations. He also disagreed on the basic postulate, valid even today, that the answer to the problems in the economy as well as society lay in efficient production and not merely expansive distribution.

Kornai believed in this even three decades later when changes were

witnessed in east and central Europe after the 2007-08 financial crisis.

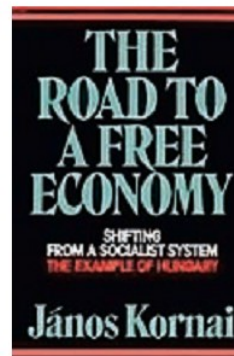
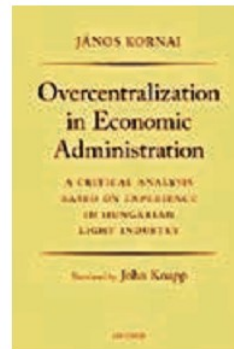
With his work on economic modelling advancing to a higher level, what attracted his attention was the general equilibrium theory, the lynchpin of the justification of the market and market mechanism. Working behind iron curtains with limited contact with Western academia in the 1950s and 1960s, Kornai taught himself serious mathematics and economics to question this lynchpin of the economic understanding in capitalist economy.

His *Anti Equilibrium* (1971) showed how the capitalist system has a supply surplus, contrasting with what he described as excess demand (shortage) in the socialist ones. This was a major critique of the mainstream Western economy and hollowed out the glory of the general equilibrium theory that worked on a different assumption. This also brought him in direct touch with the world of Western economics at a time when neoliberals, spreading out from Chicago, were trying to take over the economic establishment and the United States universities. Kornai, therefore, presented a critique of their assumption. In fact, the book also brought out issues that would become quite central to economic research in the 21st century, that is, the information base of economic analysis. His idea of 'informational asymmetry' helped many future research-

ers in the field.

The post-1980s saw Kornai gradually moving to the centre stage of the world of economics and economic thinking. In 1992 he became the Allie S. Freed Professor of Economics Emeritus at Harvard, and contributed at a larger level through his students there. This was also the time that he published his magnum opus, *The Socialist System* (1992). As president of the International Economic Association and the Econometric Society and European Economic Association, and with state and university honours from a number of countries, including the highest state honours of Hungary, Kornai travelled far and wide and higher in the realm of economics and scholarship.

Notwithstanding all the fame abroad, he remained rooted to his Hungarian origins and his concern for the Hungarian economy and society. Born in 1928, he suffered both Nazi torture and the communist suppression. The first killed his father and brother and left him without any support after his accidental survival. The other, while giving him the inspiration to become a serious economist after seeing and analysing the socialist economic system, also made him work longer and with difficulties in much of his youth. It is only after the 1980s that one saw him moving with much freedom and across the world, including to the U.S.,





While he was the first to show the fallacies of the socialist economic system, he was equally concerned about the madness of wholesale privatisation.

which was turning out to be the Mecca of economists. His extremely readable *Force of Thought: Irregular Memoirs of an Intellectual Journey* (2008) gives a moving account of the extraordinary times in which he lived and the life of a great mind.<sup>2</sup>

#### FALLACIES OF THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM

As a young researcher working on the contemporary history of central Europe, I met Kornai in 2007, just before the economic crisis hit central and eastern Europe, and could sense his discomfort at the way the transition in Hungary and its neighbouring countries was taking a turn. While he was critical of the centralised command planning of the socialist system, he did not completely wish it away. He showed me the building which used to house the Goss Plan (Planning Commission) and was being taken over by the European Union to turn into its office “to plan” its course. With a twitch of sarcasm, he indicated that what the post-socialist abandoned, the liberal economist took over after criticising it wholeheartedly. While he was the first to show the fallacies of the socialist economic system, he was equally concerned about the madness of wholesale privatisation. This made him look closely at the way societies were having to shoulder the collapse of institutions in the wake of such privatisation, which was bringing in its wake leaders and parties giving societies a completely wrong turn. He wanted the social trust to regain its hold.<sup>3</sup> His voice became cautionary and sagacious, and it is no wonder that he began to take active interest in the privatisation of, for example, the health segment in Hungary.<sup>4</sup>

He, however, was alive to the

political turn that central and eastern Europe were taking, which to him were betraying the hopes that the transition had offered. In fact, he observed closely the U-turn that Hungary was making and wrote about it. To him freedom, democracy and civilisation were too important to be sacrificed for economic development. He could see, unlike the neoliberal idea of trust that Fukuyama later came out with, that societies in this part of the world may lose many virtues of human life if the economy and society are guided in this way. In this sense, his long and committed life of reflection cautions us: we should not just be privatising for the sake of privatisation as there were repercussions, and that there were arenas of human life that needed to be treated differently.

#### RESPECT FOR NATIONAL WORTH

Deeply nationalistic in the sense of someone who loved the language, literature and the flavour of Hungary, he was forthright (during my conversation with him) that no matter how small the country was, its nationalism and national self-worth should be respected. He thought that changes should come to nations from within, as exemplified by China, where its leadership's resolve to change resulted in developing capitalism in a communist system. He was involved in advising China. It is another matter that Kornai later seems to have expressed his unhappiness and regret over the developments in China. Notwithstanding his disavowal of the socialist system and its ‘ideology of bureaucratic rule, etatism, paternalism, and egalitarianism’, which had pervaded the socialist system and caused its struc-

tural collapse, he was also the medium that conveyed to us the forces of ideas of the 19th and 20th century Europe: “the ideas of solidarity, fairness, compassion for the weak, and rationality at a societal level”, which he believed had attracted, including himself, to socialism.<sup>5</sup>

Academics and scholars who are living in oppressive systems can take heart from the way Kornai worked and exposed the cleavages in the system. May be his initial self-censorship or being an economist saved him that ultimate penalty, which many political dissidents paid for with their life and career. It was the doggedness with which he carried on his work and the grand vision that he never lost touch with that made him what he became: a person whose ideas resonated the world over and despite the Noble Prize eluding him. The contributions that he made were far in excess, using his own concept rather than the ones Western economists were providing through excess supply of papers and thesis. He personified the career of many a great European intellectual of the last century. □

*Rakesh Batabyal teaches history and media theory at the Centre for Media Studies, School of Social Sciences, JNU. He is currently working on east and central Europe from 1989-2021.*

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# Political all-rounder

For five decades, **Subrata Mukherjee (1946-2021)** was one of the most influential political leaders in West Bengal even though he spent most of his career in the opposition. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

ON the night of Diwali, November 4, West Bengal lost one of its most colourful and popular leaders. Subrata Mukherjee, the State's Panchayat Minister, passed away in Kolkata after a heart attack. He was 75 and is survived by his wife. Mukherjee was one of the most important and influential political figures in the State, starting out in the Congress and then joining the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Right until the end, he was never out of the political limelight, not even during the 34-year rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front.

A visibly upset Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said of her old mentor: "I have faced a lot of setbacks in my life, but Subrata da's death is a huge setback. I doubt whether there can be another person like Subrata da: so cheerful all the time, so dedicated to his work.... I was told he was getting better and would be released from the hospital the next day, but then suddenly he had a massive heart attack, and despite all the efforts made by doctors he could not be saved.... I will not be there at the funeral because I cannot bear to look upon Subrata da's dead body. I love him very much. I could never imagine that on the day of Kali Puja, with so much light, such darkness would descend upon us."

Mukherjee had spotted Mamata Banerjee's potential while she was still a student leader at Jogamaya College and he was president of the Chhatra Parishad. Later, when Rajiv Gandhi wanted a strong woman candidate for the Jadavpur Lok Sabha



SWAPAN MAHAPATRA/PTI

seat to take on the formidable Somnath Chatterjee of the CPI(M), it was Mukherjee who proposed Mamata Banerjee's name. When Pranab Mukherjee asked Subrata Mukherjee whether she was up to the task, he had replied that she was the only one who would be able to pull it off, and he was proved correct: she created a sensation by defeating the veteran Communist heavyweight. "Our relationship was never like that of a Chief Minister and her Minister. I always looked upon him as my elder brother, who would rectify my mistakes," said Mamata Banerjee. Right until the end of his life, he remained one of her most trusted advisers and one she would always turn to in times of crisis. Mamata Banerjee's nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, Lok Sabha MP and all-India general secretary of the TMC, described Mukherjee's passing as the end of an era. "He was like a guardian to all of us, like the roof over

our head. The void he has left behind can never be filled," he said.

## YOUNG TURKS

Mukherjee burst upon the political scene in the late 1960s as a young firebrand student leader who had the confidence of the Congress high command that he could take the party to greater heights. Mukherjee was one of the three young Turks in the Congress—the others being Somen Mitra and Priyaranjan Das Munsi—who were perceived as the future of the party in the State. So close was he to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that there was this saying within the West Bengal Pradesh Congress: "*Indirar dui putra: Priyaranjan o Subrata*" (Indira has two sons: Priyaranjan and Subrata). Although Mukherjee shared a deep personal friendship with Priyaranjan Das Munsi, there was a cold rivalry between him and Somen Mitra.

With Mukherjee's death an important chapter in the history of the Congress in Bengal comes to an end. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, a stalwart Congress leader from the State and Leader of the Congress Party in the Lok Sabha, said: "This is the end of a generation of leaders.... The great trio of the Congress, Subrata da, Priya da [d. 2017] and Somen da [d. 2021] are no more, and this is a matter of great sadness for us."

Born on June 14, 1946, in Sarangabad, South 24 Paraganas, Subrata Mukherjee graduated in anthropology and got a master's degree in archaeology. He cut his teeth in politics as a student leader in the



late 1960s and, at the age of just 25, became an MLA after he won the Ballygunge seat in the 1971 Assembly election. This was the beginning of an outstanding legislative career during which he lost only twice, in 1977 and 2006. In 1972, at the age of 26, he became the youngest person ever to assume the office of a Minister in Bengal (he was given charge of the portfolios of Home and Information and Culture under Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray). After losing in 1977, he bounced back by winning from the Jorabagan seat in the next Assembly election, in 1982. He retained the Jorabagan seat until 1996, after which he changed his constituency to Chowringhee.

#### JOINED THE TRINAMOOL

After more than 30 years in the Congress, in 2000 Subrata Mukherjee joined the TMC under his former protegee Mamata Banerjee. In the municipal elections the same year, the TMC won, and Mukherjee became the first non-Left Mayor since the CPI(M) came to power in 1977. In 2005, he quit the Trinamool after differences with Mamata Banerjee and established a new political platform, Paschchim Banga Unnayan Mancha, forging an alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party and the Congress. Subsequently, he went back to the Congress only to return to the TMC in 2010. In the intervening years, his political career hit a low patch. His political front flopped, and he lost in the Assembly election from Chowringhee. In 2008, Mukherjee and Mamata Banerjee buried the hatchet, and he was seen at her protest site in Singur, where she was carrying out a prolonged agitation against the State government's forcible land acquisition to set up the Tata Motors' small car factory. In 2011, he contested from his old constituency of Ballygunge on the Trinamool ticket and won. Nearly 40 years after he first became a Minister, Mukherjee once again had an important place in the Cabinet. Interestingly, for all his success in Assembly elections, Mukherjee was singularly unlucky when contesting for the Lok Sabha. His three

He was an excellent orator, a connoisseur of food and sweets, and a raconteur par excellence.

attempts at getting elected as an MP—in 1994, 2009 and 2019—met with failure.

Mukherjee was also widely appreciated for his remarkable administrative abilities, his pragmatism and his efficiency. As the Mayor of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, he pushed through reforms to rid the KMC of corruption and make it a smooth-running organisation. Mukherjee was also a great survivor who never lost his relevance in the politics of the State even though for most of his political career he was in the opposition. He could never be kept down for long and always found a way to bounce back into prominence some way or the other. From being the youngest ever Minister in the State, he asserted himself as a key opposition leader, the Mayor of Kolkata, a trade union leader and president of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, and a Minister in the TMC government from 2011. He had encyclopaedic knowledge of parliamentary politics, was an excellent orator, a connoisseur of food and sweets, and a raconteur par excellence. He even acted in a television series. He was a person full of *joie de vivre* and never allowed politics to get in the way of some fun and pleasure. Adhir Chowdhury said: "Wherever there was Subrata Mukherjee, there was fun and laughter, but there was also serious talk. He was not only a cheerful person himself, he could also make others happy."

Mukherjee's political career had its fair share of controversies. In 2016, just ahead of the Assembly elections, a video of a sting operation

carried out by the news portal Narada News showed several top Trinamool leaders, legislators, Ministers and MPs accepting cash on camera, Mukherjee among them. In May this year, the Central Bureau of Investigation arrested him, along with Cabinet colleague Firhad Hakim, TMC MLA Madan Mitra and former TMC heavyweight Sovan Chatterjee, in connection with the case. All four were later granted bail.

One aspect that stood out about Mukherjee and endeared him to the public irrespective of political affiliations was his affable nature. Always with a smile on his lips and his ready wit, Mukherjee's popularity never waned in the more than 50 years he spent in the public eye. His detractors called him an opportunist, always looking for a way to come out on top, and neither was it unnatural for him to conveniently switch parties when it suited him. He was once famously labelled a *tormuj* (watermelon)—green outside but red inside—which was an indirect way of accusing him of being secretly in league with the CPI(M). But Mukherjee never seemed to be affected by the personal attacks and barbs. Not only did he take them in his stride, he also gave back as good as he got with his scathing wit and sometimes acerbic humour.

