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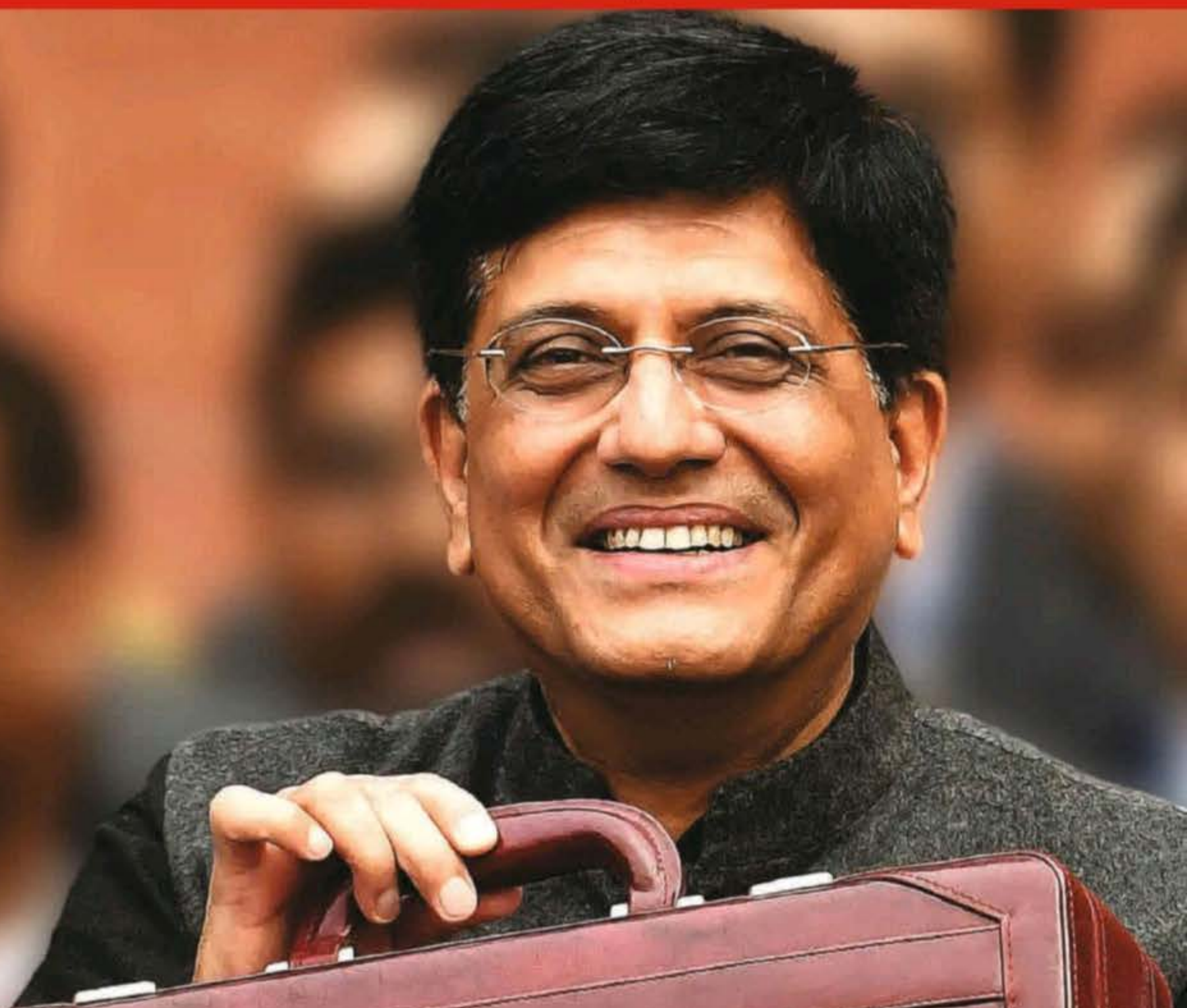
# FRONTLINE

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## DESPERATE GAMBIT

The Budget that stand-in Finance Minister Piyush Goyal has presented, solely aimed at reaping dividends in the Lok Sabha election, offers too little, too late to those who lost heavily under the Narendra Modi regime



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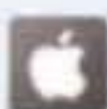
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Stand-in Finance Minister Piyush Goyal on his way to Parliament to present the interim budget.

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COVER STORY

# Election manifesto in disguise

In keeping with its **scorn for institutional propriety**, the Modi regime presents a full-fledged Budget instead of a vote on account, that too full of thoughtless schemes, with an eye on the Lok Sabha election.

BY V. SRIDHAR





ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

**STAND-IN FINANCE MINISTER**  
Piyush Goyal arrives in  
Parliament to present the  
2019-20 Budget on February 1.

THE LAST BUDGET OF THE NARENDRA MODI government, desperately aimed at reaping dividends in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, offers too little too late to those who lost heavily during its tenure.

In a cricket-crazy country, only a cricketing analogy can perhaps explain stand-in Finance Minister Piyush Goyal's Budget: he was playing a five-day Test match in what was billed to be a 20-over game. Goyal was supposed to present a vote on account, essentially a Budget for the first two months of the next financial year, after which a newly elected government would present the accounting exercise for the full financial year. Instead, he presented not just an election manifesto but a vision that extended up to 2030.

Budgets are generally assessed immediately for their impact on "sentiment", of two kinds: one, the "sentiment" that it arouses to the person on the street, and two, the way it sways the sentiment of the markets, that abstract construct that supposedly reflects the will of the well-heeled. Goyal's Budget falls flat on both counts. It is obvious that the markets will, sooner than later, look through the badly done window dressing behind that most dreaded of numbers in post-reform India—the fiscal deficit.

While nothing is more annoying to investors than the unsettling need to reconcile unbalanced numbers, the ugly truth is that the prime so-called sops in the Budget—the handout of a princely sum of Rs.6,000 over a year to small peasants, the utterly laughable pension scheme for workers in the unorganised sector and the tinkering with tax rates at the lowest end of the tax base—are possibly just too little, too late.

It is likely that sentiments of both kinds may well turn heavily negative simply because the track record of the Modi government does not allow its audience the luxury of hope.

Four aspects of the Budget are particularly vexatious. The first pertains to the very propriety of abusing the interim nature of the budgetary exercise, akin to the manner in which a caretaker government is expected to conduct itself on the eve of an impending election.

The second pertains to the numbers in the Budget, particularly as they come in the context of the Modi regime's demonstrated cavalier disdain for data of many kinds, but particularly in this context, of the economic variety. This not only threatens the internal consistency of the numbers in the Budget but may well pose conundrums for the incumbent government that assumes office after the forthcoming election.

The third is the manner in which it aggressively undermines the resource mobilisation possibilities of the States and hinders their ability to perform a meaningful role in providing relief from the grave problems caused by issues such as the agrarian distress or the utter stagnation in employment.

The fourth arises specifically from the Budget's three key proposals announced with great fanfare: the programme to provide income support to farm households, the exemption proposals at the lowest level



of the income tax bracket, and the insurance scheme for workers in the unorganised sector.

### **INCOHERENT NUMBERS**

The substance of Goyal's Budget lies in the receipts side. Gross tax revenues are projected to increase by 13 per cent in 2019-20, notwithstanding the fact that they are projected to miss the Budget target for 2018-19. A slowdown in tax collections is thus clearly evident. A significant component of the slowdown has obviously come from the shortfall in the Centre's collection of goods and service tax (GST).

Revenues from GST are likely to miss their target set in the last Budget by a whopping Rs.1 lakh crore (a 13 per cent target shortfall). This shortfall in GST implies not only that the Centre is taking a huge hit on its balance sheet, but that there are serious consequences for the States.

The pace of growth of total revenue receipts, which includes tax and non-tax revenues, is also decelerating significantly—from about 20 per cent between 2017-18 and 2018-19 (Revised Estimates) to 14 per cent in 2019-20. Clearly, the increased splurge on the schemes announced in the Budget is projected to be funded from other receipts that are capital in nature.

Goyal's Budget projects that capital receipts are likely to grow by only 2.9 per cent in the current year but will increase by close to 11 per cent in the next financial year. This is, in part, the secret to his success in hiding the true extent of the fiscal deficit. A significant part of this is expected to accrue from disinvestment as well as what the Reserve Bank of India, now under a new steward, may provide the government by way of a transfer of its accumulated capital "surplus".

Given that such accruals are, in their very nature, one-time transfers of resources, the question that arises is, Is it prudent to back expenditures of a recurring kind—cash transfers to farmers, for example—by one-time provisions that cannot be repeated in subsequent years? This is what accountants would label as a recipe for a serious asset-liability problem in the future.

Apart from this, the Budget numbers indicate that receipts from income tax have been stagnant, which is rather surprising for an economy that is clipping along at the pace that the controversial gross domestic product (GDP) estimates claim. This is particularly relevant because the collections from income tax should logically rise with an increase in national income—if not at the same rate, at least by a rate close enough to it.

In his long speech, Goyal waxed eloquent about how the Modi government had reined in inflation from near-double-digit levels to barely 3 per cent. There is some truth in this, although the causes of this lower inflation numbers are hardly flattering to the Modi regime. The reality is that the lower inflation levels attest to a significant collapse of prices, especially agricultural commodity prices (see R. Ramakumar's article on page 18).

But the collapse of the inflation rate raises yet more

embarrassing questions about national income statistics, most notably the estimates of GDP, which have a bearing on the Budget. Although the most recent estimates for GDP in 2018-19, released just before the Budget, place it at Rs.188.40 lakh crore in nominal terms, the Budget assumes that the nominal GDP will be Rs.210 lakh crore in 2019-20, an increase of 11.46 per cent.

The Central Statistics Office's most recent projections estimate GDP growth in real terms (at constant prices) at 7.2 per cent in 2018-19, whereas in nominal terms (current prices) the GDP was expected to grow at 12.3 per cent. The difference between the two growth rates is what economists refer to as the implicit GDP deflator.

The fact that the actual inflation rates (currently less than 2.9 per cent) do not match the implicit deflator has two important consequences. For one, it undermines the already diminishing confidence in the national income estimates that were controversially reworked after the Modi government assumed office.

Crucially, in the immediate context, the variance also undermines the logic and internal consistency of the estimates presented in the Budget. Logically, a lower inflation rate ought to lower the nominal GDP, which has implications for tax collections because they are a function of current incomes generated by economic activity.

The difference of 2.1 per cent between the implicit deflator and the inflation rate is not trivial in the context of the national GDP. A quick calculation indicates that this would amount to about Rs.4.41 lakh crore in 2019-20. Tax revenues account for 12 per cent of the GDP, which means that a downward revision of the nominal GDP by about 2.1 per cent would result in a tax revenue shortfall of about Rs.53,000 crore in 2019-20.

Thus, the widely suspect numbers pertaining to the GDP cast a huge shadow over the sanctity of the estimates in the Budget. That these are not merely confined to the extent of the fiscal deficit is obvious.

### **STATES SHORTCHANGED**

Goyal's Budget indicates that the States' finances are seriously adrift for three reasons. The shortfall in the States' share of tax revenues is as much as Rs.27,000 crore; in fact, it was enough to cover the shortfall in gross tax revenues of the Centre in 2018-19.

More critically, as has been repeatedly emphasised by several economists, including Kerala's Finance Minister, T.M. Thomas Isaac, the recourse to raising revenues through the imposition of cess, "additional" duties and surcharge, especially on petroleum products during the spectacular rise in their prices, has enabled the Centre to avoid sharing such revenues with the States.

Goyal has projected that Rs.4.4 lakh crore—more than 17 per cent of gross tax collections—will be raised through such means during 2019-20. This implies an increase of 45 per cent over the resources raised through this method of taxation, which avoids paying the States their share.





**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi during the Budget session of the Lok Sabha.

But the sting in the tail for the States lies in GST collections. As mentioned earlier, the shortfall of the Centre's collections of GST amounts to Rs.1 lakh crore. Given the fact that the design of GST is such that the States stake claim to half the tax that is paid by taxpayers, this immediately implies that the States too have collectively lost an amount of a similar magnitude.