His personality and loveable character made him a popular figure cutting across political party lines. Even when he was the most bitter critic of the CPI(M), he shared a warm friendship with Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. After Mukherjee's death the political parties of the State set aside their differences and came forward with rich tributes. Biman Bose, CPI(M) Polit Bureau member and Left Front chairman, said: "Subrata Mukherjee may have been with the Congress and then the Trinamool, but he maintained relations with everybody." Dilip Ghosh, senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader and Lok Sabha MP, said: "Just as he would regale us with his humour, there was also a lot to be learnt from him. The death of such a figure will undoubtedly leave a big gap in the world of politics." □



# The man whom history forgot

It is time to retrieve from the oblivion of history the colourful character of **Mahendar Misir** (1886-1946), musician, poet, athlete, revolutionary and friend of the oppressed, who was willing to go to great lengths to espouse causes close to his heart. Ironically, he is yet to be recognised as a freedom fighter, let alone as a Renaissance man. BY **J.N. SINHA**

SARAN division in north Bihar is the easternmost bastion of Bhojpuri culture in the Gangetic heartland. A flatland with wild and marshy topography, the region has been traditionally dogged by natural calamities, poverty and demographic disturbances. This has infused into its culture a streak of audacity and adventure, tinged with an undertone of melancholia and sorrow at the same time. Bhojpuri culture does not have much written literature, but it is rich in oral and folk traditions. Kabir was one of its earliest representatives; and Ghagh, an elusive genius of yore, pondered over the toils and travails of its people. Close to our times, Rahul Sankrityayan, scholar-activist and globetrotter, is another scion of this culture. All of them were unique and sailed against the tide. Here, I try to track an equally unusual and enigmatic representative of the culture. Mahendar Misir defies any epithet yet fits into many—athlete, musician, poet, revolutionary, criminal, wanderer, and thinker. His songs resonate all over the Bhojpuri world, yet people hardly know who he was.

Documented sources about him are meagre, and the chronology of the events of his life is not clear; however, oral sources abound. No histor-

ian appears to have ever worked on him; but literary works by Suresh Kumar Mishra, Bhagwati Prasad Dwivedi, Johar Safiabad, Ravindra Bharti, Anamika and others have kept his memory alive. Pandey Kapil's Bhojpuri novel *Phoolsunghi* (1977; English translation by Gautam Chaubey, Penguin, 2020) is probably a close portrayal of his life and time. Happily, many of Mahendar's own compositions speak for



**MAHENDAR MISIR.** His legacy lives on through his songs that are still sung and loved in the Bhojpuri-speaking world.

him. Mahendar Misir (1886-1946) was born on March 16, 1886, at Mishraulia village in Saran. He was not interested in conventional schooling; but mythological stories told by his schoolteacher always fascinated him. In his youth, he had an interest in virtually anything that came his way. He was attracted to athletics and excelled in wrestling and horse riding. Gradually, he was attracted to music, folk theatre and mythological narratives (*pravaachan*). He played almost all popular musical instruments of his time, composed lyrics and sang them exceptionally well. There was no cinema then, so, nautch, Ramlila, and performances by *tawaifs* (courtesans) were the popular forms of entertainment. However, men of respectable families were expected to stay away from them, but that did not deter Mahendar.

His region was among the earliest to suffer the extraction of resources by Europeans; vagaries of nature added to its woes. British revenue policy perpetuated its poverty and forced people to migrate to big cities for livelihood. A large number of them, called *Girmitiyas* (indentured labourers), went to faraway British colonies across the globe, leaving behind many problems at



home. Crime and social insecurity rose high and oppression acquired new forms in usury, property disputes and exploitation of the weak, women in particular. Natural calamities and socio-political upheavals after the First World War made matters worse. Mahatma Gandhi responded with Satyagraha and his rural reconstruction programme from Champaran, and thousands joined him to work for freedom. However, the writers and artists responded in their own ways. While Raghuveer Narayan (1884-1955) wrote his iconic song *Batohiya* to eulogise the nation, and many endeavoured to stoke up patriotism for freedom, Mahendar was exercised over domestic excesses faced by women, the exploitation of the marginalised, and the emotional suffering of the youth. He empathised with them and gained inspiration for his creativity.

Very soon, he became known for his prodigious talent. A wealthy zamindar, Halivant Sahay of Chapra, the district headquarters, took an interest in him. A patron of music and dance, Sahay had lost his wife early in life and had no children. He spent most of his time in socialising and entertainment, and noted musicians and *tawaifs* performed at his *mehfils* (private concerts). Sahay was instantly impressed by Mahendar's singing, and they became friends. Mahendar came in touch with the artists who performed for Sahay, and his singing stole their hearts, too.

Meanwhile, Sahay fell for one Gulzaribai, popular as Dhelabai, of Muzaffarpur. She was the daughter of the renowned *tawaif* Meenabai. Beautiful and talented, Dhela was accomplished in both singing and dance and was known for her gracious *adaaygee* (style). The musicologist Thakur Jaidev Singh has ranked her among India's leading musicians of the time. Sahay craved her as his companion, but she spurned his advances.

He is said to have abducted and later married her. He put her up in a separate mansion and provided her with all the luxuries of life to make her happy, but she never reconciled

with the situation and always felt caged.

Mahendar Misir grew close to Dhelabai during musical soirees. Once, after the noted artists had finished, he was asked to sing as a debutant, but he left everyone spellbound. When the event was over and Mahendar was to leave, Dhela called for him, applauded his singing and invited him to revisit. He was already smitten by her beauty and performance, now her gesture threw him into a storm of emotions and daydreaming, and thus started their friendship.

Mahendar visited her mansion frequently and performed at the concerts held there. When his relation with Dhelabai deepened, Mahendar apparently expressed disapproval of her openness with others. This irked Dhela, who asserted her independence in a way he had never anticipated. Offended and distraught, he left Chapra and mindlessly boarded a train that brought him to Benaras.

In Benaras, he loitered for days on its *ghats* (riverfront) before he mingled with the local musicians and became popular overnight. Soon, he met some leading *tawaifs* and started giving them lessons in music. Later, he also presented independent performances in major towns of north India and earned a lot of money. His knowledge and professional skill impressed the courtesans so much that they invited him to their homes in Benaras, Lucknow, Kanpur, Patna and Muzaffarpur. He composed songs for them, which resonated at their *kothas* (professional home) in his lifetime. They also invited him to their annual gatherings in Chapra, and at the famous Sonepur fair, where they assembled from all over the country to perform. However, his intimacy with a renowned courtesan (Vidyadhari Bai?) at Benaras seems to have hurt him again, and he left the city.

He moved to Calcutta (now Kolkata) and became popular among music lovers there. Some novels refer to his dalliance with courtesans and wine. His love for music, dance and poetry was certainly boundless. Calcutta was a major transit point from

where the poor and the needy sailed to far-off lands for jobs, leaving their families in a state of perpetual waiting and hardship. This was especially the case in the Bhojpur region, where pangs of poverty and separation had become a constant of life. Lack of freedom for women, incompatible marriages and oppressive social customs had perpetuated the agonies of the youth, which Mahendar portrayed in his compositions with unmatched sensitivity.

In the course of his visits to various towns, he became closely aware of the condition of *tawaifs*. During the Mughal period, they were respected as custodians of cultural heritage and its disseminators; but with the fall of the Empire, they were forced to shift for survival from Delhi to smaller places like Lucknow and Patna. Soon, the British deprived them of their last patrons as the aristocracy became impoverished. Many of them were forced to turn to prostitution.

It was in these circumstances that Mahendar Misir came to their help, like his contemporary Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938), the noted Bengali novelist. Both were Brahmins and talented, but they associated with *tawaifs*. Saratchandra came into prominence with his novella *Devdas*, which he wrote around 1901 while staying near Chaturbhujsthan, the red-light area at Muzaffarpur; Mahendar started his artist's journey from there, after Saratchandra left for Bhagalpur in 1903 (*Frontline*, "The mortals of Devdas", January 9, 2015).

## MAKING OF THE REVOLUTIONARY

The public life of Mahendar Misir began soon after the Swadeshi movement and with the rise of revolutionary nationalism in India. In one of his poems, he wrote how the British had drained India's wealth for a pitance in return (*Hamra niko na laage Ram goran ke karni...*). Seeing the inefficacy of moderate politics, he inclined towards political terrorism, which surged after 1907. In Bihar, it started with the bombing by Khudiram Bose in 1908 at Muzaf-



farpur, and terrorist activity soon intensified around Saran district.

However, something happened in the meanwhile which disrupted Mahendar's political activities and his equation with Halivant Sahay. Mahendar, who had gained popularity as an artist and probably as a toughie with his wrestling partners, opposed Sahay's attitude towards Dhelabai, who had never reconciled with her relation with him. Sahay was an easy-going person *sans* any moral concern. Faced with resistance from the two, he renounced home to live like an ascetic at the residence of his "godfather", Henry Revel, the Customs Collector of Saran, a little away from Chapra town. Dhelabai stayed back at his mansion, with property in Chapra and *zamindari* in the vicinity. Sahay had no children, so, his relatives scrambled to dislodge Dhelabai from the estate. Since Mahendar loved Dhela, he promptly came to her rescue. Some people suspect he had been a party to her abduction and now wanted to make amends by helping her. However, things could not remain like before. Legal disputes followed, depleting her assets. When the situation worsened, Mahendar supported her with his own resources, but they started drying up soon.

Yet, he did not desert Dhela. By now, she was emotionally involved with him. Thus, circumstances brought them together. She got an accommodation built for him on her premises along with a Shiva temple. He lived and practised music there. She was often woken up in the dead of night by some sad songs of separation coming out of the temple, so goes the legend. One night, beats of the *tabla* woke her up. When she came out on her rooftop, the town was soaked in moonlight and fast asleep, and Mahendar was playing the *tabla* in a frenzy, unmindful of the world around. Dhela could not control herself; on an impulse, she put on *ghungroos* (anklet bells) and started dancing on the rooftop. They caught up with each other instantly, reciprocating to the beats of the *tabla* and Dhela's footsteps; and an un-



**DHELABAI.** Mahendar Misir's relationship with her has passed into legend.

usual, divine dance continued in celestial cadence. When it ended, Dhela rushed to Misirji, bowed to him and presented him her nose ring as a token of respect, and requested him to accept her as a disciple, recount the local people. This was a touching moment that gave wings to their platonic love to soar unto their death.

However, her financial crisis worsened; and, maybe, problems cropped up also concerning their relations. As a result, Mahendar decided to get off the scene, and wandered away. He went to Calcutta for earning more money to support Dhela. His passion for music continued all along; so, as soon as he performed at a musical concert there, he captivated the audience, which comprised a sizeable number of Bhojpuri-speakers and freedom fighters. A public speech by Subhas Bose at the Victoria Ground ignited his patriotism and brought him close to Bengali revolutionaries. They planned to operate in Bihar through him and gave him a currency-printing machine to finance their operations there and weaken the colonial economy with fake money. Others say he got it from an India-born Englishman who loved his music, but this story is not plausible. Still others believe he did it for the sheer greed of money, but there is no evidence of this.

Actually, there was a streak of the rebel in him from his early days. People believe he was influenced by

the anti-British Sanyasi rebellion, which had inspired Bankimchandra's novel *Anandamath*, said to be based on the revolt of Raja Fateh Sahi of Huseypur in Saran. Bankimchandra and Vivekananda urged the youth to be strong and brave to fight the foreigners. Consequently, *akharas* appeared as unique centres of athletics and the arts, and Bharat Mata was portrayed as the female deity Durga, known as the destroyer of evil (metaphorically identified with the British at this time). This trend is likely to have motivated Mahendar to go for martial arts, music, the feminist cause, and revolutionary nationalism, simultaneously.

Thus, on returning from Calcutta in 1915, he started printing currency notes and used these to help the local revolutionaries and others. He invited them to his residence, apparently for cultural meets, but there they secretly exchanged information and money. By the 1920s, many Biharis were influenced by revolutionary groups like Anushilan Samiti and Yugantar; now they joined Bhagat Singh's Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA). A number of them lived in Tirhut division, and Saran was its hotbed. Just across the Gandak to the east lived the noted revolutionaries Jogendra Shukla and Baikunth Sukul at Jalalpur village in Muzaffarpur district. Jogendra Shukla (1896-1960) was arrested in Chapra and was jailed for over 16 years. He was among the founders of the HSRA and a senior associate of the Bhagat Singh group. His nephew, Baikunth Sukul (1907-1934), was hanged at Gaya jail for killing an HSRA police bureau member, P.N. Ghose of Betia, for turning approver in the Lahore conspiracy case leading to the hanging of Bhagat Singh. Baikunth's trial revealed how intense revolutionary activities were going on in Saran. Is it possible that Mahendar Misir was not connected with them?

By now, even *kothas* of *tawaiifs* had become information centres for the revolutionaries, as *tawaiifs* came in close contact with visitors from whom they could elicit information.



Later, some *tawaifs* actively helped freedom fighters. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Benaras, he requested the noted courtesan Vidyadhari Bai to raise funds through her performances for the freedom movement, leading finally to the foundation of the Akhil Bharatiya Tawaif Sangh in 1920. He also asked the well-known courtesan Gauhar Jaan to help in this regard. *Tawaifs* lived at Chapra, but Muzaffarpur was a greater centre. Their *kothas* were a place of entertainment and cultural grooming for the aristocracy. However, when the nobility declined under the British Raj and overall conditions deteriorated after the First World War, their existence became precarious.

Mahendar Misir acted as their saviour. His love for music and dance had brought him to them in the prime of his youth. He seems to have empathised with them, especially after losing Dhela—something like Saratchandra's empathy for all women in distress after losing Paro and Chandramukhi (in *Devdas*, Dheeru and Kalidasi in real life). Thus, Misir visited *tawaifs* in several north Indian towns and tried to hone their skill in music and dance free of charge. Above all, he helped them financially in case anyone went out of the profession because of old age or bad health.

#### CONVICTION AND JAIL TERM

While this was going on, his generosity and lavish living raised suspicions about the sources of his income. The police spied on him, and an officer, Jatadhari Prasad, entered his household as a domestic help under the name of Gopichand. Eventually, he won Misir's confidence and discovered his involvement in counterfeiting currency notes and revolutionary activities. The police raided his house on the night of April 16, 1924, while printing of notes was going on. They seized the machine, with bundles of printed notes, and arrested Mahendar along with his brothers. He was tried in the district court and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment.

Subsequently, an appeal was

filed in the High Court, and two sympathisers of revolutionary nationalism, Hemchandra Mishra and the renowned barrister C.R. Das, represented him. Das did not charge any fees. The sentence was reduced to 10 years. The *tawaifs*, especially Dhelabai, met the expenses of the suit; now they petitioned the government for his release in lieu of silver coins and their jewellery equal to his weight, but the government declined. Even if this story is not true, it shows the public perception of *tawaifs*' concern for their benefactor.

After his conviction, Misir was sent to Buxar jail to undergo the sentence. At this point, Jatadhari Prasad reportedly appeared before him suddenly, applauded his patriotism, and apologised for having him arrested. Their dialogue is captured in a moving song scripted by Misir later ("With love Gopichand served me fine betel leaves ...and got me jailed..."). Incidentally, the jail Superintendent already knew Misir as a renowned musician and poet; soon, they became friends. In fact, with his manners and his music, he endeared himself to all in the jail. He also trained them in music. Finally, he was released in 1931, three years before the due date. While in jail, he wrote on various subjects, of which the seven-part *Apoorva Ramayana*, the first epic of Bhojpuri, and *Nirguns* (philosophical songs about life) are notable.

Sadly, the moment Mahendar returned home, he came to know of Dhela's illness and rushed to meet her, but she was close to her end. She talked to him briefly and requested him to sing for her. Puzzled and perturbed, Mahender poured out: "O blessed bride, I see a fair, in the city of snares/O blessed bride, Fineries are sold, precious and rare..." (*Maya ke nagariya men lagal ba bazaria ei sohagin suna...*). As he finished, she smiled and closed her eyes forever.

This was devastating for Mahendar. For the next 15 years, he was forlorn and melancholic and became spiritual. He wrote mostly sad songs and *Nirguns*, and presented Ram-Krishna *katha* (story) in Navtanka style. His activities were restricted,

and he stayed mostly at the Shiv Mandir at Dhela's residence. Every morning he would start with *raag* Bhairavi and *raag* Vihaag; but on October 26, 1946, the eighth day of his illness, he began with Ramdhun (prayer to God) and passed away.

Today, Dhela's dilapidated double-storey *haveli* (mansion) and the Shiv Mandir stand at Shivpuri in Chapra as their last memorial. Most people do not know them, none is interested. However, the commoners have sanctified them: they call Mahendar Baba (saint), and Dhela Mai (revered, divine mother), and the temple is known after their names. Its attending *poojari* remembers their love as that of Radha-Krishna and of Krishna-Meera.

#### LOOKING BACK

Almost a century has passed since then. Let us remember them on the occasion of the 75th death anniversary of Mahendar Misir on October 26, 2021. Meanwhile, numerous versions of stories about them have floated around, making their evaluation difficult. Misir's roots are clear; his descendants still live at his native Mishraulia, with a few structures of his time intact. Dhela came from a lineage of celebrated Mughal *tawaifs*; but the confusion on the sequence and authenticity of happenings in their lives can be resolved only after further research. It is difficult also to authenticate their artistic excellence unless we have their recorded versions; nevertheless, Misir's countless songs are testimony to his legacy and enthral millions of Bhojpuri-speakers in India and the erstwhile British colonies like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam, and Myanmar. Dhela, too, survives in popular memory as an elusive diva.

Misir's compositions number in hundreds; about a dozen of his books are traceable, others in manuscripts are hidden here and there. He enriched every genre of music and literature, be it *Thumri*, *Dadra*, *Kajri*, *Barahmasa*, and ritual songs. He excelled in romantic songs of love, longing and separation. Two of his most popular and sensuous songs are





**DHELABAI'S HOUSE** in Chapra still stands.

"The serpent has stung my finger, O Sister-in-law/Kindle the lamp and call your brother..." (*Anguri men danslebiya nageenia re, ei nanadi, diyara jara da/... apna bhaiya ke bulaada...*) and "Half night past, the koel cries and I am sleepless" (*Adhi-adhi ratiya kuhuke koelia, Ram barania bhailee na/ Mora ankhiya ke niniya, Ram bairaniya bhailee na...*). He wrote many of his songs in prison. Animating his compositions with vivid imagery that brings the words to life, and with metaphors drawn from his surroundings, he has strung together simple, natural responses of love, loss and the human limitations into sublime poetry and stirring songs. Nowhere has he ever used vulgar terms to depict something otherwise considered lewd. Beneath his flamboyance and dalliance, there is a perennial undercurrent of longing for love, feelings of loss and deprivation that he experienced personally and watched his society suffer. He wrote in Bhojpuri, Hindi, Awadhi and Urdu, and also commented on the Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

His understanding of classical music and folk traditions and eye for the subtle have enriched his compos-

itions. Their malleability has allowed successive generations of artists to embellish them with their own creativity and let the audience connect. His devotional verses express deep emotions of communion with the divine, but also ponder over the primordial horror of death. There are fleeting glimpses of Kabir, Tulsi and others in his compositions; yet he has his novelties. This is why, even without finding any place in mainstream literature or history, he resides in millions of hearts across the globe. The *Purabia* style of *gaya-kee* is destined to remain his greatest contribution to India's cultural wealth.

After seniors like Sharda Sinha, now a new generation of singers such as Chandan Tiwari, Rameshwar Gop, Kalpna Patwari and Devi are carrying forward his legacy of soulful songs; and with his literary input, Manoj Bhawuk and others have brought his admirers together on TV. Yet, why is Mahendar Misir absent from mainstream history?

Obviously, the stigma of counterfeiting and association with *tawaifs* continues to hound him, though for the wrong reasons: The history of the revolutionary movement is replete

with murder and robbery committed to raise funds for operations aimed at destabilising the colonial economy. Mahendar's involvement was no different. True, his association with the *tawaifs* was too much for his traditional Brahminical society. But this obsessive moralism overlooks the social realities—his two unhappy marriages, which forced him to engage with his fads that brought him to *tawaifs*, and that, in turn, to the problems of man-woman relationship. He was appalled at the dehumanisation of women, *tawaifs* in particular. Missing this point in the name of morality is gross injustice to him.

Bhikhari Thakur (1887-1971) was inspired by him to engage on similar problems, and survived to taste freedom, popularity and honour after Independence (*Frontline*, June 12, 2016). Mahendar Misir worked on a larger canvas with much deeper sensitivity, but he lived and died under subjugation. Ironically, he is yet to be recognised as a freedom fighter, let alone as a Renaissance man! This is a reflection on his society. Pat Brown of the United States has probed the Devdas-Paro relations in *Devdas*, and has attributed their frailties to their social background. Why cannot we see Misir in that light? His relation with Dhelabai is a supreme example of human relationship, and his benevolence towards *tawaifs* an act of courage, too. Beneath his flamboyance and vagrancy, there was a humanist and an early exponent of feminism—much before Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* (1949). Indeed, Mahendar Misir is a victim of tradition and tyranny of time. □

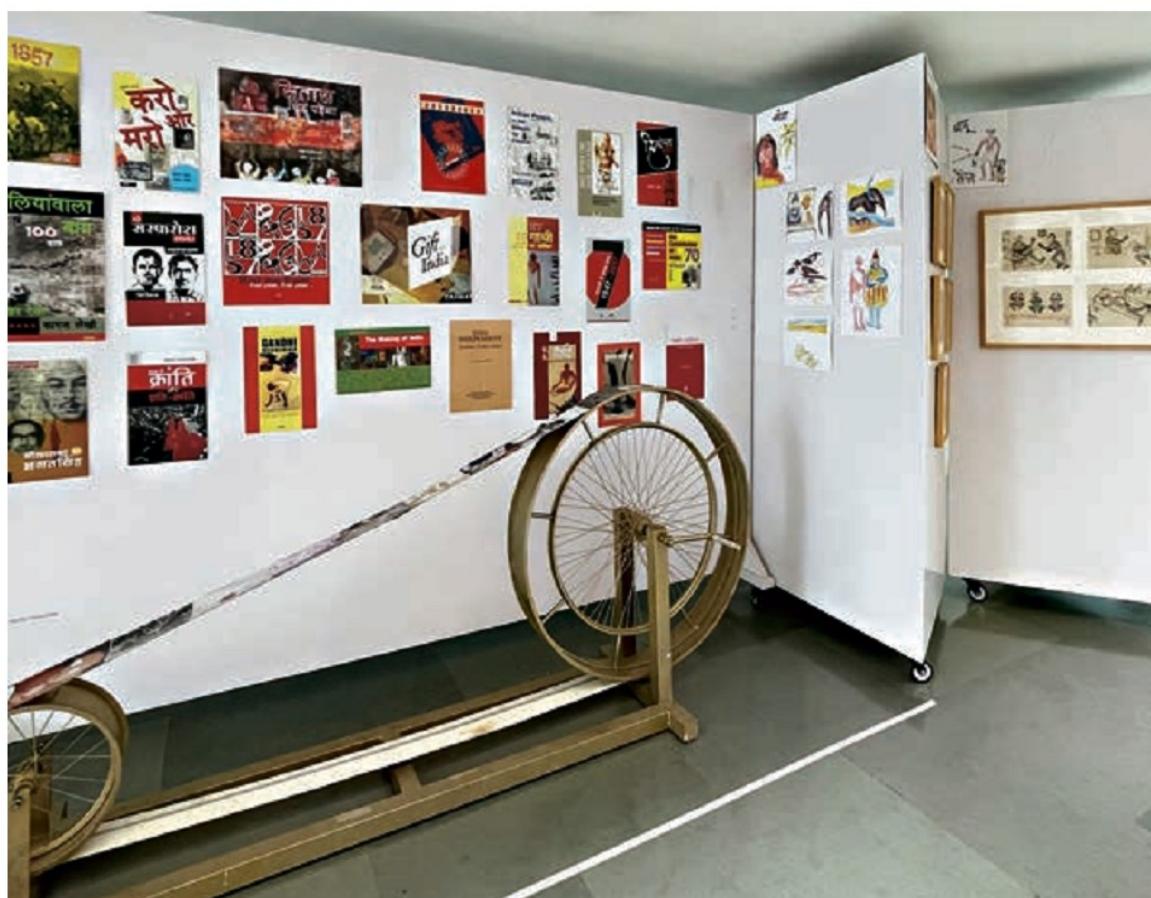
*J.N. Sinha taught history at the University of Delhi. He can be contacted at [jnsinha@rediffmail.com](mailto:jnsinha@rediffmail.com)*

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# The past in the present

“India is not Lost”, an art exhibition organised by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust to commemorate the country’s 75th year of independence, serves as a powerful, emotive reminder of what our freedom fighters stood for. BY **SUNEET CHOPRA**



**“THE SPINNING WHEEL”** by Kanishka Prasad and Vertika Chaturvedi. In the background is a display of covers of SAHMAT’s publications on the Indian national movement.



THE Jawahar Bhawan, from where the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation in New Delhi functions, is the venue of an unassuming exhibition organised by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust [SAHMAT] which reflects the core reality of the ups and downs of our independence struggles of nearly 100 years before 1947. It is an emotive amalgam of the ideas of "equality, fraternity, humanism and pluralism" that went into the "waves of hope" that developed into actions by "civic dissenters, protestors, workers unions, farmers and citizens of all vocations" standing together "in their quest to remember and reform India's legacy of communal amity and creative freedom", which is the essence of our national movement.

Put together by Aban Raza, Deepani Seth and Arushi Vats, this exhibition is called "India is not Lost". In it, we find our thoughts entering those spheres of struggle against all forms of oppression, both foreign and indigenous. The timetable of this exhibition carries us back to the revolt of Mangal Pandey and the prairie fire that it unleashed all over India in 1857, past the horrors of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the hanging of Bhagat Singh and his companions, up to the Partition of 1947 and beyond.

It is not an easy task, but the curators have made it more attractive by involving over 200 creative artists from over 20 countries, such as the United Kingdom, India, France, the United States, Brazil, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, China, Thailand, Australia, Kenya, Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica and Vietnam. The interesting element of this show is that one finds Indian artists in many of these countries—Zarina Hashmi from the U.S., Vishwanadhan and Rajendra Dhawan from France, Prafulla Mohanti from the U.K., Shami Mendiratta from Spain, Archana Hebbar from Japan and Shibu Natesan from New Caledonia. In fact, there are Indians in different walks of life in many parts of the world, reflecting our age-old interest in wandering. Naturally, they arouse an interest in us, our his-



**"I TOUCHED GANDHI: V.M. BASHEER"** by Ajayakumar, gouache, "Postcards for Gandhi", 1994; (below) Vivan Sundaram's image of Gandhi touching the salt on the ground at the Dandi Satyagraha.





tory and creativity among many countries in return.

#### ARTISTS' GANDHI

Indeed, this open-ended version of our national movement was also enshrined in Mahatma Gandhi's call: "Let India be and remain the hope of all exploited races of the earth, whether in Asia, Africa or any other part of the world." So it came to pass, and remains enshrined in our memory and actions over time.

This flexibility of outlook gives us the capacity to declare firmly: India is not Lost. As we celebrate its invincibility in the 75th year of our independence with an expression that is both Indian and world-embracing at the same time, it is also historical, contemporary and original in outlook, allowing its participants and curators to present it in a forthright manner with as much ease.

There is a spinning wheel installation by Kanishka Prasad and Vertika Chaturvedi that is intriguing. It is a curious blend of the handicraft and modern industry, with a bicycle wheel that rotates a series of postcards created by the artists who responded to two calls of SAHMAT, first in 1991 and then in 1995.

Its enormous strength lies in its visual impact as Gandhi's symbol but it also links this with significant aspects of his teachings as presented in iconic form by so many creative artists, giving it relevance in the context of an industrialising society. Behind this are displayed SAHMAT's publications relating to various aspects of the national movement. Also on display are original paintings by Shamshad and Madhvi Parekh used as illustrations for children's books.