Indeed, the shortfall in GST collections raises serious issues of propriety in financial relations between the Centre and the States. GST has generated widespread protests, and faced with this backlash, the Modi regime has constantly been tinkering with the GST regime. The periodic reassigning of tax rates on various commodities has meant that the Centre has robbed the States of one of their main avenues of resource mobilisation.

The GST Council, in which the Centre enjoys a position of power by virtue of its superior voting clout, has functioned in a manner that undermines the States' access to resources. After all, the States' dependence on GST is far greater than the Centre's dependence on it, as is evident from the massive recourse to cesses and duties that are available to the Centre, apart from others.

While it is not possible to estimate the extent of the shortfall on account of GST, it is evident that a 13 per cent shortfall for the Centre does not translate into an overall shortfall in its revenues. But since the States' dependence on GST is far greater, it is obvious that they would be hit worse by this shortfall.

Clearly, GST, which was touted as a game changer, is proving to be—at least in its current design—a millstone around the neck for the States. It is evident that the deepening farm crisis; the worsening employment situation; and the slide in access to public health, education and several other areas places the States in a difficult situation. After all, since these are issues of immediate concern and since State governments are perceived to be closer to ground realities on these matters, there is greater popular pressure on them to deliver on these fronts.

Even the erstwhile BJP governments in States such as Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were forced to undertake measures, even if ill-designed, to provide a measure of relief.

A genuine effort at providing relief to the beleaguered peasantry, for instance, would have required the Modi government to discuss the contours of its PM-Kisan scheme with State governments if it was sincere in addressing the issue of farm distress. As the accompanying story by Prafulla Das shows (page 18), even a poor State such as Odisha appears to have initiated a scheme for cash transfers with far better resolve and purpose. Although critics may say the scheme is opportunistically timed, there is no denying the fact that it has a far better insight into the nature and depth of the crisis in the countryside. It, thus, provides support not only for cultivators and even landless labourer households but other “vulnerable” sections in the rural areas.

Unlike Goyal, Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik appears to have done his maths as well, having a ready estimate of the number of beneficiaries. In short, the scheme appears to be better targeted and better designed. In contrast, Goyal's Budget exercise pretends to have forgotten what was promised in Arun Jaitley's last Budget, when he promised a scheme involving the States that would address the question of paying peasants the promised minimum support price.

This Budget is in keeping with the Modi regime's scorn for institutional propriety. The interim budget, by masquerading as a full-blown budgetary exercise, threatens to tie the hands of any government that assumes office after the election. For instance, it would be difficult for a new government to rescind the allocation of Rs.75,000 crore for the PM-Kisan scheme; it would not be able to design a better programme based on a more realistic assessment and informed by a more genuine concern for the extent of rural distress.

The tall promises and a sudden discovery of the need to make amends for the colossal pain that was inflicted on large swathes of the population—most notably peasants and small producers—in the wake of demonetisation and GST may well boomerang. Unfortunately for Modi, there is some time between Goyal's Budget and when people will actually vote, which gives them the time to think things through. In effect, the nightmare of actually experienced five-year “achhe din” is likely to cloud hopes of yet more “achhe din”. □



# The new fiscal arithmetic

Over the years, the Narendra Modi government has not only **window dressed its Budgets** but also relied on extra-budgetary resources and off-budget expenditures to “rein in” fiscal deficit. BY **C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR**

WHEN STAND-IN FINANCE MINISTER PIYUSH Goyal presented what was neither a mere vote on account nor a full-fledged Budget, he delivered a speech that sought to make up for the failure of the National Democratic Alliance government to do enough on the economic front to win favour with India's electorate. The background to the speech was the poor economic record of the Modi-led government, which is reflected in a number of outcomes.

First, the accumulating evidence that demonetisation, besides failing to achieve any of the objectives the government could claim it served (from wiping out the black economy to ending currency counterfeiting), ended up damaging the most vulnerable, hurting small business and pushing unemployment and underemployment to a new peak, forcing the government to hold back official evidence that convincingly established that reality. The second was that the ostensibly game-changing goods and services tax (GST) proved to be a failure, with receipts falling way short of target, in addition to disrupting the operations of businesses and heaping new burdens on many final consumers. The Budget's estimates place collections from GST at Rs.1,00,000 crore (or more than 13 per cent) below target in 2018-19. The third was that despite talk of doubling farmers' income by 2022, the government had, in the last four-and-a-half years, left the farm sector languishing and made its first serious effort to provide farmers any real benefit through an enhanced minimum support price only in the last year of its tenure. Fourth, despite the slogans of “Make in India” and “Start Up India”, manufacturing in the country has been ailing, making growth dependent on services. And, finally, there was enough evidence that, in the midst of this failure, the government had paid off big business, especially selected

cronies, including through the public banking system, leading to huge non-performing assets, a large part of which was being written off and financed with recapitalisation funds from the exchequer.

Aiming at damage control, given this background, the Budget decided to offer a set of new sops that were big in hype but small in terms of benefits transferred to each beneficiary. The real intent of the sops seems to be to woo a large section of the peasantry and the middle classes, besides the unorganised workers who have been hurt most by both demonetisation and GST. As many commentators have pointed out, the sops themselves are small recompense, if at all, for the substantial neglect of



**CABLE OPERATORS** protest against GST in Hyderabad in December 2018. The “game-changer” tax has seen receipts falling short of Budget Estimates by Rs.1,00,000 crore.



the beneficiary population. What was surprising was that even while violating norms by tinkering with the tax structure in what should have been a vote on account (presenting in essence six Budgets in a five-year term), the Budget speech wanted to declare that it had kept to the government's commitment to fiscal deficit reduction. The fiscal deficit is placed at 3.4 per cent in 2018-19 (against a targeted 3.3 per cent) and is to remain at that level, with the slight deviation from the deficit reduction "glide path" attributed only to the need to provide some succour to the peasantry suffering from low or negative net incomes.

Interestingly, advocates and supporters of fiscal reform and "consolidation" led by international finance have more or less accepted the government's claim that it has only marginally deviated from the budgeted deficit for this fiscal year and can prevent any further slide next year so as to return to the task of fiscal consolidation. In fact, one newspaper carried a hearsay story that besides implicitly accepting the figures attributed them to the Prime Minister's personal insistence on fiscal "prudence". Some have expressed "concern" about even the one-tenth of a percentage point deviation from the deficit figure in Budget 2018-19 and the failure to keep the original target of 3.1 per cent for the coming financial year.

While the absurdity of this discourse need not detain us here, what is clear is that these "experts" have both accepted this government's fiscal arithmetic for 2018-19 and presumed that whichever government comes to power in May 2019 will stick to the deficit numbers that this "interim budget" has scripted.

There is a major presumption underlying this version of the charade that is played out at Budget time every year

and has turned comic during the tenure of the current government. That is the view that we can accept at face value a set of numbers put out by a government that has shown itself willing to violate norms and convert a vote on account into a pre-election assessment of its tenure, peppered with some largesse on the tax and expenditure sides aimed at wooing voters. Moreover, this is a government that has, according to the assessment of even insiders, not only manipulated national accounts statistics to show that it has performed better than its predecessors in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) growth but has also prevented the scheduled release of at least two surveys that point to a worsening of the employment situation in the country because of its policies such as demonetisation and GST. Why such a regime should, at this crucial juncture, be honest in its accounting is by no means clear.

In fact, there is reason to believe that not just in this "interim budget" but over time during its tenure, in keeping with its tendency to further undermine all norms procedures and institutions, the National Democratic Alliance government has window dressed its budgets in multiple ways and relied in unprecedented fashion on extra-budgetary resources and off-Budget expenditures to "rein" in the fiscal deficit.

Evidence of window dressing is writ large in this Budget too. Despite claiming to have provided Rs.20,000 crore in financial year 2018-19 for the new direct benefit transfer scheme to farmers (and although even by its optimistic estimates, the receipts from GST have fallen short of Budget Estimates by Rs.1,00,000 crore), the Budget claims to be nearly on track with its fiscal consolidation exercise, which targeted a deficit of 3.3 per cent.

#### COOKED-UP FIGURES

Figures have clearly been cooked up to deliver this result. First, is the "revision" of GDP estimates, which by consistently hiking the size of the national cake, helps depress the ratio of the fiscal deficit to the GDP. The second is optimistic estimates about tax buoyancy. Thus, besides the optimism with regard to GST revenues, the "projected" revenue from corporation taxes in 2018-19 is now placed at Rs.50,000 crore, or 8 per cent more than the Budget Estimates. Finally, the government is providing for large on-target receipts of Rs.80,000 crore from disinvestment in 2018-19 and a higher Rs.90,000 crore in 2019-20. Surprisingly, thus far there does not seem to be evidence of success on the disinvestment front. Excluding the most recent buyback of equity by Indian Oil Corporation and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), disinvestment receipts are currently placed at a little more than Rs.34,000 crore in 2018-19, which is not even half-way to the target.

What is more noteworthy is the transformation of the nature of disinvestment in two directions. The first is the securitisation of public sector equity for sale in the form of exchange traded funds (ETFs), which allows putting on sale equity from multiple profitable enterprises in one



G. RAMAKRISHNA



bundle at prices that are attractive to investors. Receipts from the sale of ETFs accounted for more than Rs.25,000 crore of the receipts in 2018-19. The second is to squeeze out “disinvestment” receipts from public sector corporations rather than through sales of public equity to private players. Having started with sale of Central Public Sector Enterprises’ equity to other CPSEs, which culminated in the complete sale of Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited to ONGC in 2017-18, the government is now relying on “buybacks” by public sector enterprises (PSEs) of their own equity held by the state. Eight out of 16 disinvestment transactions in 2018-19 were “buybacks” of government-held equity by the public sector undertakings concerned. The government also plans to mobilise in excess of Rs.10,000 crore by selling its 52.63 per cent stake in the Rural Electrification Corporation to the Power Finance Corporation, which, too, it owns. Often, the public sector corporation that is buying either its own equity or that of other PSEs needs to turn to market borrowing to finance its modernisation and expansion plans, having handed over its cash reserves to the state. The accounting exercise merely shifts borrowing out of the budget to other sections of the public sector.

#### OFF-BUDGET FINANCING

The other element is resort to off-Budget financing of various kinds to meet expenditures. According to a recently released Comptroller and Auditor General report, this form of financing is reflected in the deferment of fertilizer subsidy arrears through special banking arrangements; implementing the irrigation scheme (Accelerated Irrigation Benefit Programme) through borrowings by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development; financing railway projects through borrowings of the Indian Railway Finance Corporation and power projects through the Power Finance Corporation; and much else. What has become the norm is the issue of special securities, varying from the recapitalisation of public sector banks and financial institutions to covering dues with special bonds such as those issued to oil bonds, fertilizer bonds, bonds issued to State Bank of India (during the recent rights issue), Unit Trust of India, the Industrial Finance Corporation of India and the Food Corporation of India. This is a transaction in which the government is providing funds to the organisation con-

cerned and that organisation invests the money in special securities so that there is no net government capital expenditure and an increase in the fiscal deficit. However, while the transfers are netted out, interest on the securities is paid out of the Budget. As a result, interest payments in the Budget have ballooned at a faster pace than the increase in recorded government debt would warrant. In addition, a rising volume of capital expenditures are being funded by reliance on borrowing by, or the “internal and extra-budgetary resources” of, public sector entities.

And finally, the government has been relying on the direct transfer of resources from PSEs and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in the form of profits and dividends, which rose from Rs.91,360 crore in 2017-18 to an estimated Rs.1,19,265 crore in 2018-19, and are placed at Rs.1,36,071 crore in 2019-20. Interestingly, while dividends received from PSEs were, at Rs.45,124 crore, well short of the budgeted Rs.52,495 crore, dividends and surpluses of the RBI, nationalised banks and financial institutions are estimated at Rs.74,140 crore in the Revised Estimates for 2018-19 compared with the budgeted Rs.54,817 crore. That figure is slated to rise further to Rs.82,912 crore in 2019-20.