One cannot cover all aspects of such a presentation in detail, but the nearly 500 postcards in display are themselves not only a wide net of communication but also a powerful iconic reminder of what our freedom fighters stood for and inculcated in us as issues to be fought for.

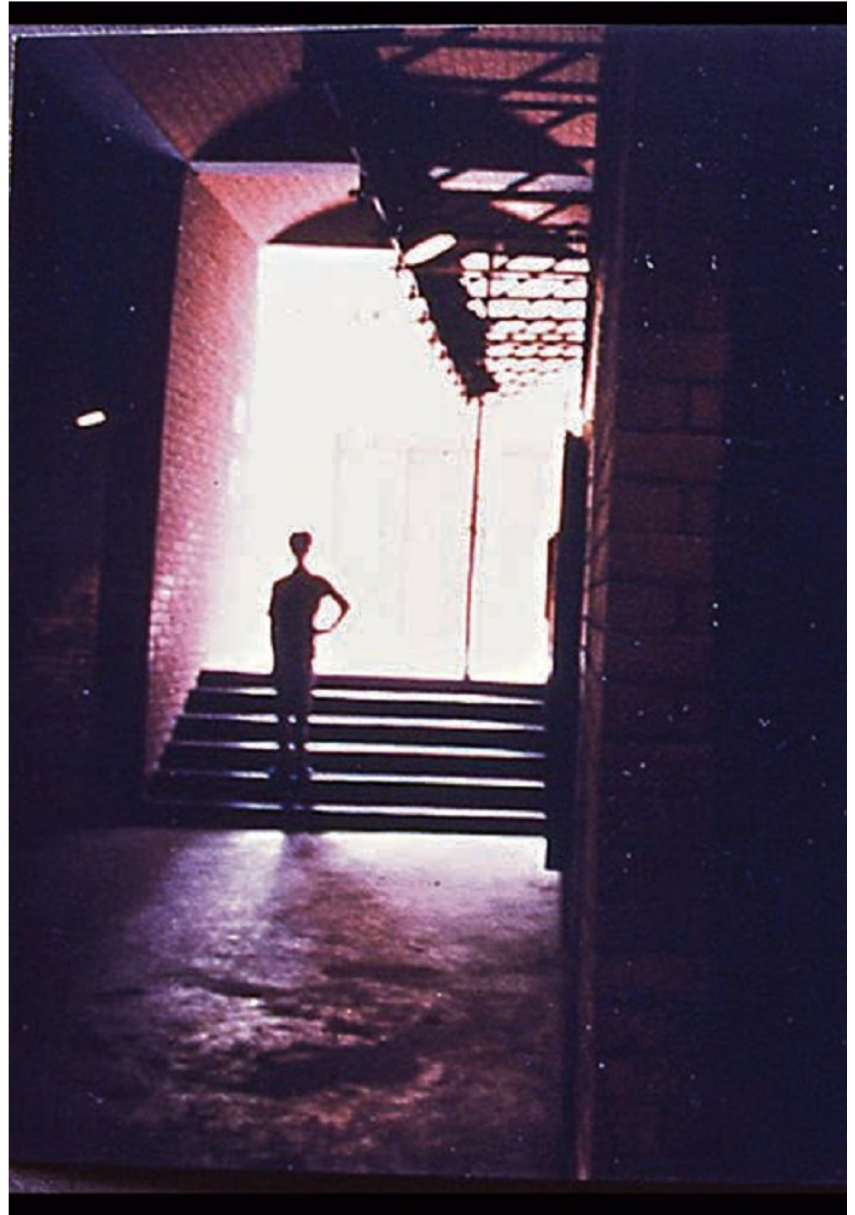
One thing is clear: the image of a wiry bespectacled figure in a small dhoti reflects both Gandhi the man and his ideas that made him the icon of one of the most exploited and op-

pressed people, torn apart and divided by castes and communities that were a powerful obstacle to their progress and development but were unable to stop their march forward.

It is not surprising then that artists across a wide range were touched by this image in different ways. If Jehangir Sabavala sees him as the tireless traveller, Surjeet Kaur pictures him as the agitator; Ravi Agarwal portrays the young Gandhi evolving his ideas and shapes his physical appearance accordingly;

Arpana Caur sees him through the heart of his wife Kasturba, while Orijit Sen sees him surrounded by the symbols of the global youth of the 1960s yearning for the beginning of a world without war.

Others closer to our times, such as Shami Mendiratta, see him sanctified by those who merely appropriate him for their convenience. Ram Rahman portrays him as a larger-than-life poster being removed after the rally is over; Suhas Roy sees him as the eternal sacrifice in a Christ-like







**PHOTOGRAPH** by Ravi Agarwal, "Postcards for Gandhi", 1994.

crown of thorns.

Bijan Choudhury, Rekha Rodwittiya, Atul Dodiya, Indrapramit Roy, Madhvi Parekh, Shibu Natesan, Shakuntala Kulkarni and Vasudevan Akkitham, show Gandhi caught up in the brutal ideological battle of ideas between violent and non-violent solutions. But it is artists like Nagji Patel who see him as a concrete body in its passage over time.

Ajayakumar, too, stresses this

material element, showing the young Vaikom Muhammad Basheer touching Gandhi as a little boy at the venue of the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Shamshad offers flowers of his grief while Surendran Nair and K.M. Adimoolam see him immortalised as abstract forms. Others personify him as the fighter par excellence against untouchability, as one who performs menial tasks, as in Walter D'Souza's image of him sweeping the floor,

while Sunil Das draws the iconic goat, the source of rich protein for the poor that Gandhi brought to the forefront during his stay in Dalit colonies. But things have changed since.

Jayanti Rabadia shows a cynical collusion between the well-known three monkeys, while Umesh Verma shows Gandhi peering through microscope studying events beyond what the eyes see. Vivan Sundaram's image of Gandhi touching the salt on the ground at the Dandi Satyagraha shows how it was not so much his homilies but his sense of touching the heart of things that made him immortal. Indeed, the sense of touch is something this exhibition uses to bring us closer to Gandhi's image and keep us involved.

#### THE 1857 UPRISING

These creative flowering forms of expression become the basis of a much broader perspective as a series of boxes in SAHMAT's "Gift for India" campaign and a set of posters on 1857 that bring many others into the presentation—like the declarations of Bahadur Shah Zafar, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Khan Bahadur Khan, Azimullah Khan and the soldiers of the uprising that developed into the First War for Independence.

This history was later appropriated by V.D. Savarkar in an account that he wrote before his incarceration in the Andamans and the letters that followed, begging for his release in which he promised to serve the British faithfully. I would have liked, however, to see some acknowledgement of the role of Nepal in saving the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal and a number of others from the brutality that Bahadur Shah Zafar suffered at the hands of the British.

#### COMMUNAL AMITY

Another important aspect of this long and complex journey that we see in this exhibition is how it was not only Hindu-Muslim unity against the British that was forged but also the participation of Sikhs in equal measure that kept us together. Karl Marx in his contemporary accounts published at the time not only sought





**COLLAGE** by Surjeet Kaur, "Postcards for Gandhi", 1994.



**CARDBOARD RELIEF** by Nagji Patel, "Postcards for Gandhi", 1994.

out every case of evidence of Hindu-Muslim unity but also mentions the Sikh soldiers in revolt in regions as far apart as Aurangabad and Banaras. It is interesting too, how people like Azimullah Khan noted how the *frangi* [foreigner] "came from faraway lands and such a spell he cast with both his hands he

plundered this motherland of ours". This spell still divides us and the plunder goes on unchecked in the period of neoliberal economics of our times.

The unity in struggle is highlighted in Nanak Singh's poem "Amritsar ki Aap Biti" of 1919 where he states: "I saw brother with brother

drinking water from the same glass and eating their food together."

But it was the warning of Bhagat Singh that rivets us. It is an extract from his "Why I Am An Atheist", where he says: "Any man who stands for progress has to criticise, disbelieve and challenge every item of old faith". He is reminding us that the fruits of revolutionary transformation have to be constantly protected and developed along with social and economic developments that hold us together in the upsurges they unleash.

This holds good as a caveat for defending the Indian Constitution that we are struggling to protect today in the face of concrete economic plunder, social disintegration and divisive tendencies.

Indeed, this exhibition serves as a broad-based and creative wake-up call to all of us to feel for "We, the people...." as we, too, are part of them.

The exhibition will remain open until November 30. □



# ‘Savarkar did very little for India’s independence’

Interview with the historian **Dr Vinay Lal**. BY **ABHISH K. BOSE** IN KOTTAYAM



**T**HE claim of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that V.D. Savarkar, the Hindutva icon, had written mercy petitions to the British on the basis of advice from Mahatma Gandhi has stirred a controversy.

Dr Vinay Lal, a Professor of History and Asian American studies at the University of California, Los

Angeles, has repudiated Rajnath Singh’s claim. Vinay Lal is the author of many seminal books on history, including *The History of History* (2003), *Introducing History* (2005), and *The Other Indians: A political and cultural history of South Asians in America* (2008). He spoke to *Frontline* on the issue and also chal-

lenged several existing myths.

Excerpts from a detailed Zoom interview he gave Abhish K. Bose, a journalist based in Kerala:

**Defence Minister Rajnath Singh’s claim that Hindutva icon V.D. Savarkar had sent a mercy petition on the basis of advice from Mahatma Gandhi has led to a controversy. What is your opinion? What do you think of the role played by Savarkar and other Hindu nationalist leaders in the freedom struggle?**

With regard to what Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said, let me say it clearly, loudly and unequivocally: it is a complete falsehood. It is a complete fabrication and there is not the slightest evidence that Mahatma Gandhi ever advised Savarkar to write a mercy petition. Considerable work has been done on Savarkar and his mercy petitions, and there were many of them, before the Defence Minister came up with this claim. For example, there is a book published by A.G. Noorani called *Savarkar and Hindutva: The Godse Connection* (LeftWord Books, 2002). If you go through the appendices of the book, you will find reproduced several of the petitions.

**“The RSS and the BJP are trying to legitimise their notion of Hindu nationalism by invoking the name of Gandhi. This is something that must not only be questioned but completely rejected.”**



The text of the petition Savarkar filed in 1911 is not available, but the one from 1913, and later petitions as well, are painful to read.

He says: "If the government in their manifold beneficence release me, I for one cannot but be the staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the British Government....". He suggests to the British government that releasing him would be to their advantage, saying "my conversion to the constitutional line would bring back all these misled young men in India and abroad who were once looking up to me as their guide, I am ready to serve the Government in any capacity they like...."

It gets more pathetic as he reaches his conclusion: "The Mighty alone can afford to be merciful and therefore, where else can the prodigal sons return but to the parental doors of the Government?" What Savarkar is in effect saying to the British is this, "I will do whatever you want me to do, just get me out of this jail."

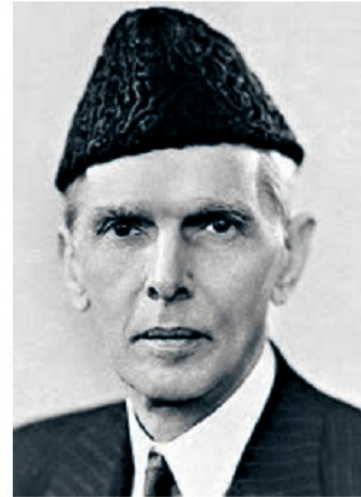
He is asking the government, the *mai-baap*, to take their son back into their bosom. Gandhi himself was in jail many times. Did he ever write a mercy petition, or a petition asking to be released? In fact, when he was put on trial in 1922 on charges of sedition, and indeed charged under Section 124 of the Indian Penal Code, which the present government uses at the drop of a hat, he invited the judge to give him the harshest possible sentence under the law if the judge truly believed that he was guilty of the charges laid against him.

But for those who don't like

The serious dissenters are being marginalised and silenced at Indian universities.



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

**V.D. SAVARKAR**, the Hindutva icon, and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Dr B.R. Ambedkar was of the opinion that Jinnah and Savarkar agreed on the two-nation theory and that Savarkar was the author of Partition.

Gandhi, let us take the example of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev. Did they ever file a petition for mercy as they were awaiting their execution? On the contrary, when Bhagat Singh's father pleaded with his son, saying "You're a young man, your whole life is ahead of you, file a petition of mercy with the British authorities", Bhagat Singh was outraged and deeply hurt that his father made such a suggestion. In contrast to this, Savarkar filed mercy petitions repeatedly.

Let us go back to the claim that Gandhi advised Savarkar to file a petition with the British authorities that they should offer him clemency.

On January 18, 1920, Savarkar's younger brother wrote to Gandhi saying that the government had given clemency to other prisoners but not his brother, and enquired whether Gandhi could do anything. Gandhi replied from Lahore on January 25 (the text of this letter is in Volume 19 of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, published by the Government of India): "I have your letter. It is difficult to advise you."

Where did our honourable Defence Minister get this idea that Gandhi advised Savarkar to file a mercy petition? Is it there in his letter? No. The letter continues: "I suggest, however, your framing a brief

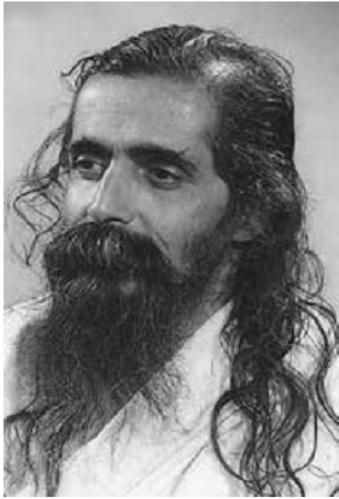
petition setting forth the facts of the case bringing out in relief the fact that the offence committed by your brother was purely political. I suggest this in order that it would be possible to concentrate public attention on the case."

Gandhi meant that Savarkar's offence was political and he was not jailed for a common crime. This is important, because whatever political differences there were between Gandhi and Savarkar, Gandhi understood that people imprisoned for political offences belonged in a category different from those incarcerated for ordinary crimes. He was underscoring the fact that Savarkar was a political offender.

In 1920, Gandhi wrote an article published on May 26 in *Young India*, a journal that he edited. It also appears in Volume 20 of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* under the title, 'Savarkar Brothers'. The article concerns, once again, the release of political prisoners under a royal proclamation of clemency, and Gandhi was once again very clear that the Savarkar brothers were entitled to clemency just as other political prisoners.

But what he thought about them is very clear from this article, where he wrote: "Both these brothers have declared their political opinions and





**RSS** leader M.S. Golwalkar.

both have stated that they do not entertain any revolutionary ideas and that if they were set free they would like to work under the Reforms Act, for they consider that the reforms enable one to work thereunder so as to achieve political responsibility for India. They both state unequivocally that they do not desire independence from the British connection. On the contrary, they feel that India's destiny can be best worked out in association with the British."

Could there be a clearer expression of the fact that Savarkar was so desperate to be released from jail that he stated that he did not care for India's independence from the British?

It must be said that the record is very clear and we should not shirk from the truth. Savarkar was not at all the hero that his supporters and *bhakt*s are trying to make him out to be.

He did very little, if anything, for India's Independence. I would go so far as to say that the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha likewise did not do a single thing for India's Independence during the freedom struggle. They were collaborators of the British.

I would like to recall what B.R. Ambedkar said about the tendency of Indians to hold Mohammed Ali Jinnah responsible for the Partition

of India. However, the first exponent of the two-nation theory was not Jinnah; it was Savarkar. How much Savarkar had in common with Jinnah is not commonly realised, but Ambedkar was absolutely clear that it was not Jinnah who was the author of the Partition of India, but Savarkar.

In his book *Thoughts on Pakistan* (1940), Ambedkar wrote: "Strange as it may appear, Mr. Savarkar and Mr. Jinnah, instead of being opposed to each other on the one nation versus two nations issue, are in complete agreement about it. Both agree... not only agree but insist, that there are two nations in India, one the Muslim nation and the other the Hindu nation."

#### **GANDHI AND CULTURAL CAPITAL**

**Why are the RSS and its affiliates keen on appropriating the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi? Is it because the Sangh Parivar lacks a person of the stature of Gandhiji? What is your view on this?**

In some respects you have answered your own question. If you want to lay claim to be an individual or an organisation that has done something worthy for the country, especially with regard to the freedom struggle, it is imperative to show that you are the inheritor of Gandhi's legacy. Whatever the limitations of Gandhi, and he certainly had them as does every other individual, we can understand what his name means if we turn to a concept proposed by the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, which is the concept of cultural capital.

The name of Gandhi has had cultural capital all over the world. Let me give you an illustration. I have spoken to Indian immigrants who came to the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s, when there were very few Indians in the U.S. (Between 1923 and 1945, Indians were not even permitted within the U.S. because of the 1924 Immigration Act and Asian exclusion laws.) Many came without having any contact in the U.S. When they came

here, all they had to say was "we are from the land of Gandhi" and people would open their homes to them. That is what I have been told; and this is, mind you, before the civil rights movement, when Gandhi became even more renowned in the U.S.

Gandhi was, and remains, a world historical figure, and when he died many compared him not to Jinnah or Nehru, but rather to Jesus Christ and the Buddha, among the greatest teachers of humankind. Just look at the work of Indian print-makers at that time. This is what Bourdieu terms cultural capital. The RSS and the BJP are, of course, trying to legitimise their notion of Hindu nationalism by invoking the name of Gandhi. And this is something that must not only be merely questioned but completely rejected. Because, if we do not reject this, [yet] another lie will circulate in the public domain.

#### **READING HINDUTVA HISTORY CRITICALLY**

**There are controversies across the country around the demand in some colleges to study the history of the RSS and its leaders. The move to include the writings of RSS leaders such as Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya in the curriculum of Kannur University in Kerala should be seen as part of this move. What is your view? Is it essential to teach the ideologies of Hindutva icons?**

I think that it is very essential that we should take a nuanced view on this matter. I, for instance, teach an undergraduate course to students aged between 18 and 21 on contemporary world history—from the time of the Industrial Revolution to the present times. Now, when we get to the 1930s and 1940s we get to the time of Nazi Germany and to Adolf Hitler. Hitler wrote a very large book called *Mein Kampf*. It is actually a mediocre work... an exceedingly mediocre work. No scholar who has looked at it has been impressed with Hitler's thinking. This is not to say that he did not have a different kind of political





genius—one that let him captivate the country.

Now, one of the things I have my students do is read around 10 pages from *Mein Kampf*. Am I therefore promoting anti-Semitism if I am asking the students to read Hitler? Not at all. It is part of a critical pedagogy to understand texts that are obviously misleading and that may even be dangerous. If we are going to be thoughtful and reflective human beings, we cannot read only books that present a portrait of humankind in the most flattering terms. It is also essential to understand what role a text played in society at that time, especially when a text is pernicious.

I think some students should have access to what Savarkar or other RSS ideologues wrote, but there is a risk in doing so. Students have to be guided by teachers who are sensitive and reflective, who have some moral compass; part of that critical pedagogy may necessitate requiring the student to also read something crit-

**AT THE CELLULAR JAIL** in Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where Savarkar was imprisoned. He wrote several clemency petitions to the British government from this prison.

ical of the views associated with Savarkar and his kind.

Savarkar and Golwalkar are, as thinkers, extremely mediocre, although Savarkar was in some respects, though not many, a very talented and gifted person. We must concede that. For example, he was evidently gifted as a writer of Marathi because he was writing poetry from the age of 10 and he wrote what became a very crucial (and controversial) book in the reinterpretation of the rebellion of 1857-58. This is a very interesting book.

By the way, it is a misleading idea that he gave birth to the idea of Hindutva. A man called Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, who was a Vedantic scholar and Bengali convert to Christianity, first wrote on Hindutva—but that's a different story.

If you want to understand Savarkar's idea of 'punya bhoomi', holy land or sacred geography, it is essential that we have to read some pages from the book. But these have to be read critically. We do not do any service to students if we do not work with texts that are difficult and sometimes actually offensive to others.

Although I personally think that Golwalkar and Savarkar are not at all interesting thinkers, I think that small extracts from these books can be taught in order to illustrate some of the most pernicious consequences of Hindutva ideology. In the case of Golwalkar the case is even more clear. If you go through *A Bunch of Thoughts*, or his other book, *We, Or our Nationhood Defined*, we can see the great debt that he owed to the Nazi ideologues.





K. MURALI KUMAR

Golwalkar was practically speaking as a Nazi. Golwalkar was a great admirer of Nazis and he said it very clearly that what the Nazis were doing to Jews in Germany, we can take a lesson from that in India. And I need not explain who he had in mind when he said that some people can be treated in India the way the Jews are being treated in Nazi Germany. This is important to underscore.

Regarding Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, the present government of India has done much to promote his work and name. Before 2015 the government had released one stamp in his honour, but then they released one in 2015, and another in 2016, and yet another in 2017. What is the principal idea that Upadhyaya had? It is an idea that he called 'integral humanism'. This idea is what Jayaprakash Narayan also had. J.P. is a bit more of an interesting thinker, but his idea is not radically different from Upadhyaya's. The difference is that we see a far more ecumenical approach on the part of J.P.

with regard to the question of Muslims in particular, and with respect to the question of how we can actually forge a movement dedicated to the idea of sarvodaya or welfare of all. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya was going somewhat in that direction, but some of his views are, to put it bluntly, wholly contaminated with a certain partisanship on behalf of the Hindus.

## REWRITING HISTORY

**The absence of opposition to the moves to rewrite history is apparent nowadays. Many historians swearing allegiance to the Sangh Parivar attempt to rewrite history. Attempts in this vein are evident in the move to term 'Harappan civilisation' as 'Saraswati civilisation'. The previous attempts to make changes in the syllabus of the National Council of Educational Research and Training were noticeable in the late 1990s. Why is there no opposition against this in the country?**

Let me answer this question first in the broadest terms. Let us not be surprised by the attempts to rewrite history. Unfortunately, this is the prerogative of those who are in power. This is true not only in India, but all over the world. I have been writing about this question for many years. In 2003, I published a book called *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2003). This book is about the politics of the writing of history.

The attempt to rewrite history is something that we are invariably going to associate with those who see it as their prerogative when they acquire power. There are debates about the contents of history textbooks in almost every country. One of the problems with how we think about these things in India, if I may be permitted to say, and indeed one of the problems with Indian journalism, is insularity. Our journalists don't look at what is happening in other parts of the world. There are a lot of debates happening in Japan

about the contents of Japanese history textbooks. Why? Because of questions about the role of Japan in the Second World War. What should Japan do? Should the Japanese apologise the way Germany has apologised for the atrocities it committed in the Second World War?

I am not going to speak here about the politics of apologies. What I am simply saying is that these kinds of debates about the contents of the history textbooks, and the fact that people in power will attempt to rewrite them, is par for the course. Now having said this, this doesn't mean that we just sit back and say, "This is what people in power do." Of course not, because if textbooks are being rewritten in ways that can be substantiated by historical evidence, by powers of reasoning, or by reasonable inference—we have to look at the totality of what we have—then we have to look seriously at such attempts.

What is this whole argument regarding Saraswati civilisation about? Why is the Hindutva brigade so attached to this idea? One of the many reasons is, they want to dismiss the idea that Aryans were foreigners; they, in fact, want to claim that India is the source of all Aryan migrations, but the evidence doesn't suggest that. But let's get to the bottom of this. They want to say, "Muslims are foreigners in India." To which I would say, "What does it mean to call Muslims foreigners in India? How long have the Muslims been in India? For over a thousand years. At what point will they cease to become foreigners, I want to know."

If one then said that the Aryans themselves were foreigners, that becomes an even greater problem. I'm not saying the debate is entirely about this. I'm saying this is a characteristic move. This is what we can call an act of displacement; an argument appears to be about one thing but is actually about something else.

**Why do you think that the opposition is not taking any measures to counter it? Why is the intelligentsia of the country being silent on this?**

I don't think that the intelligentsia of



the country is silent. The problem is that this current government does not tolerate dissent, it has shut down the avenues of dissent. Look at what is happening in the universities of the country. Look what is happening at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The Hindutva people will tell you that JNU is a bastion of communists. That is absurd. Of course, they have some left-wing historians and sociologists as they do at any half-decent university. But look at what is happening at JNU now. You mentioned the controversy at Kan-nur in Kerala last month or so.

Recently, in JNU they introduced a course on terrorism and counter-terrorism as an optional paper. It states clearly that if you are going to study terrorism and devise counter-terrorist strategies, all one has to do is study Islamist jihadism, which means that practically speaking, Islamist jihadism alone is synonymous with terrorism and we need to know nothing else. Nothing more. This is the primordial and primary example of terrorism and that's that. Who has approved this? It has been approved by the academic council and the vice chancellor. It is frankly a completely suspect course.

Indian universities are becoming the laughing stock of the world, unfortunately. The serious dissenters are being marginalised and silenced at Indian universities. Now there are web portals such as the Wire and Scroll, but they speak to a largely anglicised audience, preaching as it were to the choir. I have to say that I'm very glad that a few years ago the Wire started investing seriously in producing material—even videos—in Hindi.

If you say to me, however, that no one is protesting against these changes to the curriculum across the country, that is not really the case, but there is a problem with regard to what happens to people who speak out loud. There are trolls everywhere—in the U.S., too, as I know very well—but the trolls in India are vicious, absolutely vicious and most of them are unlettered; they are not accustomed to reading or reflecting, but they have understood the power

of the social media that they use. And this is one of the risks of such media; it can lead to not just democratisation but also to authoritarianism.

**There are reports that the government is in the process of forming a single common academic curriculum for all academic institutions of the country. What is your view on this?**

I have heard about it. But I don't know enough about it at this point as to comment on it. There is also speculation that there are ongoing moves to glorify 10,000 years or more of India's history, whatever those 10,000 or 15,000 years of history may be, considering that the Harappan or Indus Valley Civilisation can be dated back only to 3000 BCE. What I will say is this: if there is a programme for a common academic curriculum for all the academic institutions of the country, it would be a disaster. Because that will be the end of free inquiry.



**DEEN** Dayal Upadhyaya, the Hindutva ideologue.

The idea that some central agency should dictate a common curriculum for all the academic institutions of the country is complete anathema to the life of the mind and to free inquiry. A little footnote: When I teach history courses even for undergraduates, I do not even use a textbook. I have my students read dozens of articles and primary sources. I do not use a textbook and this goes back to the question of history textbooks, because a textbook is a way of homogenising knowledge.

What a common curriculum

would do is multiply that problem by a factor of 10, or 20. If we are going to have a common curriculum, we are going to end up producing a country of robots. That's what's going to happen. If that is what the fight for *swaraj* was all about, then why have *swaraj* at all? There may even be greater freedom in slavery than in this kind of *swaraj*.

**There are allegations that in many universities the books of eminent historians are purposefully being avoided in the reference section, such as books of Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma, and Romila Thapar. What is your view?**

Are you telling me that the books by Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, perhaps D.N. Jha, and other such scholars are being removed from university bookshelves? Well, if that is the case, that is why some people are saying that the analogy with an authoritarian state, or worse, may not be incorrect. We are moving in that direction. How is this really different than the burning of books? What happened at *Kristallnacht*, the night of shattered glass, when Jewish synagogues and businesses were set on fire—all this culminated, we could say, in the Final Solution. Books were also burned that night; the Nazis made bonfires of books they considered degenerate.

If the works of these historians are being no longer made available, or are being thrown out of university and public libraries—if that is happening, it is not simply a problem of censorship, it is a much graver problem. A culture that begins to burn or bury books is going down the wrong path, a very dangerous path.