Manipulations of this kind have, however, not been enough for the government to make its “pro-people” sops additional to existing measures of support. Thus, while a grossly inadequate amount relative to demand of Rs.61,064 crore was spent on the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme in 2018-19, allocation for 2019-20 is placed at a lower Rs.60,000 crore. The expenditure in 2017-18 and allocations for 2019-20 for the schemes for Scheduled Castes are Rs.7,609 crore and Rs.5,395 crore, and that for Scheduled Tribes are Rs.3,778 crore and Rs.3,610 crore respectively.

Even the current government’s flagship programmes have suffered. Expenditure on the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in 2017-18 was Rs.31,164 crore. The Budget for 2018-19 allocated only Rs.25,705 crore, and expenditure was a lower Rs.26,405 crore according to the Revised Estimates, and the allocation for 2019-20 is an even lower Rs.25,853 crore. The corresponding figures for the heavily advertised Swachh Bharat Mission are Rs.19,427 crore (Advanced Estimates 2017-18), Rs.17,843 crore (Budget Estimate 2018-19), Rs.16,978 crore (Revised Estimate 2018-19) and a much lower Rs.12,750 crore (Budget Estimate 2019-20).

In sum, all its efforts at window dressing notwithstanding, the Finance Ministry has not been able to provide the allocations for the income transfer for farmers and other “new” schemes, while adhering to fiscal conservatism, without cutting back on allocations of existing schemes that possibly can have much larger beneficial outcomes. In sum, the “interim budget” 2019-20 is nothing but a cynical propaganda effort. Whether a people who were promised large transfers of expropriated money into their bank accounts and huge benefits from demonetisation and received nothing will swallow such propaganda is to be seen. □

Even the current government’s flagship programmes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and the Swachh Bharat Mission, have suffered.



# Budgetary charades

Budget 2019-20 is a “jumla”, and little thought has gone into formulating the schemes it has announced such as the largesse to “vulnerable landholding families” and pension for 10 crore workers in the unorganised sector. BY PRABHAT PATNAIK



KARAD-RAJU SANADI/PTI

**AT A CONSTRUCTION SITE.** The pension scheme announced for workers in the unorganised sector is actually a savings scheme without any substantial government contribution.

WHEN ONE CONTINUOUSLY WATCHES charades, one begins to mistake charade for reality. This is what the Narendra Modi government has been banking upon, in presenting one charade after another as cover for its real activities. This is not an unfair accusation: Bharatiya Janata Party chief Amit Shah himself admitted as much when he used the word “jumla” to describe some of Modi’s promises, meaning a substantial and self-serving public fib. Amit Shah’s philosophy, which one assumes must be that of the government too, is that democracy entails the presentation of competing “jumlas” before the people by the different aspirants for political power. This, however, is a dangerous philosophy

since in a democracy there ought to be no place for “jumlas” of any kind.

The 2019-20 Budget alas is such a “jumla”, which is not the same thing as its being “populist”. Consider its *piece de resistance*, the scheme to transfer Rs.6,000 annually to “vulnerable landholding families”, defined as those with two hectares or less. It is obvious that very little thought has gone into formulating this scheme. No distinction is drawn between irrigated and unirrigated tracts, whose thresholds of vulnerability are vastly different. No clarity is offered on whether “landholding” refers to “operational” or “ownership” holdings. The figure of 12.5 crore beneficiaries mentioned by Piyush Goyal sug-



gests that he was referring to “operational holdings”, as the Agricultural Census puts their number around this figure (see Jayati Ghosh’s article on page 28), but “operational holdings” include tenant-cultivated holdings, and data on tenancy being notoriously unreliable, especially on the widely prevalent “informal tenancy”, identifying targeted beneficiaries in such a case would be almost impossible.

One may think, therefore, that perhaps he meant ownership holdings. But even ownership data are unclear since land records are in a complete mess over much of the country. What he meant by “landholding” and how the government proposes to go about identifying beneficiaries thus remain a mystery. The government, on its part, has issued no clarifications to date on this issue, leading one to suspect—especially in view of the abysmal state of its finances, which would scarcely permit such a scheme as long as the fiscal deficit target is adhered to, and whose precariousness is itself covered up by a “jumla”—that the scheme, at least for 2019-20, is just another “jumla”.

This impression is confirmed by a curious fact. The very day after the Budget, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley stated that for 2019-20 the Centre would ask State governments to share 40 per cent of the financial burden of the scheme. And we now hear that Aadhaar would be mandatory for drawing benefits under the scheme in 2019-20, though not in 2018-19, when Rs.20,000 crore will be disbursed under it. The impression is unavoidable that the government simply proposes to distribute Rs.20,000 crore to “small and marginal farmers” before the Lok Sabha election and has no real plans for what should happen thereafter in case it comes back to power. And since immediately identifying all the “small and marginal farmer” beneficiaries to pay Rs.20,000 crore to within two months is virtually impossible, this sum would be used basically for disbursing largesse to some specific sets of people in rural areas in the run-up to the election. As a general scheme, this centrepiece of the Budget is a mere charade.

This impression of the Budget having the character of a charade is confirmed by the other talking point it has thrown up, namely, the pension scheme for 10 crore unorganised sector workers. This not only does not provide pensions to the existing old, not only does not provide a pension amount that is half of the minimum wage, as has been demanded for long, but is also contributory in character. What is more, the promised contribution of half the pension amount by the government is nowhere discernible.

A simple calculation shows that a male worker, just turning 29, who opts for the scheme and pays Rs.100 a month regularly until he turns 60 in order to get a pension of Rs.3,000 a month thereafter, would be virtually getting the pension out of his own savings. At 8 per cent compound interest rate his own contribution when he becomes 60 would have added up to nearly Rs.1,50,000, and given the average male life expectancy of 65 years, this sum would suffice to provide him with

almost Rs.3,000 a month for the rest of his expected life.

The scheme is thus more of a savings scheme for unorganised sector workers, giving them an additional saving instrument, rather than a pension scheme with any substantial government contribution. The government’s claim of providing pensions to 10 crore workers thus turns out to be yet another “jumla”, and the meagre amount earmarked for it under the Budget suggests that it does not even expect many takers for it.

Thus, the only two real takeaways from the Budget are the income tax concessions, whereby persons earning up to Rs.5 lakh a year will not be paying any income tax from 2019-20 onwards, and the expenditure of Rs.20,000 crore in the current financial year as cash transfers to farmers, a promise on which presumably it will be too costly for the government to renege on just before the election. Curiously, the income tax concessions are expected not to hurt income tax revenues, which are in fact supposed to go up by 17.2 per cent between 2018-19 Revised Estimate and 2019-20 Budget Estimate. There is an important point of principle here, which is often missed. Since income tax revenues are shareable with the States, the Centre’s unilateral announcement of income tax concessions when such concessions are likely to affect the size of the divisible pool adversely, to the detriment of State governments, goes against the federal spirit. It is a sign of the centralisation of decision-making that has occurred of late, especially under the Modi government, that while the States have to seek the permission of the Goods and Services Tax Council for raising resources within their own domains (as Kerala recently had to do for imposing a 1 per cent cess on the sale of goods and services within the State, for financing recovery from the devastating flood), the Centre feels free to make unilateral changes in tax rates even when such changes may hit State finances. The assault on federalism that has occurred is an important aspect of the attenuation of democracy, which we are witnessing in India at present. In providing the income tax “sop”, the Centre is being “generous”, at least in part, at the expense of the States.

But it is also a symptom of our times, of State governments being cowed down, that hardly a voice has been raised on this. This is in sharp contrast to the earlier times, when the Centre’s decision on one occasion not to raise the income tax rate but to levy a surcharge on income tax instead, which was not shareable with States, had caused huge protests from the State governments.

#### **EXCLUSION OF THE POOR**

What is particularly striking about this Budget is its exclusion of the poor. Agricultural labourers, unrecognised tenants and small peasants with over 2 ha in unirrigated areas are excluded from the cash transfer scheme, and given the state of land records, when the money is actually disbursed, several of the targeted beneficiaries among small peasants will also get excluded in practice. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which has been allowed to get run





G. RAMAKRISHNA

**PATIENTS OUTSIDE** a hospital in Hyderabad. Only nominal additions have been made in the Budget to the already paltry allocations in 2018-19 for the National Health Mission and the Maternity Benefit Scheme.

down for some time, is now set to be further run down: its budgetary provision for 2019-20 is actually Rs.1,000 crore less than for 2018-19. The allocation for the National Old Age Pension Scheme has also declined in absolute terms. And only nominal additions have been made to the already paltry allocations in 2018-19 for the National Health Mission and the Maternity Benefit Scheme, which would mean a decline in real allocations.

On the other hand, the raising of the income tax floor and the largesse to landholders, which is likely in practice to benefit some better-off peasants (a 2 ha holding in irrigated tracts is quite substantial), suggest an effort to woo the “intermediate classes”. If the Budget has any implicit electoral strategy underlying it, it is to reach out to the intermediate strata while ignoring the poor.

The importance of the (urban and rural) intermediate classes in Third World societies was underscored by the renowned economist Michal Kalecki, who had even seen this class as wielding state power under postcolonial dirigisme. While this was an exaggeration, not just now under neoliberalism when the big bourgeoisie’s dominance is palpable, but even for the dirigiste period for which his theory was advanced, this class certainly has considerable political significance.

In fact, a major reason for India’s easy transition from dirigisme to neoliberalism was the switch of loyalty between regimes by the urban middle class. There were many reasons for this: primarily, of course, the dead end reached by Nehruvian dirigisme but additionally also a waning of anti-colonial nationalism and the large-scale

migration by educated urban middle class children to the advanced capitalist countries. And though under the neoliberal regime the peasantry (not just the poor peasants) got squeezed, significant segments of the urban middle class did quite well for a long time.

But as the neoliberal regime itself reached a dead end, causing large-scale unemployment everywhere, engendering protectionism in the United States and calls for curbs even on internal migration within the European Union, the urban middle class in many countries, including India, began to get restive. Modi cashed in on this restiveness by putting the blame for the dwindling fortunes of the urban middle class on the previous Manmohan Singh government, on its timidity (“shackled by the dynasty”) and its “populism” (under Left pressure). Modi promised the urban middle class a new boom.

That promise has come a cropper, as it was bound to do, since he had no inkling of even the fact of the dead end of neoliberalism, let alone any strategy to counter its effects on the Indian economy. Exhorting globalised capital to “make in India” by investing here can hardly be a game-changer when the world economy itself is virtually stagnant and very little investment is being undertaken anyway.

#### **MODI SELLING ‘JUMLA’**

In short, Modi was just selling a “jumla”, and as this fact has become clear, the restiveness of the urban middle class has once more manifested itself. And this has happened at a time when the peasantry, which always takes a long time to react, has been rising at last against the squeeze imposed upon it by neoliberalism, and further compounded by thoughtless measures like demonetisation. Unemployment now, unlike in the pre-crisis period of neoliberalism, afflicts not just the labourers and distressed peasants and petty producers who were squeezed by this regime but the urban middle class as well that had earlier done well out of it, with even the information technology-related service sector witnessing dwindling employment growth. The Modi government’s instinct has been to reach out to this significant intermediate strata. Its problem is that it has very little to offer to this strata, and nothing demonstrates it more clearly than this Budget. It was presented, against all constitutional propriety, to enhance the Modi government’s electoral appeal. What it provided, however, is no grand vision, no blueprints for change, no programmes for employment generation but only some paltry blandishments: just over Rs.3 a day per person to some peasant households and some rebate to a segment of income tax payers. The intermediate strata being wooed by Modi are unlikely to be much impressed by such paltry offerings.

What this means, however, is greater talk of “urban naxals”, more strident attempts at communal polarisation, more targeted CBI-activism and more determined efforts to conjure up a siege mentality with Modi being projected as a saviour, in the run-up to the election. Even these measures have started yielding diminishing returns, but there is little else for them to fall back on. □



# Clutching at straws

The political context of the announcements in Budget 2019 is the BJP's **defeat in the recent Assembly elections** in the Hindi heartland and its urge to recapture lost ground. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**



**THE POLICE** use tear gas to disperse farmers who were pressing for waiver of farm loans, among other demands, at the New Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border in October 2018.

AP

EVEN AS STAND-IN FINANCE MINISTER Piyush Goyal was presenting Budget 2019-20 on February 1 in Parliament, commentaries in the media started pointing out its blatant political and electoral orientation: the thrust areas included a new scheme to enhance the income of small and marginal farmers, a mega pension scheme and income tax sops aimed at the middle class. Other indications of the impulse imparted to the Budget preparation exercise by recent political factors were the marginal increase in allocations for rural spending and the interest subvention for crop loans. The potential beneficiaries of these proposals are farmers and other sections in the rural areas, senior citizens (pensioners) and a clutch of communities that matter in elections, especially in north India.

The political context for these measures was evidently the defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the recent round of Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and

Chattisgarh and the consequent urge to recapture lost ground before the 2019 general election.

Nearly a week after Goyal's Budget presentation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking in the Lok Sabha, tried to present a case of good governance for his government and ridiculed the *mahagathbandhan* of the opposition as Mahamilavat (highly adulterous). Even before the Prime Minister's turn to speak came, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced another measure that sought to strengthen the farmer-and-rural-sector-oriented proposals in the Budget. The RBI raised the limit of collateral-free agricultural loans from Rs.1 lakh to Rs.1.6 lakh, with the professed aim of helping small and marginal farmers. Clearly, the measures announced in the Budget are expected to get more supplementaries beyond its framework in the days to come.

Early reactions to the Budget proposals were mixed, with the voices of disapproval being more voluble. The most important proposal, according to the BJP-NDA's



own admission, is the farmers' income enhancement scheme, which involves a transfer of Rs.6,000 a year in three instalments through Jan Dhan accounts. However, the quantum of money that has been allocated has come in for widespread criticism.

### BRICKBATS FROM FARMERS

Speaking to *Frontline*, Mahesh Sahu, a small-scale farmer in Dalli Rajhara in Chhattisgarh, said that what was being doled out was a cruel joke on farmers. "A loan of Rs.65,000 that I took from a moneylender three years ago is yet to be repaid. With accumulated interest, it has become almost Rs.1 lakh. And the government expects me to make do with financial support of Rs.2,000 every four months."

Colonel (Retd) Subhash Chandra Deswal, a farmer based in Sikandrabad in western Uttar Pradesh, pointed out that the scheme would not bring any relief or enhancement of income to segments of farmers other than the most marginal. "Farmers of western Uttar Pradesh are relatively better off than those in other parts of the country. It is amazing that the Modi government came up with a scheme like this to address agrarian distress. The medium and big farmers are laughing at the scheme," he said.

Many Sangh Parivar insiders believe that a properly implemented loan waiver scheme, such as the one implemented in early 2009 by the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, would have fetched better political gains than the current scheme. But they also admit that Modi and his team could not have taken recourse to that path because the Congress had taken the lead by launching farmer loan waiver schemes in the three States it came to power.

Moreover, Congress president Rahul Gandhi had taunted the Prime Minister saying that he would not "let the Prime Minister sleep" until Modi announced loan waivers in States ruled by the BJP. Thus, announcing loan waiver schemes would have meant succumbing to Congress pressure. That the BJP's own loan waiver scheme launched by the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh had come a cropper was also a limiting factor.

A senior Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) leader based in Meerut in western Uttar Pradesh credited Modi with thinking up the fund transfer scheme. "Modi thinks no end of himself and seems to have these periodic delusions of him being a master economist. His demonetisation drive caused economic havoc all around. I am apprehensive about how this money transfer scheme is going to work out."

He said that the overall tone and tenor of the Budget was a clear admission of the reality of agrarian distress. "If we can indirectly admit the Congress' claim and the pressure it is mounting on the issue of agrarian distress, couldn't we have found a more practical way of assuaging the farmers?" The leader was worried about the scheme causing problems in the BJP's electoral preparations. "Already, there is the sense that the Budget proposals mean too little too late politically. He pointed out that

there were enough signals from the ground since Budget 2018 that things were going awry and a course correction was needed, either in the form of radical policy measures or even going in for an early general election.

These proposals have been discussed at different levels of the Sangh Parivar since January 2018, but they were articulated by Rajesh Jain, an entrepreneur and founder of Niti Digital, an outfit that played a significant role in Modi's 2014 election campaign. In an article for the portal Nayi Disha, Jain pointed out that the decline in the popularity of the BJP and the Modi government manifested itself in many concrete ways in the years between 2014 and 2018. The article stated that Assembly elections were held in 15 States in the period and their results underscored the drop in the electoral support of the BJP. In these 15 States, the BJP had won 191 Lok Sabha seats in the 2014 general election. Juxtaposing the Assembly election trends with Lok Sabha seats indicated a drop of 45 seats for the BJP. He pointed to a drop in the vote share of 10 percentage points in these 15 States for the BJP, from 39 per cent in 2014 to 29 per cent in the elections held since then. This decline, he felt, would continue in forthcoming Assembly elections too and would only get worse with the passage of time. The Meerut-based RSS leader also added that the discussions within the Sangh Parivar on Jain's article had specifically referred to the situation in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, classifying them serious. "Of course, there were large sections in the BJP and other organisations in the Sangh Parivar who called for drastic measures, including the possibility of advancing of the general election, but Modi and party president Amit Shah were confident of 'managing' the situation."

Several Sangh Parivar insiders believe that the "management strategy" of the Modi-Shah team for the 2018 round of Assembly elections and the 2019 Lok Sabha election hinged on splitting the opposition parties by using corruption cases against many of them. Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati seemed to going along with this game until the Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Once the Congress managed to get more seats than the BJP in these States, this sense of accommodation vanished. She not only proactively took steps to be associated with the Akhilesh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party, but also got into parleys with Mamata Banerjee to organise the mega opposition rally in Kolkata.

The Meerut-based RSS leader said: "Clearly, that management plan has come unstuck. Our new moves, including the Budget proposals and the manoeuvres against Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi's husband, Robert Vadra, could well be termed clutching at straws." Evidently, there is no clarity on the political gains from Budget 2019 even within the Sangh Parivar. This suggests that the development and economic welfare path to electoral gains will be abandoned by the Modi-Shah team, instead the focus will be on the communal polarisation plank that is going apace systematically through the "modernisation-beautification-demolition" drive in Varanasi and the "Build the Ram Mandir" sloganeering in Ayodhya. □



# A crop for all seasons

Interview with Dr Raju Narayana Swamy, Chairman, Coconut Development Board. BY A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

**IN INDIA**, the coconut tree (*Cocos nucifera*) is eulogised as “kalpavriksha”, the wish-fulfilling tree. Coconut production plays an important role in the national economy of India. The Coconut Development Board (CDB), a statutory body established in 1981 under the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, and with its headquarters in Kochi, Kerala, has been formulating and implementing several schemes for the integrated development of coconut cultivation and industry, with a focus on productivity increase and product diversification. Excerpts from an email interview with Dr Raju Narayana Swamy, Chairman, CDB, about the Board's plans and policies:

## **How successful has the CDB been in bringing more areas under coconut cultivation and extending market access for coconut farmers?**

The CDB has given small and marginal farmers several incentives. In addition to covering more areas in traditional belts, coconut cultivation has been extended to non-traditional States such as Gujarat, Bihar, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram. Compared with 10.83 lakh hectares [ha] in 1980-81, the total area of cultivation increased to 20.99 lakh ha in 2017-18.

Market access is provided to coconut farmers through participation in trade fairs and exhibitions. Buyer-seller meets are also organised to help develop trade linkages. One such meet was organised in Patna, Bihar, in November 2018 to facilitate the demand for fresh coconuts during the Chhat festival. Representatives from farmer producer companies in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh had direct interactions with the traders and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce in Bihar. Improvement in quality is also promoted through assistance for quality certification. The Board also supports the establishment of grass-roots-level procurement centres for post-harvest handling and primary processing of coconuts.

## **What are the major challenges before the Board in ensuring a steady remunerative price for coconut farmers?**

The collectivisation of small and marginal farmers into producer organisations has emerged as one of the most effective ways to address the challenges in agriculture. This helps member farmers earn their fair share by avoiding intermediaries. The Board has initiated the



formation of farmer producer organisations [FPOs] with the aim of providing a fair, steady and remunerative income to farmers.

The FPOs have a three-tier structure. The base is the coconut producer societies [CPS], which are mostly engaged in the aggregation of primary produce. The middle layer is the coconut producer federations [or CPFs, consisting of 20 to 25 CPSs] that are engaged in medium-scale investment activities. And the topmost tier is the coconut producer companies [or CPCs comprising eight to 10 CPFs]. The companies are registered under the Indian Companies Act, 2013, and are wholly owned by the farmers. Through this initiative, we could simultaneously promote input supply and output processing in the coconut sector. Also, such collectives of farmers increase their bargaining power, reduce marketing costs and provide better prices. The CDB encourages better post-harvest handling and value addition. We also have a scheme to support FPOs to set up their own exclusive sales outlets of coconuts and value-added coconut products.

## **What are the initiatives undertaken by the CDB to promote new products?**

The coconut industry is a sunrise industry with unlimited potential for processing and value addition. The demand for value-added coconut products is on an upward trend. Virgin coconut oil, which is used for curing Alzheimer's and many other diseases, is not being produced on a large scale in Kerala or in other coconut-producing States. We have the capability to compete with countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Moisturisers, hand creams, face creams, and so on, containing virgin coconut oil are in demand.

Neera [the sap extracted from the spathe, or the imma-



ture flower spike of coconut trees] is another product from which products such as Neera honey, Neera sugar, Neera jaggery, and so on, can be produced. Desiccated coconut powder, coconut milk powder, packed tender coconut, snowball tender coconut, jaggery and coconut sugar are other products. Coir, coconut pith, coconut leaf, coconut shell and other parts of the tree can be used for making various products.

The Board is planning to distribute coconut through coconut producer companies and sell this to temples at moderate prices. It is also planning to create facilities for selling coconut products at airports and railway stations.

The basic aim of the Technology Mission on Coconut [TMOC], an initiative of the CDB, is to divert raw coconuts for making value-added products instead of traditional products such as ball copra, copra and oil. Under this scheme, the Board provides financial assistance as back-ended subsidy and helps existing coconut industries enhance their capacity and improve their economic viability. The TMOC initiative has helped enhance the market potential for coconut products both in domestic and international markets. It also helps in controlling and stabilising market prices of raw coconuts, providing competitive and remunerative prices to farmers and in boosting export earnings.

#### **How is the Board addressing the challenge of pestilence and diseases?**

The Board aims to introduce scientific innovations and technologies, including artificial intelligence [AI]. Chances of infestation can be identified using unmanned aerial vehicles, or "drones". When a plant is affected, the first symptom is the depletion of chlorophyll. It can be identified by the use of infrared lighting systems. So it is possible to drive away insects and resist diseases at least 10 days before it starts spreading. Another problem in this sector is that pesticides and fertilizers are not being used properly. The Board aims to provide technical inputs to farmers free of cost for the proper use of pesticides and fertilizers, which will bring down the cost of cultivation.

The Board has also implemented schemes for replanting and rejuvenation of trees in old coconut farms and initiated integrated farming to increase productivity.

#### **What are the innovative technologies promoted by the Board?**

Several technologies have already been developed and commercialised under sponsored research projects of the Board in



association with the Central Food Technological Research Institute [CFTRI] and the Defence Food Research Laboratory [DFRL], Mysuru. The Project Approval Committee of the Technology Mission on Coconut has recently approved the project of the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute [CPCRI], Kasargode, on "UAV-based monitoring system" for the precise and early detection of diseases and pests. The commercialisation of tender coconut vending carts and coconut ice cream vending machines developed by the Department of Agriculture, Government of Tamil Nadu, and the Indian Institute of Food Processing Technology [IIFPT], Thanjavur, is also under active consideration.