## **RICH MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

**There are also moves in many universities to not teach the medieval history of the country. Allegedly, there are instructions to not teach it.**

Again, if that is the case, we have yet another problem. Of course, if this is true, or if it is beginning to happen, we know why that is the case, because the medieval period is syn-





SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

**A VIEW OF THE JNU** administrative building. The university courted controversy with a new course that stated that Islamist jihadism alone was synonymous with terrorism.

onymous with the period of Muslim rule—the Muslim conquests, the Muslim invaders, and Muslim rule. In the north you have the Delhi Sultanate, in the south the Deccan or Bahmani Sultanates, and then, of course, the Mughal empire.

If all of this is not taught, the students obviously will not have an understanding on what happened in this period, they will be gasping for some understanding. But the problem is not merely that a huge chunk of India's history is eradicated, so to speak. It is a much more fundamental problem that we have to think about. The problem with the RSS and BJP people who are now beginning to manage our universities and institutions is that they have this idea that our medieval period is like the Dark Ages or Middle Ages of Europe. What they do is they take the template of European history and they just plant it on to India.

Remember that Europe had a medieval period which was known as the Dark Ages or Middle Ages. In India, this so-called medieval period was an enormously rich period. The literature in nearly all Indian languages flourished at this time; it was also the period of the 'bhakti movement'. If you look at the period from 1000 to 1700, India produced a

storehouse of devotional literature which is unmatched anywhere in the world. In the north we are familiar with figures such as Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai, Kabir, Nanddas; in Maharashtra, we are familiar with Tukaram, Eknath, Narsinh Mehta, and, much earlier, in the 13th century, Jnaneshwar; in the south, of course, poets such as Basavanna, the Virasaivas, and much more; in Bengal, Chaitanya and Chandidas; and so on. I'm just naming some 15 people who come to mind immediately. Now, whether they were all working to create a single vision, or can retrospectively be interpreted as such—there is a lot of discussion about this, about whether one can speak of a bhakti movement, whether it was not itself in some ways a creation of the nationalist movement that was trying to think of the cultural unity of India. Those are questions that are properly addressed when we are looking at the scholarship on bhakti.

I am simply saying that this period was, in fact, a very rich period; just because Europe had its Dark or Middle Ages, it doesn't mean that our so-called Middle Ages were also Dark Ages. Europe lost contact with its own intellectual and cultural inheritance; this is the meaning of the

Dark Ages. It is well known that it is through the Arabs that Greek thinkers such as Aristotle were rediscovered in the West. There are thousands of books on this subject. We in India swallowed this idea that we too had our Dark Ages—and, quite conveniently, this is the period of Muslim dominance in India.

This whole idea of even carving up the study of history into three large chunks—ancient, medieval, modern—is a European idea and there is no reason to even think of history along those lines. Let me also say that an Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis developed in north India that is unmatched in the world, except perhaps in Moorish Spain.

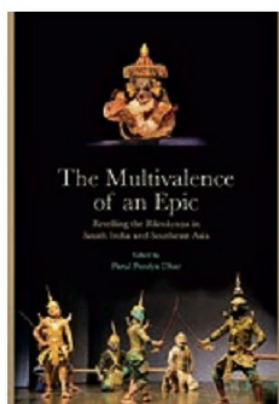
I would be the first to admit that there are some serious historians who do not accept this idea of Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*, or Indo-Islamic cultural synthesis, but nevertheless it is possible to advance an argument about such a synthesis. And we should also look at the Deccan, at the Bahmani sultanates; courts at places such as Bijapur were very cosmopolitan. So, in short, removing this entire period from our history books, apart from all the other problems I've described, would be a catastrophic failure of intelligence and imagination. □



# Many Ramayanas

The book perceptively brings out the plurality and inclusiveness that mark the diverse Ramayana traditions traversing over two millennia and across wide geographical locations. BY RAZIUDDIN AQUIL

MUCH as politics around Rambhakti has fallen to its nadir, scholarly endeavour to study the vast traditions of Rama stories is reaching the pinnacle of excellence. Some of the finest historians and scholars of literary traditions, visual cultures and performing arts have come together to showcase the results of their outstanding scholarship on the Ramayana's myriad traditions. Parul Pandya Dhar, a distinguished editor and leading art historian, has perceptively organised and contextualised the stupendous range of fascinating material on retelling the epic, encompassing several centuries and geographical boundaries across South and Southeast Asia—the long-standing connections between the two regions are determined by historical processes of epic proportions. The splendid product on offer—19 chapters each with an introduction—is a veritable treat for anyone with a heart for appreciating diverse tellings of the extraordinary credentials of Maryada Purushottam Sri Ram of Ayodhya. The equally fascinating character of Lanka's Ravana—the powerful anti-hero (and in some cases, a hero in his



## The Multivalence of an Epic

Retelling the Ramayana in South India and Southeast Asia

Edited by Parul Pandya Dhar  
Manipal Universal Press, 2021

Pages: 370  
Price: Rs.3,000

own right)—also comes alive in parts of the book spread over 370 pages.

The editor and publisher deserve praise for bringing together this marvellous collection of essays, placed in three distinct yet interrelated mediums of artistic expressions—spectacular visual representations, powerful literary compositions and tantalising performance traditions.

The book emerges out of an international conference on the multivalence of the epic, which was organised by Professor D.S. Achuta Rao Endowment in Bengaluru in 2017. The contributors include accomplished scholars of repute and erudite young researchers located across the world. The meticulously produced volume with over a hundred ex-

quisite images will also be a collector's delight.

## VISUAL CULTURES

The first section on visual cultures—sculptures, paintings and inscriptions—comprises as many as eight articles, beginning with Parul Pandya Dhar's rigorous study of inscriptions and sculptures retelling the Ramayana in pre-Vijayanagara Karnataka. From around the 5th century onwards, dynastic eulogies compare rulers with Rama as an ideal king, who is also represented in early inscriptions as a divine incarnation, *avatara*. These regional references to Rama and to Ravana reveal departures from the *Valmiki Ramayana* (c. 500 BCE to 200 CE).

The next contribution by John Brockington em-

phasises the significance of visual and inscriptional sources predating textual evidence of the Rama story in Southeast Asia. Yet visual imagery and inscriptions are also found side by side with texts since the late 9th century in Java, but much later in large parts of Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar, with possible connections with Bengal.

Valerie Gillet highlights the presence of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu in the Pallava royal iconography, both in inscriptions and temple reliefs from Kancheepuram, in a milieu which sought to project the superiority of Siva over Vishnu and Rama. The latter's presence in the royal discourse was subsequently asserted by the Cholas, who accorded significant space to the Ramayana in their visual repertoire.

Further, Rachel Loizeau offers a fine reading of the Ramayana in the rich Khmer sculptures with reference to the *Yuddhakanda* in Angkorian Cambodia, 10th-12th centuries, in a context in which there is a dearth of texts. The sculptures reveal complex adaptations, with new motifs inspired by local concerns



on the pediments and lintels of Hindu temples and Buddhist monuments—especially exalting chivalry and valour, besides serving an apotropaic function, that is, depicting power to avert evil influences or bad luck.

#### BRONZES AND SCULPTURES

Back in southern India, under the Cholas, bronzes and sculptures of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman were deployed as important processional icons. A scientific-technical analysis of some of the key bronze icons by Sharada Srinivasan suggests that archaeo-metalurgical finger-printing of Chola period bronzes are distinct from the later Vijayanagara ones, even as the possibility of melting and recasting as well as fresh stylisation indicates the need for understanding interesting complexities, both in terms of historical chronology and iconographic features.

In continuation with the editor's approach of a back-and-forth movement to highlight intertextual cross-referencing between South and Southeast Asian traditions, though within a broad chronology, the next chapter by Gauri Parimoo Krishnan draws our attention to the adaptation, localisation and transformations in the character of Hanuman in Southeast Asia, in particular in Javanese, Khmer and Siamese portrayals. Styled variously as half human-half ape, puppet and dancer, with motifs drawn from visual and performance arts of varied cultural zones of Southeast Asia, Hanuman is presented as

an intelligent being, artful lover and playful magician in the service of Rama.

Further, in the centuries to come (16th-17th), the Nayaka rulers brought the idea of Rama rajya from their homeland in Vijayanagara to the Tamil-speaking region of southern India. The dual project of popularisation and re-

gionalisation of the epic has been studied by R.K.K. Rajarajan with reference to the Ramayana paintings in the haloed precincts of the historic Maliruncolai temple, connecting them with traditions relating to Tamil Alvar hymns of 7th-9th centuries and with Kampan's 12th century *Iramavataram*. It thus be-

comes part of the larger subcontinental devotional tradition, a process intelligently mediated by the Nayakas.

In line with understanding the multivalent contours of Ramayana traditions, transcending time and space, the last essay on visual cultures by Cheryl Thiruchelvam examines



**RAMA, SITA,** Lakshmana and the golden deer. Virupaksha, Pattadakal, c. 740 CE.

PARUL PANDYA DHAR



the continually evolving traditions of the Ramayana epic as expressed in different contemporary art forms in Malaysia. They range from traditional shadow puppets to digitised characters and narrate episodes from the epic relevant to the specific socio-political and religious contexts of present-day Malaysia.

#### LITERARY PRACTICES

The second section of the volume on literary practices explores a huge archive of texts, examining narrative accent and recitation, and showcasing associated imagery. Malini Saran highlights the significance of the discourse on governance and ethics as a leitmotif in the *Old Javanese Ramayana*, or the *Ramayana Kakawin* (9th century), the oldest extant Ramayana text from Southeast Asia, which has followed a 7th century Indian retelling of the Ramayana, poet Bhatti's *Ravanavadha* or *Bhat-tikavya*. As a Javanese text on ideal kingship, it goes on to have a life of its own greatly impacting later Islamic courts of Java, and as a text meant for performance it also fused boundaries between textual and performative traditions.

The next chapter by Chirapat Prapandvidya looks at the close links of *Thai Ramakien* (Sanskrit: *Ramakirti*) with south India, through connections with older traditions of Ramayana in Cambodia. In doing so, it digresses from the *Valmiki Ramayana*, which too was known in Thailand between the 11th and 13th centuries. Surviving political violence, the current version of



**RECITATION** of Kakawin Ramayana by the late Ida Pedanda Ketut Sidemen of Geriya Taman Sari, Sanur.

*Thai Ramakien* is attributed to the first ruler of the Chakri dynasty, who assumed the names of both Buddha and Rama—King Phra Buddha Yodfa Chulalok or King Rama I—and ruled from Bangkok between 1782 and 1809.

The Southeast Asian Ramayana tradition also includes the enigmatic character of the “floating maiden”, a *rakhsasi* known as Benjakai or Srijeti, who is presented not only as counterfeiting a dead Sita to deceive Rama but is also portrayed as being in a romantic liaison with Hanuman.

Mary Brockington deploys wide-ranging material to analyse the complex web of sharing and innovation of narrative elements and motifs from within Southeast Asian regions and across the ocean, which produced a colourful character of the *rakhsasi*, including a possible connection with the 10th century Sanskrit drama,

Rajashekhara's *Balaramayana*.

The next two chapters (12-13) in the section on literary cultures look at Ramayana traditions in Malayalam. A.J. Thomas studies Tunchat Ezhuttacchan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu*, a 16th-17th century Malayalam bhakti text aimed at offering spiritual solace to a people suffering from entrenched social exclusion and injustice, with no access to Sanskrit scriptures. Thomas offers a translation of excerpts from the text, in which Rama figures as the supreme deity, besides analysing its larger significance in Kerala society, which is reflected in its popularity down to modern times.

Translation being an act of retelling, Sudha Gopalakrishnan presents a fine rendering in English of the critical Malayalam poetic composition, *Chintavishtayaya Sita* (Sita in Deep Contempla-

tion) of Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), one of the Malayalam literary stalwarts. In exile with her two sons and Valmiki, Kumaran Asan's Sita experiences her own agency, embracing truths about herself and Rama with grace and dignity, reconciling the agony of her exile with the warm comfort in the solitude of Valmiki's *ashrama* (hermitage), and considering the forest as a happier place. In Sudha Gopalakrishnan's moving translation, Sita's transformative self-realisation meant a detached engagement, bordering on compassion, and withdrawal from the world:

“Do not worry, daughter! With the sage's soothing words, gazing only at his feet,

She walked on, her face bent downwards, and reached the royal assembly;

Wordlessly, she went to him, saw her husband deeply drowned in remorse,

Amidst the royal gathering, and in this manner, she relinquished the world.”

The last chapter by Thomas Hunter highlights the deep connection between text and recitation with reference to the art of reading and interpreting the *Kakawin Ramayana* in Bali to an audience gathered in club-like community groups, called Sekaha Mabasan. The stories recorded in textual sources are brought to life in masked dramas such as the *Wayang Wong*, devoted to the magically powerful characters of Rama and Sita. The narrations and performance in Mabasan

THOMAS M. HUNTER





SAO MANUT

**THE ROYAL BALLET OF CAMBODIA** performing 'Remakirti', the Khmer version of Ramayana.

clubs have led to a cultural reawakening and negotiation of Balinese identity in the context of tradition and modernity intersecting each other.

#### PERFORMANCE CULTURES

The representations of Ramayana stories in theatre, puppetry and folk practices are dealt with in great depth in the third section of the book on performance cultures. Paula Richman, the veteran scholar of Ramayana studies, offers an interesting discussion of a couple of early modern and modern plays, which present Ravana in a sympathetic light, illuminating aspects seldom emphasised in Rama-centric narratives: a

late 18th-century Kathakali play in mixed Malayalam and Sanskrit, *Ravanodhbbhavam* (The Origins of Ravana) by Kallaikulangara Raghava Pisharoty (1725-1799), and a mid-20th century Tamil mythological drama, *Ilankesawaram* (King of Lanka), performed to perfection for nearly 50 years by Lakshmi Narasimha "Manohar" (1925-2006). Together, the plays offer an alternative political lens, commending Ravana's rule as centralised, but egalitarian, Ravanarajya, and departing from the conventional Ramarajya, without demeaning varna- and dharma-bound Rama.