The Board is teaming up with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research CSIR-CFTRI, Mysuru, for the creation of a "sensory lexicon" and the development of coconut-based products for sustenance in sports. The Board, in association with the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, is to conduct studies on the effect of virgin coconut oil on cardio metabolic parameters in patients with dyslipidaemia and in preventing oral cancer. These studies are expected to provide conclusive scientific evidence of the health attributes of coconut products, adding to their unique selling proposition.

The Board has requested the Central Agricultural University, Imphal, Manipur to develop a road map for the comprehensive development of coconut cultivation and value addition in the north-east. Other initiatives are in the pipeline.

India is the world leader in coconut production and productivity. In 2019, the Board envisages all efforts to make India the global leader in processing and value addition of coconut. This will lead to the fulfilment of the Government of India's vision to double farmers' income by 2022. □





# Crumbs for farmers

Hidden in the Modi government's Budget promises to India's farmers, who are in distress, is the admission: **we have failed you.** BY R. RAMAKUMAR

NO SECTION OF SOCIETY HAS PERHAPS fared worse under the Narendra Modi regime than small peasants and agricultural labourers. Rural India, particularly peasants, voted in large numbers for the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2014. Once in power, the NDA government promised to double the incomes of farmers between 2015 and 2022. But by the fag end of his term, Modi, taken down a peg by a restive peasantry, is reduced to the sorry state of offering Rs.17 a day to cajole them to vote again for his party.

There are two dimensions—one long term and another short term—of the current agrarian distress that are striking. Between 2003 and 2010, Indian agriculture grew commendably thanks to two fortuitous factors: externally, higher global prices and, internally, higher minimum support prices (MSPs). The terms of trade—the ratio of “prices received” to “prices paid out” by farmers for inputs—rose, allowing farmers to survive a period of rising costs of production. After 2011, however, global prices began to fall and the domestic policy atmosphere turned hostile to agriculture. The goal of inflation targeting became the cherished goal of monetary policy. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-2 government refused to raise MSPs at the same rate as earlier, fearing that higher MSPs would lead to higher inflation. This fear was passed on from the UPA-2 to the NDA government after 2014. In sum, MSPs rose only moderately between 2011 and 2018.

After 2011, terms of trade turned adverse for farmers (see Figure 1). Figure 2 plots data on the sectoral deflator in agriculture—the difference between the rates of growth of gross domestic product from agriculture at current and constant prices—up to the first half of 2018-19. The sectoral deflator rose between 2005-06 and 2009-10 and then fell sharply after 2010-11, even turning negative by the second quarter of 2018-19. In other words, the economics of agriculture under the UPA-2 and NDA governments' tenures was marked by the presence of acute disincentives.

The second dimension of the agrarian distress is evident from Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6, which depict the movement of wholesale price indices (WPIs) for a selected but varied set of crops. Strikingly, the WPIs for wheat, pulses, oilseeds, and spices and condiments began to

decline sharply after November 2016. November 2016 was the month of implementation of one of the most reactionary and illogical economic measures ever attempted in independent India: demonetisation.

Demonetisation had two levels of impact on agricultural markets. First, in the first few weeks or months, it disrupted agricultural supply chains across the country. November 2016 was the month when kharif harvests arrived in mandis. But cash shortages prevented the smooth sale of the harvest. In some regions, traders did not pick up farmers' harvest from fields and yards. In other regions, farmers were forced to sell at lower-than-market prices to traders or sell in exchange for older notes of Rs.500 and Rs.1,000. There was a sharp decline of arrivals in agricultural markets in November and December 2016.

Secondly, demonetisation upset some systemic features of agricultural markets. Use of cash has always dominated mandi trade (see *Frontline*, “Monumental blunder”, December 12, 2016, and “Unkindest cut”, December 23, 2016). Traders regularly rolled over cash across commodities, other traders, markets, farmers and retailers. The success of traders was not decided by what they bought and sold, but by how best they kept the cash rolling. Payments between wholesalers and retailers were not always immediately realised. Many traders would play around with part payments and delayed payments. When cash was not immediately available, traders would borrow from informal sources and repay when cash arrived. In other words, cash was the lubricant that made mandis work smoothly.

All this came to a standstill after demonetisation. As cash was sucked out, the practice of rolling over cash became difficult. The basic rhythm of the market was upset. Many small traders exited the business. A few began to use cheques to delay payments, but few were ready to accept them. Banks were rarely approached for credit lines, as traders feared getting tracked by the authorities. But even when adequate cash was available, traders were circumspect about rolling over large amounts of cash after demonetisation. As a result, the vibrancy of mandi trade was undermined. Prices fell precipitously in most commodities.

But demonetisation was not the only factor respons-



FIGURE 1

### Trends in the index of terms of trade for farmers, India, 2004-05 to 2016-17

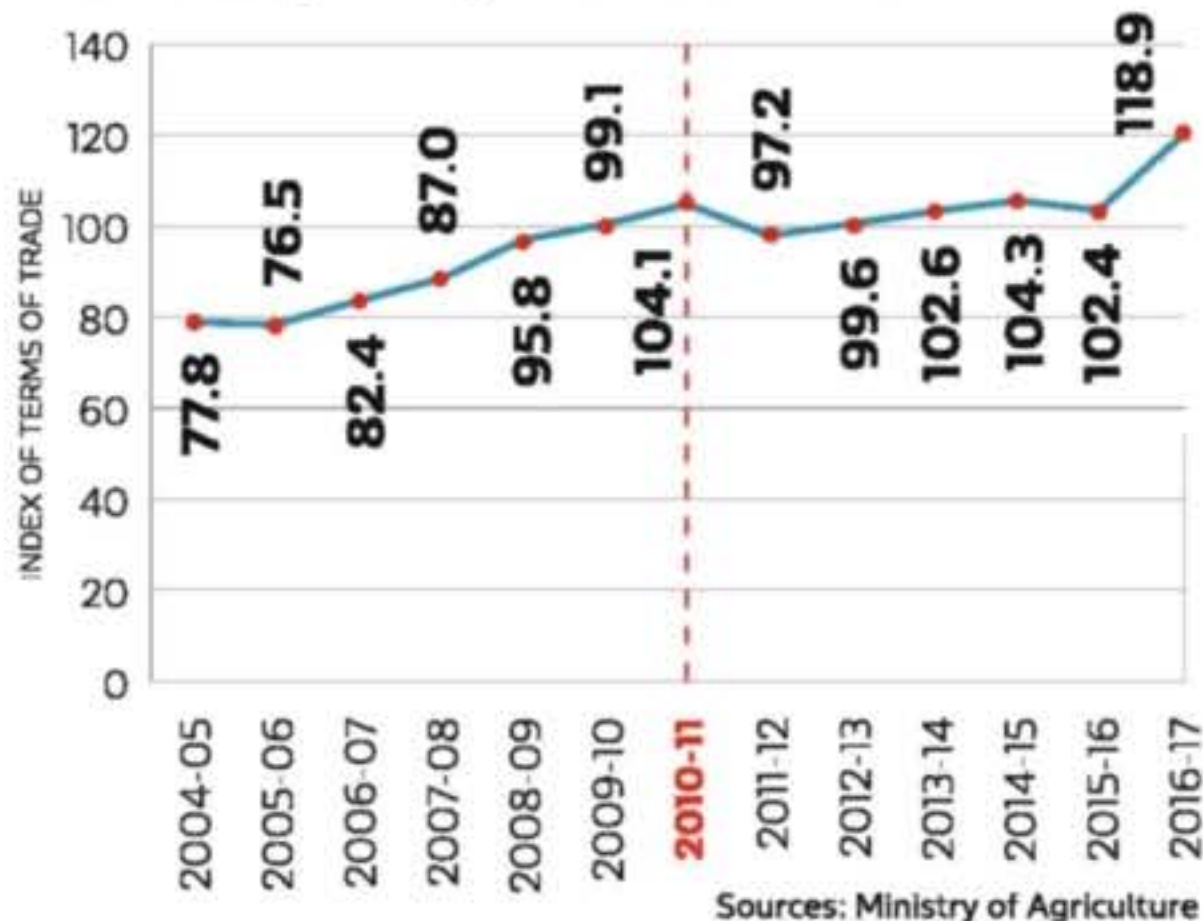
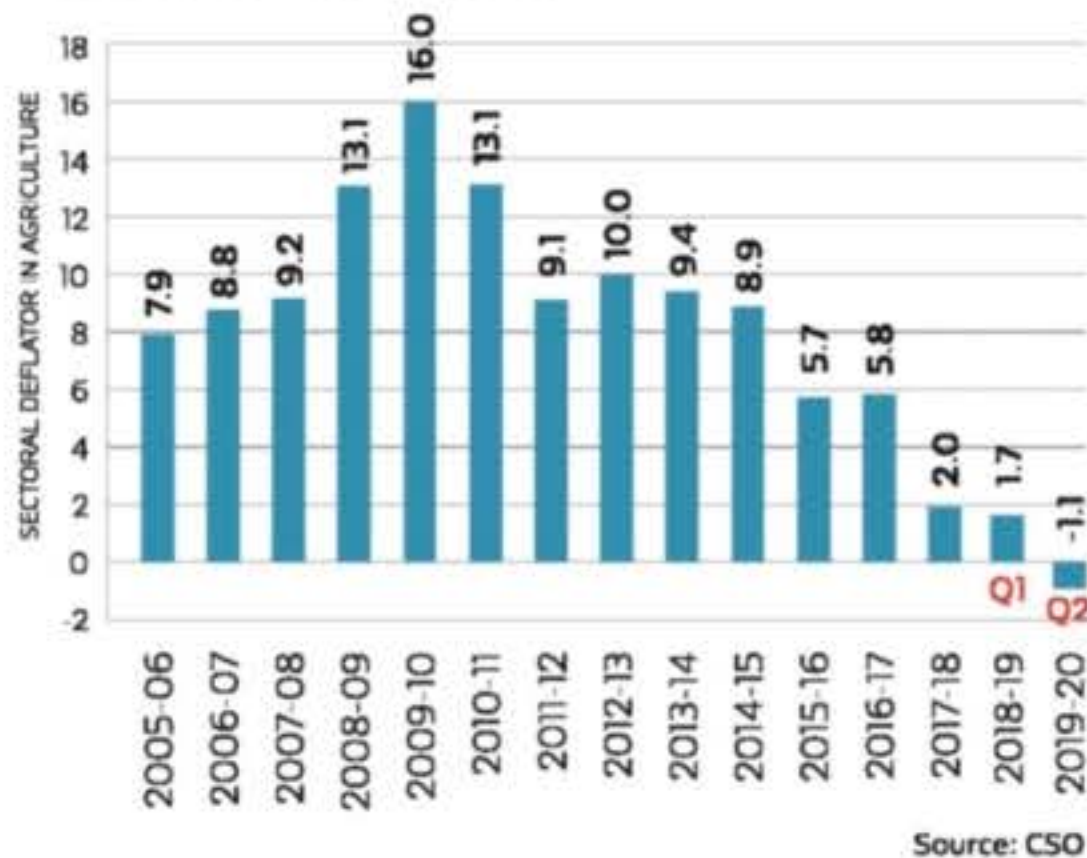


FIGURE 2

### Sectoral deflator in agriculture, India, 2005-06 to 2018-19



ible for the price crash. Alongside, there were two other important factors. The first was rising production. In pulses, higher production in 2017-18 was a response to the government's promise of higher MSPs. However, when the harvest arrived, the government refused to procure beyond a limit. This contributed to the fall in pulse prices in 2017-18. In 2018-19 too, production of pulses matched the fervour of the previous year. But government procurement did not increase in 2018-19 either, ensuring that higher MSPs were inconsequential for farmers. Prices fell again.

In wheat too, higher production in 2016-17 was a factor that contributed to lower prices in 2017-18. However, in 2017-18 and 2018-19, in States such as Maharashtra, farmers did not continue with wheat as the second crop; they sowed crops such as onion, tomato and pomegranate. The rise of wheat prices in 2018-19 (see Figure 3) was an outcome of such a shift in sowing leading to lower market arrivals.