Further departures are to be seen in Ghulam-Sar-

war Yousof's discussion of the Malay Shadow play, *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, said to be based on an oral version of the Ramayana from the north-eastern state of Kelantan on the Malay Peninsula, named *Hikayat Maharaja [Ra]wana* (Story of King Ravana). These may be read in conjunction with the Malay-Indonesian *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Story of Sri Ram), among other Southeast Asian versions of the Ramayana stories—which in turn were informed by imports of several versions of episodes from the Rama saga, not only from Valmiki's Ramayana, but also Krtivasa's Ramayana (15th century) and Tulsidas' *Ramacharitmanas* (16th

century). An interesting strand of the story analysed by Yousof narrates Ravana's misconduct in the Sky kingdom, which led to his banishment to earth and landing in Lanka, where he spent his time in penance. The Prophet Adam, who is sent down to Lanka by Allah, happens to meet Ravana. Adam intercedes on Ravana's behalf for his forgiveness and permission to become the ruler of three parts of the world, with the fourth reserved for Adam's own descendants. The story thus acquires a form relevant to popular Islam in the Malaysian archipelago.

The next two chapters look at the versions of the epic in Kannada. Krishna





**PORTRAYAL OF SHURPANAKHA** in Yakshagana of coastal Karnataka.

Murthy Hanuru examines how different folk performatives, which popularised the Ramayana tradition by bringing it from palace to streets and bylanes, departed from the classic Sanskrit epic to suit the ideals of the folk world. This meant varying emphasis in the processes of idealisation and demonisation. Revealing complex relationships between classical traditions and the beliefs and aspirations of the common people, some folk performances tended to contradict widely held views on virtues associated with Rama and Sita, and yet others idealised the character of Hanuman.

In the next chapter, Purushottama Bilimale, a distinguished scholar of Kannada folk and literary traditions, highlights the creative processes and improvisations by composers, musicians actors and audience in the staging of the Yakshagana of

coastal Karnataka. In Bilimale's words, together they continually recreate, redefine, communicate and appropriate episodes from the Ramayana.

The last chapter by Sirang Leng takes us across the ocean again for a discussion of the adoption of the Ramayana in *Reamker* performances, meant for both ritual invocations and entertainment in Cambodian Khmer society, where sculptures and inscriptions relating to the Ramayana are observed from as early as the 6th/7th century.

The history of *Reamker* performance dates back to the 16th century, with its popularity ranging from the high elite to ordinary folks—catering to the spiritual and social needs of the people, besides their entertainment quotients. The chapters on wide reception of performance cultures also reminded this reviewer of the excel-

lent work of Philip Lutgendorf in the field and his translation and edition of Tulsidas' *Ramacharit-manas* as well as the more recent work of Molly Kaushal, documenting local and tribal Ramlilas.

The Indian Sufi appreciation of versions of narratives around the ethical figure of Sri Ram of Ayodhya, from the 15th-16th century, also add interesting dimensions to the common pool of literary and devotional resources around the cult of Rama. The devotional compositions of Sufi-Sant Kabir and of Malik Muhammad Jaisi of Padmavat fame come to mind immediately as examples of Sufi adaptations of Sita-Rama narratives. The same is true for the older Jaina traditions.

In conclusion, plurality and inclusiveness mark the enduring feature of the history of diverse Ramayana traditions traversing over two millennia and

across wide geographical locations. The remarkable contributions to this significant volume have brought together many of the multifaceted features of the epic in South India and Southeast Asia. A sequel volume focussing on northern parts of the subcontinent, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan, will bring forth several other dimensions of the Rama stories. As Parul Pandya Dhar writes in her introduction:

"Categories of intrinsic and extrinsic, change and continuity, classical and vernacular, and parts and whole offer useful perspectives to unravel the epic's multivalence. As it flows and adapts in varied contexts, its unique identity as a *mahakavya* (great poem) sustains even as it merges in a stream of continuous change. This assimilative power, with its diverse and plural renderings, is also its soul and strength.

"This reminds us of the heated debate on the value of the outstanding work of scholars such as A.K. Ramanujan and Paula Richman on many traditions of Ramayana. As the annual Dussehra celebrations and current research illustrate, imaginative and powerful new tellings continue to be created, and the ways of perceiving them are many as well. Thus, to privilege any monolithic or exclusive reading of the vast traditions of the Ramayana is antithetical to its very essence. Let a thousand and one Ramayanas flourish!" □

*Raziuddin Aquil is Professor of History in the University of Delhi.*

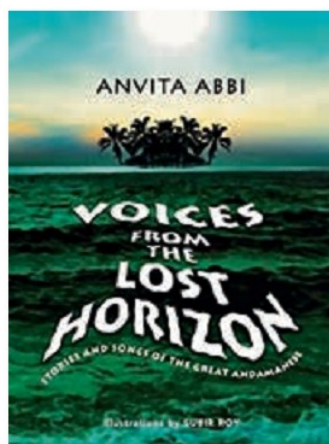


# Last speakers of a language

The 'first ever' transcription and translation of folk tales and folk songs of the Great Andamanese captures some of the intangible heritage of the people of the Great Andamans, their history, culture, ecological base and knowledge of biodiversity. BY MEENAKSHI BHARAT

IN January 2010, when the media mourned the passing of the last 'speaker' of the Great Andamanese Bo language, the linguist Anvita Abbi had publicly paid obeisance to both the speaker, Boa Sr, and the language. *Voices from the Lost Horizon: Stories and Songs of the Great Andamanese* comes as part of her continuing homage to the two, albeit in a fresh and singular mode.

Renowned for her work on endangered languages, especially the Great Andamanese, and awarded the Padma Shri in recognition of this effort, Prof. Anvita Abbi's research in the field has been ongoing. She has been constantly finding newer ways of accessing moribund linguistic spaces. This handsomely produced volume, complete with edifying illustrations by Subir Roy, innovatively and creatively breathes life into the 'dead' enunciated word by co-opting 21st century digital technology to the service of



**Voices from the Lost Horizon**  
Stories and Songs of the Great Andamanese

By Anvita Abbi  
Niyogi Books, 2021

Pages: 176  
Price: Rs.795 (hardcover)

the print format. Kudos to the publishers, Niyogi Books, for recognising the intrinsic worth of the project and for identifying an inspired and enabling format to carry it through.

## BOA SENIOR'S YEARNING

Anvita Abbi, who is known for identifying a sixth language family in the dying Great Andamanese tongues, has been globally feted by her peers for her linguistic expertise, as

evidenced by the multiple endorsements and the preface and afterword included in the book. Unique to this book is not only the self-avowed 'first ever' transcription and translation of Great Andamanese folk tales and folk songs but a verbalised, warm and intimate insight into the difficult elicitation process from 'rememberers' who have no listeners or responders in their own language.

The empathy of the specialist linguist with

these last tellers of tales and singers of songs in their heritage language, shines through the bleakness of their incipient extinction, inhering the one positive of recording these for posterity before their life runs out. If, in the person of Boa Senior, the death throes of a language and a culture are dramatised, then it is Anvita Abbi who makes note of it; if Boa Sr's sorrowing, lonely heart's yearning for someone who will listen to her and who will understand her issued a distress call, then it was Anvita Abbi who answered it.

## INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

This book witnesses the transformation of the cut-and-dried scientific exercise of data collection into a collaborative venture between the Great Andamanese speakers and herself. The excitement of capturing some of the intangible heritage of the people of the Great Andamans—their history, culture, ecological base and knowledge of biodiversity—is palpable, and the findings, priceless. This makes the volume truly an opening up of what Bernard Lowrie calls a 'wonderful world'.

Most importantly, the awakening of love for their language and cultural inheritance gives the disheartened speakers a warming sense of accomplishment to such an extent that they themselves become eager to share their stories and songs. The author's dramatised recall of the enjoined nitty-gritty speaks of the absolute



emotional and intellectual involvement of both the recaller and the recorder, reaching out to the reader with the demand for an invested participation.

Anvita Abbi's underplayed assertion that she was 'fortunate' to have been able to access their language and culture before their time ran out is patently not the whole story. The fortuitousness is more than matched by her foresight and understanding of the urgency of the situation and by her obvious perseverance in the face of dire odds.

The introduction and the details of the data collection make this book a field linguist's delight. But even as these specifics, along with the word for word phonetic transcription and translation, invite the interest of the specialist reader, the stories are an enticement to the lay reader.

#### ORAL LEGACY

Anvita Abbi's documentation of the ethno-linguistic practices and the recognition of the identity of the community through the oral legacy is achieved by the inclusion of original oral narratives and songs. The 10 stories and the 46 songs give an inimitable peek into the birth, death and marriage rituals and beliefs of the beleaguered islanders.

The tale "Pheratjido" emphasises the centrality



**BOA SR**, the last speaker of "Bo", one of the 10 Great Andamanese languages, on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Boa Sr, who died in January 2010 at the age of 85, was the last member of a tribe believed to be descendants of one of the oldest human cultures on earth, according to the London-based organisation Survival International. The Bo are thought to have lived in the Andaman Islands for up to 65,000 years.

of love and care in the process of creation and in its preservation. Death is an accepted part of the cycle of life, and the funeral rites are dictated by the kind of life and death a person goes through, as "The Tale of Juro the Hunter" amplifies.

The narratives, harking back to different points in the history of the Great Andamanese, become dramatic witnesses to the invasive progress of assimilation as in Nao Jr's insistent parallel drawn between Juro, their cannibalistic goddess, and the Hindu goddess Kali. They open windows, to a greater or lesser extent, to the importance of love, sacrifice,

social responsibility, loss, sorrow, sense of belonging with a community and its food habits.

From the stories a fair list of the occupations that the islanders follow can also be drawn: fisherfolk, bamboo weavers, hunters, and so on. Giving an insight into the sociology and psychology of the people, the stories highlight not only the inequality in gender positions and roles but also the latent feminist awareness of women's rights. Social and sexual norms are laid bare. The evil man Dik is reproached and murdered by a long-suffering wife because he "would not help

her in any of the chores".

The narratives also document historical developments like colonisation, revolt and resistance as in "Golat and Tae Daniel: The Short Story of Two Brothers and a Crocodile", which follows the strong and courageous Pujjukars, "who had so far resisted any outside intervention".

*Voices from the Lost Horizon*, with its thoughtful division into an extended introduction and commentary on the general and particular details of the methodology and importance of collecting data through stories and songs by the author, is backed by an enabling QR code access to the songs and an open link-sharing to various allied sites. This makes the volume a delight for researchers in neighbouring fields: folklore studies, cultural history, literature, sociology, anthropology, psychology and musicology.

Most importantly, it illuminates the processes of language shifts evident in the preferred usage of Andamanese Hindi, either because it is necessary or because of the social and economic clout it gives.

This weakening of language vitality and the looming endangerment and extinction, counterpointed by Anvita Abbi's practical demonstration of the ways in which this could have been circumvented, and her committed linguistic investment to cultural preservation make the book a complete, wholesome offering. □

Meenakshi Bharat is professor, Department of English, Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi.

Giving an insight into the sociology and psychology of the people, the stories highlight not only the inequality in gender positions and roles but also the latent feminist awareness of women's rights.





NATURE

# THROUGH A CHRONICLER'S LENS

**TIM AT THE AMBOSELI NATIONAL PARK** in Kenya. He was 50 when he died in 2020.  
He was considered to be Africa's largest elephant with arguably the longest tusks.





**A CHEETAH**  
named Imani  
and her cubs in  
the Masai Mara  
National  
Reserve, Kenya.



**A HERD OF  
IMPALAS** in  
Masai Mara.





## Interview with Percy Fernandez, wildlife photographer who is Professor and Chairperson for the School of Media and Communication, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Dubai, UAE.

Text by LEENA MARIAM KOSHY and  
photographs by PERCY FERNANDEZ

THE world is definitely facing an emergency. The present vicious cycle of biodiversity catastrophe and extreme cross-continental climatic events jeopardises the availability of air, food and water needed for human survival. It also adversely affects the sense of assured shelter, security and predictability of life that humans need to procreate and perpetuate future generations on the planet.

Climate Analytics and NewClimate Institute, both based in Germany, have predicted a 2.9 °C rise in global temperature by 2100. Are the earth's animal and plant species faced with another mass extinction?

With COP26, the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties, just having been held in Glasgow, Scotland, from October 31 to November 12, it seems appropriate to take a look at the critical role played by wildlife photographers in documenting what remains of the planet's wilderness, with which humankind shares an intertwined destiny.

"I try to go as often as I can to catch the planet's last frontiers and photograph what's remaining of the wild animals in their natural habitats. What if they won't last 10 years on?" said Percy Fernandez, Professor and Chair-



SIVAPRASAD NANDAKUMAR

**PERCY FERNANDEZ.**





**TWO MALE LIONS** in Masai Mara. Percy Fernandez: "You have to have ... infinite patience to get a photograph capturing the moods of wild animals."









**IN MASAI MARA**, zebras drinking water, and (below) grey crowned cranes. Fernandez: "By shooting over a period of time, serious photographers can chronicle natural history and the relationship between man, nature and the wilderness."







**THE LOEPARD**  
LULUKA and her  
cub in Masai Mara.



**GIRAFFES** against the morning light in Masai Mara.



**A BLACK RHINO** flanked by a topi and a gazelle.



**THE FAMOUS** cheetahs of Masai Mara. Fernandez: "This group was the largest coalition ever to be observed in the wild hunting together. In 2017, they were five of them, called Tano Bora [which] in Masai means the Fast Five."





person for the School of Media and Communication, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). He has followed his passion for wildlife photography in real earnest for the past two decades. He straddles the world of academics, journalism and wildlife photography with a sense of mission. At present, he works on wildlife projects in collaboration with Nikon Middle East and Africa and has just returned from a trip to Pantanal, the world's largest wetland ecosystem, in the Brazilian Amazon that suffered massive wildfires in 2020. The planet will feel the impact of this ecological disaster for a long time to come.