The second factor was indiscriminate imports. Take pulses. India's demand for pulses was estimated at 23.6 million metric tons (MMT) in 2015-16, while production

stood at 16.4 MMT. To cover the deficit of about 7.5 MMT, India imported 5.8 MMT of pulses. In 2016-17, the production of pulses shot up to 22.3 MMT while the projected demand was 24.6 MMT. The deficit was only 1.8 MMT, yet imports rose from 5.8 MMT to 6.6 MMT. Take wheat. In 2014-15, India imported only 29,494 MT of wheat. However, wheat imports in 2015-16 were 5.2 lakh MT; in 2016-17 it was 57.5 lakh MT; and in 2017-18 it was 16.5 lakh MT.

The decline of agricultural prices after demonetisation was a proximate rallying factor in the spate of farmers' protests, led by the All India Kisan Sabha, which swept the Indian countryside in 2017 and 2018. The two major demands were the waiver of outstanding farm loans and the fixing of MSPs at 150 per cent of the cost of production.

### LOAN WAIVERS

Loan waivers are similar to band-aids on wounds. They, however, provide immediate relief to farmers from the crushing burden of debt when prices are crashing. While this has been the rationale behind the demand from farmers, its opponents put forward two major criticisms. First, loan waivers have "reputational consequences"; that is, they adversely affect the repayment discipline of farmers, leading to a rise in future defaults. Secondly, after the implementation of debt-waiver schemes, farmers' access to formal sector lenders decline, leading to a rise in dependence on informal sector lenders.

Both the arguments are false. First, farmers are disciplined borrowers. In September 2018, agricultural non-performing assets, or NPAs (8.4 per cent), were far lower than industrial NPAs (21 per cent). Furthermore, agricultural NPAs fell continuously between 2001 and 2008. Secondly, there is no evidence to argue that default rates among farmers rose after the 2008 waiver. The lowest of all NPAs was recorded in March 2009 (2.1 per cent), which was just after the implementation of the 2008 scheme. The reason was the cleaning up of the account books of banks by the government. Once the cleaning up was complete, it was expected that NPAs would rise again to settle within a normal range. This was exactly what happened; agricultural NPAs rose and settled at about 5 per cent in 2011. There was one additional reason. D. Subbarao, as Reserve Bank of India Governor, pointed out in 2012 that agricultural NPAs rose between 2009 and 2011 owing to the "general economic slowdown" after 2009 and the introduction of new norms in the "system-wide identification of NPAs".

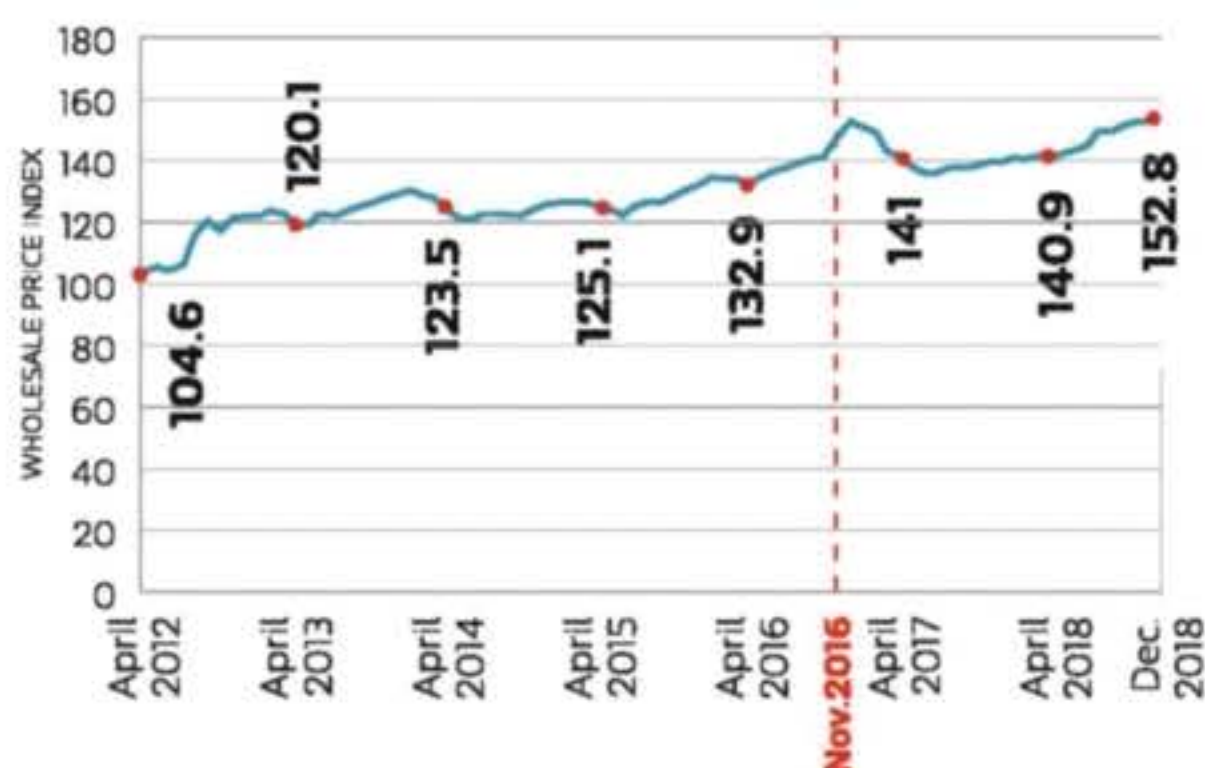
After 2011, agricultural NPAs remained range-bound between 4 and 5 per cent until 2015 and then began to rise. As we have seen, there is enough evidence that this rise was not the result of any moral hazard; it was real, policy-induced and a direct consequence of an acute agrarian distress that spread across rural India after 2015 and, in particular, after demonetisation.

The second argument, that loan waivers shrink access to formal credit sector for farmers, is only partly true. But the culprits here are banks and not farmers. After every



FIGURE 3

### Wholesale price index for **wheat**, India, Apr. 2012 to Dec. 2018



waiver, banks become conservative in issuing fresh loans to beneficiaries, as they are perceived to be less credit-worthy. As a result, the scheme's objective of expanding the issue of fresh loans to farmers is never fully achieved. But to cite such opportunistic actions of banks to deny fresh credit to farmers would be perverse policy.

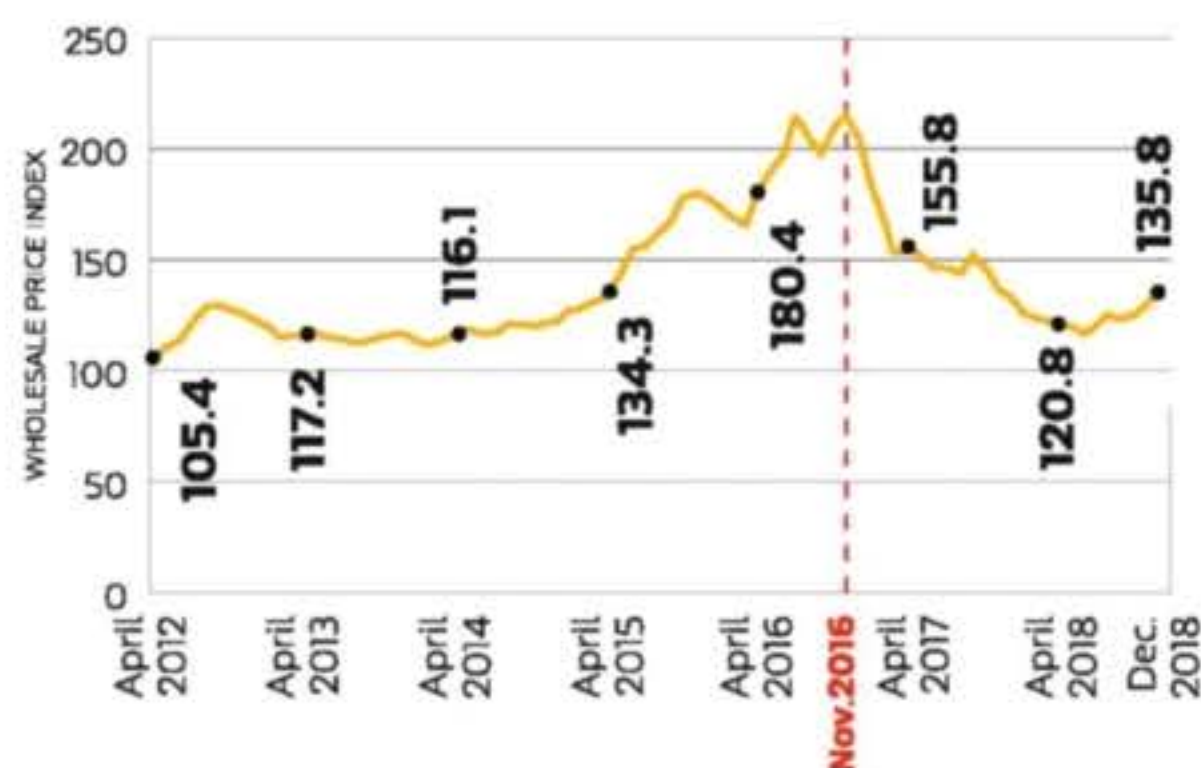
It is only natural that when the bottom line of an economic enterprise shrinks, it instinctively attempts a reduction of debt. However, while firms have always received debt waivers, though they are tactfully termed as "loan restructuring" or "one-time settlements", farmers are made to believe that waivers are largesse. This is despite the fact that farms, just as firms, also need a reduction of their debt burden, followed by fresh infusion of credit, especially during a downturn. The demand for loan waivers is absolutely logical when viewed from such a standpoint.

But loan waivers only address the distress partially. They cover only formal sector loans. Small and marginal farmers borrow less from formal lenders and more from informal sources. This leads to the exclusion of many small and marginal farmers and a disproportionate inclusion of large farmers in the ambit of waivers. Even as such an inbuilt bias exists, loan waivers do benefit in unburdening farmers of at least a part of their outstanding debt. States such as Kerala have tried to include loans from moneylenders also under debt-relief programmes. These interventions may be useful blueprints to design more comprehensive, inclusive and less leaky loan-waiver schemes in other States.

The second demand of farmers' organisations was the fixing of MSPs at 50 per cent higher than the cost of production, an idea that originated in the report of the National Commission for Farmers (NCF) in 2006. The "cost of production" referred to by the NCF was the "C2" cost of production (i.e., sum of paid-out costs, imputed value of family labour, interest on the value of owned capital assets, rent paid for leased-in land and the rental value of owned land). However, the Modi government chose to interpret it as the "A2+FL" cost of production (i.e., sum of paid-out costs and the imputed value of family labour) and announced MSPs at 50 per cent above it in Budget 2018-19.

FIGURE 4

### Wholesale price index for **pulses**, India, Apr. 2012 to Dec. 2018



Members of NITI Aayog and bureaucrats have justified the use of A2+FL cost in estimating MSPs. According to them, 88 per cent of India's farmers do not lease in land, and hence the rental value of owned land need not be considered an imputed cost. Such justification is but a poor excuse to ignore a cogent economic argument. For farmers cultivating their own land, the land could always be not self-cultivated and leased out for rent. This opportunity cost is in no way dissimilar to the imputation of family labour at the market wage rate. In the latter too, farmers are not actually earning a wage outside the farm; yet, it constitutes a wage lost because farmers forgo it and choose to cultivate their own farm. That we allow the opportunity cost of family labour to stay but exclude that of owned land makes poor economic sense.

But, like for loan waivers, we cannot consider MSPs too as a panacea for agrarian distress. Even if MSPs rise, there is no evidence that its benefits reach the farmer. Official surveys show that only 13.5 per cent of paddy farmers and 16.2 per cent of wheat farmers sell their harvest to procurement agencies. The rest sell to private traders at prices lower than the designated MSP. In fact, this not only makes a mockery of the MSP but also undermines the logic of the claim that higher MSPs automatically translate into higher rates of inflation.