Excerpts from an interview with Percy Fernandez.

#### **How did you develop a passion for wildlife photography?**

My first impressions of nature and wildlife were formed during my stay at the Sainik School in Amara-vathinagar, at the foot of the Anaimalai Hills in the Western Ghats [in Tiruppur district, Tamil Nadu]. We used to see elephants regularly congregate at the edge of the reservoir to drink water. The reservoir had lots of crocodiles in it. There was a crocodile farm close to the school. Leopard visits were common.

One evening, I was fascinated to see two cobras entwined near the tap inside the police station premises

**KURILE LAKE** with the Ilyinsky volcano in the background in Kamchatka, which is in Russia's Far East. (Right) Mutnovsky is an active volcano in Kamchatka.

where we used drink water every evening after playing. Bison and elephants roamed these hills and so did deer and wild boars. The wild boars would feast at the water-melon farms near the oval ground. As boys, we used to trek to Chinnar and Munnar in Kerala. The stretch had tigers and leopards. We saw a lot of sandalwood trees as we neared Chinnar. That was a long time ago.

I also have fond memories of my stay in the hostel at Jawaharlal Nehru University while doing my PhD. Peacocks used to dance on my balcony against the backdrop of the Qutb Minar in the distance. Foxes and Nilgais were a common sight in JNU. At night, skunks moved about on treetops.

In due time, I visited Corbett, Ranthambhore, Kanha, Bandavgarh, Nagarhole, Bandipur, each of these national parks dedicated to protecting Indian tigers is unique. I have walked quite a bit in the Indian Himalaya. It requires a lifetime or more to travel and explore the heart of the Indian wilderness, leave alone to take a peek at the entire planet's biodiversity.

Since now I am based in Dubai, the Masai Mara









**A BEAR WITH HER  
CUBS** in Kamchatka.



**FERNANDEZ: "... OVERFISHING  
FOR SALMON, A HUMAN-INDUCED  
DISTURBANCE** of the food chain and  
the ecosystem, has had a telling effect  
on the bear population."





**THE VILYUCHINSKY  
VOLCANO** in Kamchatka.



**SIESTA TIME** for a mother and her cubs. Fernandez: "... photographers should take care not to disturb animals during shoots."

[National] Reserve in Kenya is not far away. I have been frequently travelling to the Mara and the Amboseli [National Park, Kenya]. Recently, I was in Kamchatka, Russia's Far East, home to the largest density of brown bears. They feed on the salmon that swim upstream from the Pacific to spawn. Twenty per cent of the wild Pacific salmon go to spawn in Kamchatka. It's quite a spectacle to see the bears in Kurile Lake, located in the beautiful and wild Kronotsky Nature Reserve.

I am just back from Pantanal, Brazil, after a jaguar-mapping trip. Millions of animals were burnt to death in last year's fire in the world's largest wetland ecosystem.

#### **What is special about these places and about your wildlife photography trips?**

Nature, especially wilderness, has a calming effect on

the mind. Each topography is special because of the landscape, flora and fauna. Kotagiri or Coonoor, for example, is idyllic; we see herds of bison browsing through the tea gardens there or an occasional barking deer vanishing into the bushes. The lush forests and the *tach*, which means meadow in Himachali, above Rola in the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh are home to the Western tragopan and the Himalayan monal. Once for almost a day, we were following the marks of a snow leopard during a trek that I did with a few friends from Kargil to Srinagar in Kashmir.

It is an indescribable feeling when I am in the mountains or in the forests [or in some other landscape], whether it is the forests of Nagarhole in Karnataka or the desert in the UAE or, for that matter, the grasslands of the Mara.

#### **What special knowledge and skills does a wildlife photographer need? What does wildlife photography engender?**

First of all, wildlife photography is a very individualistic engagement. You have to have a very real passion [for it] and infinite patience to get a photograph capturing the moods of wild animals. It is also crucial to have an understanding of the species and to observe the behaviour of the subject carefully.

But wildlife photography is much more than that. It should simultaneously combine knowledge of natural history, biodiversity, development, man-animal conflict, conservation policies, and so on. As for me, I studied sociology, anthropology [and] have been a journalist, all this gives me my perspective.

In the course of visiting the same places often, we find many phenomena happening over time. In Masai Mara, along with a few photographer friends, we followed this group of cheetahs every time we visited from 2017 [onwards]. This was the largest coalition ever to be observed





**A JAGUAR** walking along the side of a river looking for caimans, in Pantanal, the world's largest wetland ecosystem, in the Brazilian Amazon.



**A GIANT OTTER**  
with a fish in Pantanal.





**A HYACINTH MACAW**  
in Pantanal. The region  
suffered massive  
wildfires in 2020.

in the wild hunting together. In 2017, they were five of them, called Tano Bora [which] in Masai means the Fast Five. It is the safari guides in the Mara who name the animals. Of the five, two were brothers, and the rest of them were from different mothers. This phenomenon has never been observed before in the wild.

Consciously, photographers should take care not to disturb animals during shoots. It's easy nowadays to get a shot of a leopard or a cheetah with a big glass, say a 600 or 800 mm, from afar. On a few occasions, cheetahs have jumped onto jeeps. On several occasions, lions, cheetahs and leopards have walked straight to us, looked us in the eye, and skirted around our jeep. You just remain still and quiet. There are photographers I know who ventured to take close-ups or low-angles and got their cameras crushed by elephants or chewed off by lions.

#### **Did Sir David Attenborough influence you?**

What Sir Attenborough did in his lifetime made a profound impact on many of us. Without him, we wouldn't have known how beautiful our planet is. He made us seriously think about the way we lived and how it affected our planet. *Wild Karnataka* is an exquisite documentary on the wildlife in Karnataka narrated by Sir David Attenborough.

#### **What is the role of wildlife photographers at this juncture in our planet's history?**

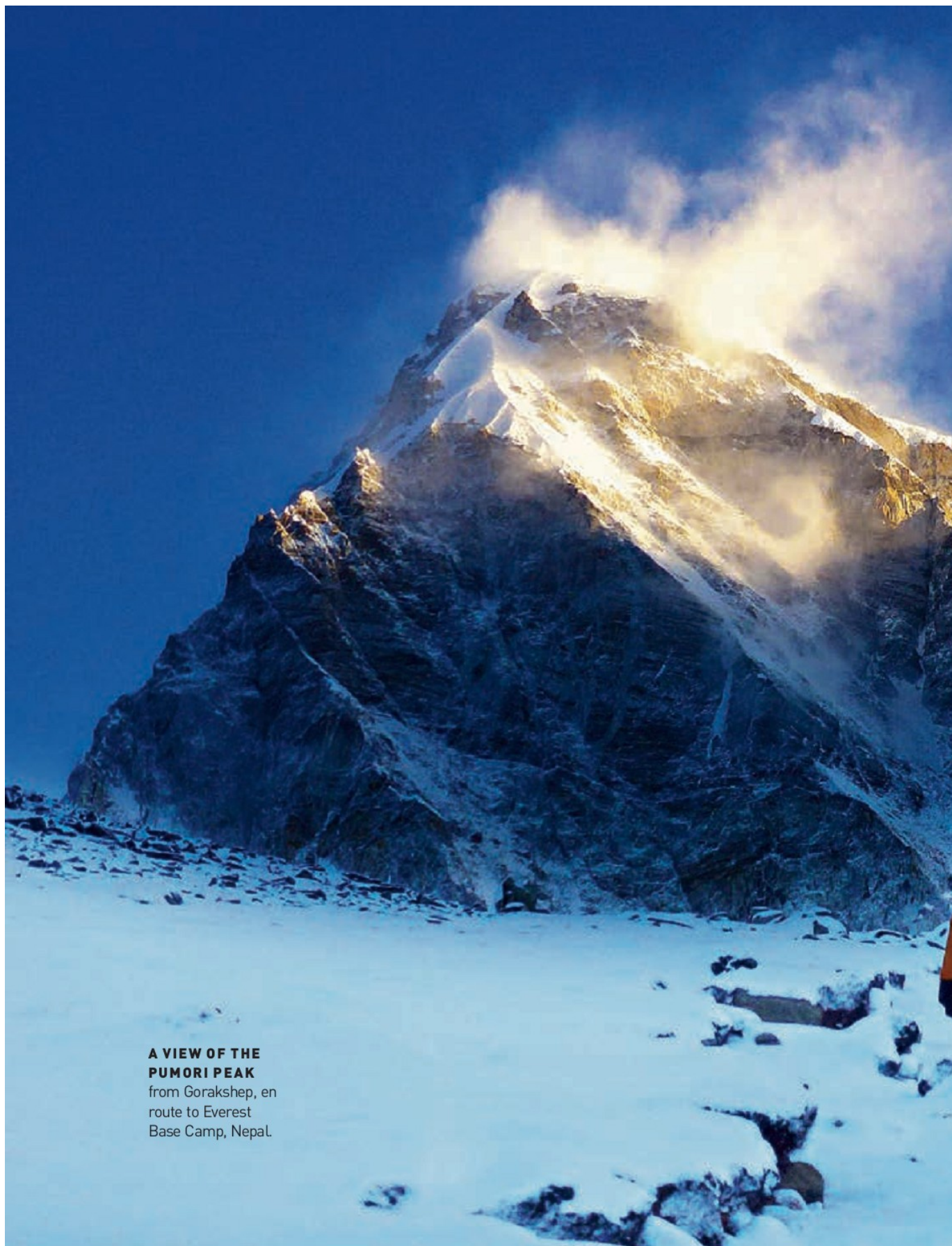
Wildlife photographers play a critical role, firstly in documentation. By shooting over a period of time, serious photographers can chronicle natural history and the relationship between man, nature and the wilderness. Their work can help provide insights to field biologists, climate change scientists, economists and help in formulating policies for the betterment of our planet. Wildlife photographers act as the crucial link between the status of biodiversity and the conservation efforts.

Today, there are many teams out there scanning the remote corners of the world and filming nature, birds and [other] wildlife. Mostly, they are commissioned. These productions are expensive affairs, with the crew spending a minimum of seven to eight weeks at a location. But with technology ushering in a new series of affordable, lightweight cameras, it could be a game changer for aspiring wildlife film-makers who once thought it was an expensive affair. I have been teaming up with friends to make shorts. I have also been collaborating with Nikon Middle East and Africa.

#### **After the pandemic, has a new perspective dawned on the general public with respect to wildlife?**

The perspective has changed after the pandemic. People have started taking their existence on earth seriously. They don't want to take anything for granted any more. Now faced with the climate emergency, everybody is taking a wider perspective that humankind's very exist-





**A VIEW OF THE  
PUMORI PEAK**  
from Gorakshp, en  
route to Everest  
Base Camp, Nepal.





**WILD DOGS** and (below) a gaur at the Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka. Fernandez: "It is an indescribable feeling when I am in the mountains or in the forests [or in some other landscape], whether it is the forests of Nagarhole in Karnataka or the desert in the UAE or, for that matter, the grasslands of the Mara."



**A MALABAR GIANT SQUIRREL** at Nagarhole.





**A LANGUR** in the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh.

ence on the planet is itself dependent on the well-being of nature and its biodiversity.

#### **What are the fallouts of global warming?**

The biorhythm responsible for the earth's seasons has gone. You hardly get to witness clearly demarcated seasons any more. That is because of the depletion of biodiversity and wilderness. The polar [ice] caps and glaciers have receded in front of our eyes. We have searing summer temperatures and winters are not so cold any more. When I went to Kamchatka last year [August], I met a photographer from Siberia who said that at her place the winter temperatures which used to be minus 35-40 °C till recently had risen to minus 15 last year. The temperature rise, on the one hand, and then an unprecedented massive snowfall, on the other, [resulted in] a larger melt later that submerged villages of Kamchatka.

Globally, unless countries collectively take a stand and start protecting biodiversity and the wilderness, climate catastrophes will increase.

#### **How do topsy-turvy biorhythms and human interventions affect food chains and lead to the depletion of biodiversity?**

The dwindling of food for a species has an adverse effect on the species population over time. The park rangers of Masai Mara tell me that earlier during the Great Migration season, a million wildebeests used to migrate from the Serengeti to the Mara to feed on the grasslands; the herd needs a massive food supply to feed and breed there. Now two changes have taken place in the migration. The biorhythm has changed. The crossing

over that used to take place in July/August, now starts early in June. Secondly, the wildebeest numbers have dwindled. The adverse food conditions at the breeding grounds could be a reason for this. Due to the aridification of the land, the savannah may not be robust any more to support great numbers [of animals]. The planet's biodiversity can be kept intact only if we keep the habitats and food chains intact.

Another example is the dwindling [number] of brown bears in Kamchatka as the population of the fatty salmon coming to breed in Kurile Lake has vastly reduced. The bears have to gain body weight before they go for hibernation during the harsh winter months. But overfishing for salmon, a human-induced disturbance of the food chain and the ecosystem, has had a telling effect on the bear population. For nutrient cycling and complete health of the ecosystem, not only are the iconic animals on top of the food chain important; the tiny insects, amphibians, small birds down to invisible microbes are all equally important.

#### **How can countries try to mitigate climate change?**

It is a tall order. You have to protect the wilderness. This comes from policy change, which means injecting a lot of funds into the environment budget of countries. Over the years, we have seen only an increase in poaching and loss of wilderness. You can't set the clock back; an extinct species can't be brought back to life. However, one that is endemic and faces the threat of extinction can be revived [if there is] firm political will. □

*Leena Mariam Koshy is an independent writer based in Kozhikode, Kerala.*



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