It was to ensure that farmers obtain the full MSP that the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government in Madhya Pradesh initiated the Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana (BBY).

#### THE BBY OPTION

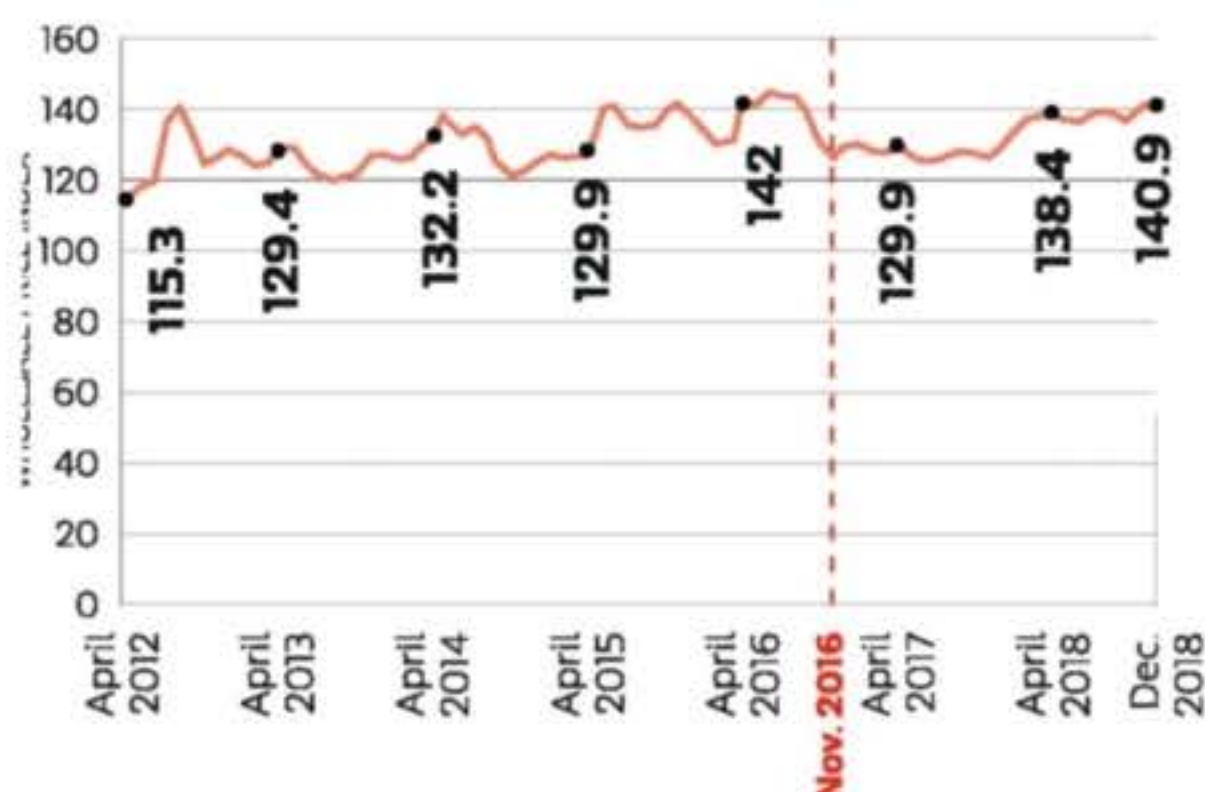
The BBY is a scheme that pays into the farmer's bank account an amount equivalent to the difference between the MSP and a modal price in the market. The BBY, however, has been found to be a failure, for two reasons.

First, a BBY-type scheme is deeply vulnerable to collusion among traders. In Madhya Pradesh, traders actively colluded to pull down the prices of soybean soon after farmers began to bring their produce to the market. They paid the farmers around Rs.300 less than the prevailing market price and asked farmers to collect the rest from the government under the BBY. But as soon as the window for BBY payments closed, soybean prices were pushed up to their original levels.



FIGURE 5

### Wholesale price index for oilseeds, India, Apr. 2012 to Dec. 2018



The second problem is more fundamental: with schemes such as the BBY, there will always be a perverse incentive for governments to not expand procurement by investing in warehousing and storage. With less food procured, less food will be available for distribution through the public distribution system. As long as the option of deficit payments to farmers exists, governments would constantly aim to exit procurement, and thus distribution, altogether. Many statements of NITI Aayog members suggest that this is not just a fear but a real possibility.

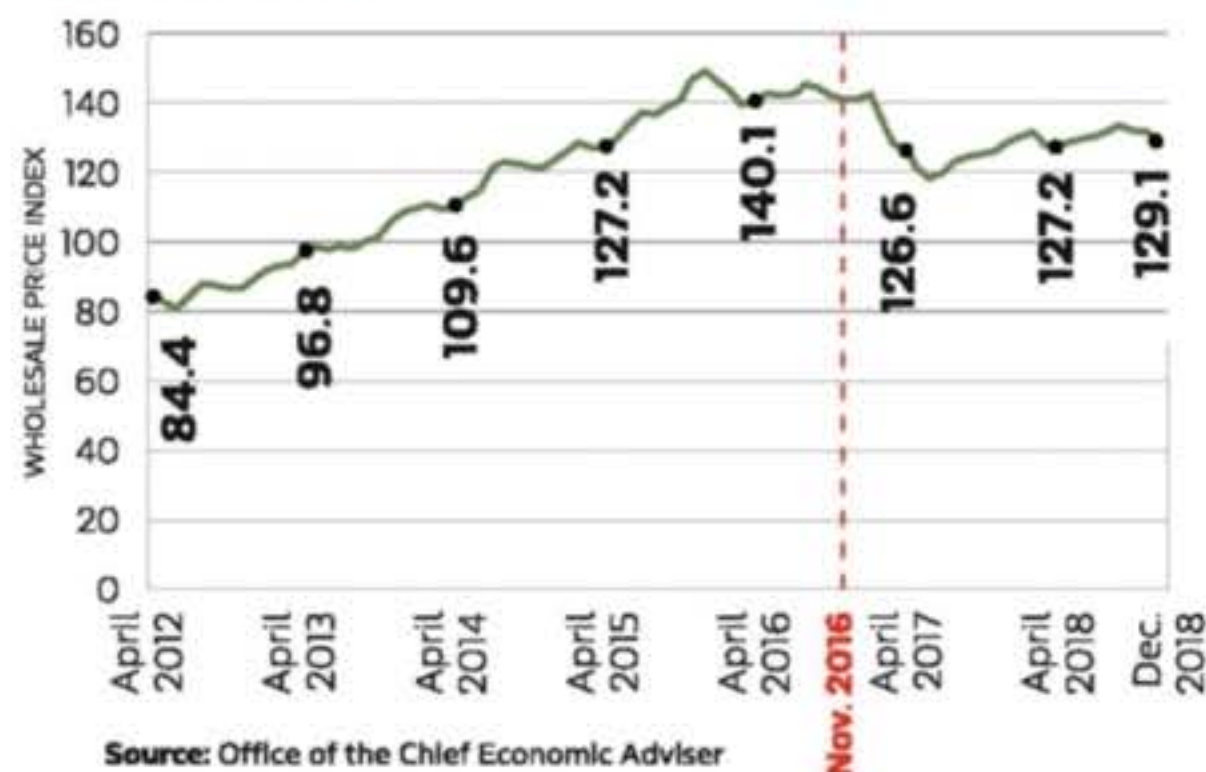
### DIRECT CASH TRANSFERS

With both loan waiver and higher MSPs ruled out ideologically and given the BBY's failure, the government's attention has now turned towards direct cash payments. Thus, Budget 2019-20 announced the "PM-Kisan" scheme to give each farmer household Rs.6,000 a year. Before the Budget announcement, two other States had already announced similar schemes. Telangana announced its Rythu Bandhu scheme in 2018, where each farmer would receive Rs.8,000 per acre (0.4 hectare) as investment support in a year. Odisha announced the KALIA (Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation) scheme in 2018, where each family of small and marginal farmers would receive Rs.10,000 a year. Thus, while PM-Kisan and KALIA payments are for families, Rythu Bandhu payments are for per acre owned.

For a while now, there have been discussions about the idea of universal basic income (UBI). We note that the PM-Kisan, Rythu Bandhu and KALIA schemes are not universal schemes but targeted ones. In the UBI, the government pays everyone a fixed amount; in these three schemes an eligible household has to be identified. The total number of farmer households with a particular characteristic (say, owning less than five acres) can be easily estimated from sample surveys of the National Sample Survey Office. But identification follows estimation, where the government has to prepare a list of households with one such characteristic. It is here that troubles begin, as our earlier experience with dividing the population into those below and above the poverty line showed.

FIGURE 6

### Wholesale price index for spices & condiments, India, Apr. 2012 to Dec. 2018



Source: Office of the Chief Economic Adviser

Targeted schemes are prone to a number of errors, such as errors of exclusion and errors of inclusion. Households that should be beneficiaries are left out, and those that should not be beneficiaries are listed in. In our case, tenants cultivate land but are excluded as they do not own the land. Agricultural labourers are left out because they neither own nor operate land. At the same time, in schemes such as Rythu Bandhu, the more land you own, the more money you get; the scheme, thus, is regressive in design.

There are administrative costs too. State machinery is mobilised on a large scale to ensure that ineligible households are strictly kept out. For instance, an absolute necessity for such schemes to work is updated land records so that the cash transfer reaches the right person. However, the status of our land records in States is nothing short of abysmal. Unless land records are updated and modernised (which Telangana did on a war footing before implementing its scheme), any cash transfer programme such as PM-Kisan will end up as a huge failure in even identifying a "farmer".

Finally, targeted schemes are not self-selecting. Schemes such as the MGNREGS are self-selecting, as only those who are in need and willing to work will offer themselves for work. As everyone loves a bit of cash, no beneficiary would drop out of targeted cash transfer schemes, which would be a drain on public resources.

The larger problem with cash transfer schemes in agriculture is that they are cop-outs, an abdication of responsibility. It signals the inability of a government to raise productivity in agriculture and, thus, the incomes of farmers, through decisive investments. The government plans to spend Rs.75,000 crore for the scheme. This rather large amount could be productively invested in a number of spheres in agriculture and could, over a horizon of five or 10 years, become a substantial investment leading to the overall development of agriculture and farm incomes. That instead, narrow electoral considerations have come to dominate policymaking is indeed the sad part of the story. Hidden in it is the Modi regime's admission: we have failed you. □

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# A game changer

INSTEAD of going for a farm loan waiver, the Odisha Cabinet on December 21 approved the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme under which Rs.10,180 crore will be spent over a period of three years to accelerate agricultural prosperity and reduce poverty in the State. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik launched the KALIA scheme on New Year's eve, announcing that it would cover 92 per cent of the cultivators, loanee and non-loanee farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers of the State. The scheme will be reviewed in 2020-21 for further modifications.

Countering the claims of the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party that promise loan waivers if voted to power in Odisha, Patnaik said that of the 20 lakh farmers who had availed themselves of loans from among 32 lakh cultivators in the State, about 60 per cent had regularly repaid loans. "What wrong have the 60 per cent done by repaying the loans?" he asked. Further, he pointed out that the entire gamut of sharecroppers and landless labourers would not be covered under a loan waiver scheme.

The KALIA scheme has five components: support to small and marginal farmers for cultivation; livelihood support for landless agricultural households; financial assistance to vulnerable agricultural households and landless agricultural labourers for sustenance; insurance support for farmers and agricultural labourers; and interest-free crop loans. Under the scheme, 30 lakh small and marginal farmers will get Rs.5,000 each in the kharif and rabi seasons in the crop seasons (five) between 2018-19 and 2020-21. The kharif assistance will be paid on "Akshaya Tritiya" day (April/May) and the rabi assistance on the agrarian festival "Nuakhai" (August/September) every year.

A sum of Rs.12,500 each will be provided to 10 lakh landless agricultural households to support activities such as small goat-rearing units, mini-layer units, duckery units, fishery kits for fishermen, mushroom cultivation and beekeeping. This will particularly benefit the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribe populations. Five lakh households will be covered in the first year. Besides, 10 lakh vulnerable cultivators and landless agricultural labourers will get Rs. 10,000 per family per annum as financial assistance under the scheme. No individual will receive more than one of the benefits.

The scheme provides a life insurance cover of Rs.2 lakh along with personal accident cover of an equal amount to 57 lakh farmers and agricultural labourers. Those farmers already covered under similar schemes will be excluded. Also, interest-free crop loans up to Rs.50,000 will be provided to farmers from 2019-20.

On January 25, Patnaik rolled out the transfer of

funds to beneficiary farmers under KALIA at a rally held in Puri. The next day, in his address at the State-level Republic Day celebrations, Governor Ganeshi Lal said: "The newly launched KALIA has proved to be a unique model for agriculture development in the country."

## INSTANT HIT

The KALIA scheme proved to be an instant hit with farmers not just because it was attractive for them but also because Lord Jagannath is called Kalia by devotees. "You raise crops and provide food to the State. Your production is offered [to the Lord] as mahaprasad. You're doing a great job, a pious job. So, I named this scheme KALIA," Patnaik told farmers at the Puri rally. The scheme will show a new path to the entire nation, he said.

Patnaik's words proved prescient when the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi was announced in the Union interim Budget on the lines of the KALIA scheme. It would have benefited farmers more if the quantum of assistance was equal to or more than the KALIA scheme, which is Rs.10,000 a year, said Patnaik in his reaction to the Budget.

In the first phase, 13.03 lakh small and marginal farmers, including 57,614 sharecroppers, have already been paid Rs.5,000 each for the current rabi season. The remaining farmers will be paid the financial assistance in the second phase in February.

Patnaik has flagged off 150 KALIA raths that will go to all panchayats of the State to create awareness about the scheme. While the government paid 13 lakh farmers and sharecroppers on the basis of Census 2011 data, over 67 lakh farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers have sought inclusion in the scheme by filling green forms.

Steps are being taken to exclude ineligible applicants. Implementation committees have been formed at the State, district and block levels to monitor and oversee the smooth implementation of the scheme. To ensure error-free transfer of the grant, Collectors of all the districts have been asked to hold district-level bankers' committee meeting.

Patnaik has added a new component to the scheme, the KALIA scholarship, under which the State government will bear the educational expenses of the children of KALIA beneficiaries who are studying in government professional colleges on merit basis. Children of KALIA beneficiaries will be aided in their pursuit of higher studies in disciplines such as medicine, engineering, management and law, he said.

The State government has made a provision of Rs.4,461 crore for KALIA in the Budget proposals for 2019-20 unveiled on February 7. If implemented properly, the scheme could be a game changer in the simultaneous Lok Sabha and Assembly elections.

*Prafulla Das*



# Jobs and gloom

Available evidence indicates that the employment situation in India may have **worsened in the recent past**, and the losses have been heavy for the informal sector. The delayed release of official data on employment only makes diagnosis difficult. **BY JAYAN JOSE THOMAS**

THIS YEAR'S UNION BUDGET, EVEN IF truncated because of its interim nature, was widely anticipated for the manner in which it would address the question of employment. In the last week of January, two members of the National Statistical Commission (NSC) quit, citing, among other reasons, the delay in publishing the official data on employment for 2017-18. In the same week, the media reported that the unemployment rate in India in 2017-18, according to the yet-to-be released data, was 6.1 per cent, which would make it the highest unemployment rate recorded in the country in the 45 years since the gathering of such data by official agencies commenced.

The gloomy data on employment may not have sur-

prised many. But what was shocking was the confusion around, and the delay in, the release of the official data. Thankfully, as a result of these developments, the attention of the media and observers of the Indian economy is now riveted not only on the crisis in jobs but also on the problems relating to employment statistics in India.

## DATA ON JOBS

At the heart of the revelations in the media are the employment and unemployment household surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), which functions under the Union Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. The NSSO's household surveys on employment and unemployment and consumption expenditures are considered a reasonably reliable source of information on the enormous social and economic changes in India. Social scientists all around the world have actively participated in the analysis of, and debates surrounding, the various rounds of these surveys.

The NSSO's household surveys are typically held at an interval of five years. The major surveys since the 1990s were held in 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12. Notably, the NSSO has not released data relating to any major employment and unemployment survey after 2011-12. This has led to a highly undesirable situation in which we are unable to measure the impact on jobs of some of the tumultuous changes that have occurred in the Indian economy after 2011-12, including a significant slowdown in investment, the demonetisation of high-value currency notes in November 2016, and the introduction of goods and services tax (GST) the following year.

In the absence of data from the NSSO, the only other official source of information relating to employment in India are the household- and enterprise-level surveys conducted by the Labour Bureau, which functions under the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment. Unfortunately, even the Labour Bureau data on employment are available only until 2015-16. For the last three years, the only source of data on job creation in the Indian



ALTAF QADRI/AP

**AT THE "YOUNG INDIA ADHIKAAR MARCH"** held by students in New Delhi on February 7, demanding that the government address the unemployment crisis.



economy is from a private agency, the Centre for Monitoring of the Indian Economy (CMIE), in collaboration with the Bombay Stock Exchange.

The absence of official data on employment in India for the recent past must be seen in the context of a debate centred around the notion of a “jobless growth” path that began almost a decade back. When the NSSO released its report for the 2009-10 survey, many commentators argued that despite the improvement in the growth of incomes, job creation in the Indian economy had slowed down sharply after the mid 2000s. They pointed to the meagre increase in employment in the economy (of five million) during this period, from 458 million in 2004-05 to 463 million in 2009-10.

The media discussions, however, had missed an important point by focussing on overall employment, which is the sum of employment generated in the agriculture and non-agricultural sectors. Arthur Lewis and Simon Kuznets, both Nobel laureates in economics, had argued in the 1950s that a decline in the workforce engaged in agriculture (along with its shift to non-agricultural sectors) is part of a progressive structural transformation of any economy.

As the Indian economy had been hit by drought as well as by the worldwide economic crisis in 2009-10, the NSSO conducted another round of employment survey in 2011-12. The survey confirmed that the slow growth of employment in India after 2004-05 was partly on account of a large-scale withdrawal of workers from the agricultural sector. The absolute decline in agricultural employment was, to some extent, due to “push” factors (such as the low level of agricultural incomes) but equally important were the “pull” factors. The latter included a large increase in jobs in the construction sector, especially for rural workers from States such as Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh; a modest improvement in agricultural growth after the mid 2000s; and the creation of employment by public works programmes, mainly the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). There was a clear upturn in rural wages in India during the second half of the 2000s as compared to the first half.

The above discussion relating to three rounds of NSSO surveys also held an important lesson. While it is a good sign that there is growing interest in the employment numbers, it is also important that these numbers are interpreted with care, taking into account the larger socio-economic context.

It is important to note here that employment generation in India in industry and services during the period from 2004-05 to 2011-12 was not adequate. Considering the increase in the working-age population and the number of workers who quit agriculture, we have estimated that the potential workforce in industry and services grew at the rate of 14.7 million a year during the 2004-12 period. At the same time, the actual rate at which employment was created in industry and services in India during the above period was only 6.5 million a year, or at less than half of the potential rate.

It is likely that the rate of growth of employment generation in the Indian economy, especially in sectors other than agriculture, may have slowed down in the years after 2011-12. First, there has been a slowdown in investment rates in the Indian economy. Gross capital formation as a proportion of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) was 39.5 per cent in 2012-13 but declined to 33.5 per cent by 2016-17. India's exports, too, slowed down, with a decline in global demand conditions. The change in the base year for GDP estimations from 2011-12 onwards makes it difficult to compare the rates of growth before and after that year. However, certain points are worth noting.

In the nine years between 2003-04 and 2011-12, there were only two years of deficient monsoon rainfall (2004 and 2009) and three years in which the growth of agriculture and food production was relatively slow (2004-05, 2008-09 and 2009-10). There was also a large increase in government spending on rural areas, mainly public employment programmes such as the MGNREGA, especially in the period from 2007-08 to 2011-12, which gave a boost to rural demand.

On the other hand, of the six years between 2012-13 and 2017-18, there were four years in which the rainfall that the country received was less than normal (2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017), and three years in which the growth of incomes from agriculture and allied activities was below 2 per cent. It is clear that the growth of incomes and demand from rural areas has clearly been lagging behind during the recent years.

The sharp reversal in the fortunes of the construction sector after 2012 may also have adversely affected employment generation in the country. The construction sector grew at fast rates and generated 24 million new jobs in the country between 2004-05 and 2011-12, which was almost half of all jobs created outside agriculture in that period. On the other hand, the growth of GDP from the construction sector was noticeably slow during the years between 2012-13 and 2017-18, and this sector has been hit hard by demonetisation. The growth of employment in the manufacturing sector, especially in micro and small industrial units, was not impressive even in the pre-2011 period. The growth of small industries has been constrained by severe infrastructure bottlenecks such as power shortages. With the multinationals and large Indian companies increasing their dependence on imported components, small units have fewer opportunities to succeed as suppliers of ancillaries. The absence of credit from banks and other institutional sources of finance has been another major hurdle.

#### **DEMONETISATION AND GST**

As is well known, the demonetisation of high-value currency notes in November 2016 and the introduction of GST in July 2017 have been landmark events with serious implications for the economy and labour markets. The adverse effects of these policies have hit small units in the informal sector especially hard. While these units have been compelled to join the formal sector in the wake of



## Estimates of employment in India (in million)

Sectors	Employment in 2011-12*	Net change in employment, 2004-05 to 2011-12*	Net change in employment, 2013-14 to 2015-16**
Agriculture and allied activities	224.4	-33.3	-4.8
Manufacturing	61.3	5.1	-2.2
Construction	49.9	23.9	-0.4
Services	131.8	18.7	3.7
All Sectors	472.5	14.7	-3.7

Sources: \* Estimates made by the author on the basis of NSSO data.

\*\* Estimates made by Vinoj Abraham using Labour Bureau data, from his paper in *Economic & Political Weekly* (September 23, 2017)

demonetisation and GST, many of them may have perished, causing severe loss of employment.

The State of Working India 2018 report, prepared by Azim Premji University, which examined evidence from the Labour Bureau and other sources, has concluded that the growth of employment in India has clearly slowed down after 2011-12.

The CMIE data, which are based on a survey of a sample comprising 1.7 lakh households, show that the employment situation in the country has worsened after 2016. According to the CMIE's sample, the labour force (persons who are employed and unemployed) as a proportion of the working-age population, which was 46.1 per cent in 2016-17, fell to 43.5 per cent in 2017-18 and to 42.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2018-19.

During this time, however, subscriptions to social security schemes of the Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) increased impressively, by approximately eight million between September 2017 and September 2018. Citing this evidence, some have argued that the employment situation has actually improved after 2016, supporting the government's claims in this regard. However, there are problems with this reasoning. For instance, firms come under the ambit of the EPFO only if they employ 20 workers or more. If a firm that was already employing 18 workers adds two more, the number of EPFO subscriptions will increase by 20—although the new employment created here is only two.

Dr Pronab Sen, former Chairperson of the NSC, has pointed out that the official statistical agencies in India need greater strengthening. This is to tackle the challenges thrown up by the growing size and complexity of the Indian economy.

According to government sources, the NSSO has already launched Periodic Labour Force Surveys, which will provide data on labour and employment on a quarterly basis for urban areas and on an annual basis for rural areas. This implies that labour surveys are going to be carried out at a much greater frequency compared with the earlier practice of conducting employment surveys once in five years. While this is indeed a welcome step, it also means that the NSSO will require far greater resources, including human resources, so that the sur-

veys can maintain high standards of quality along with the increase in the frequency of data collection.

There are several areas in which labour and employment data in India need significant improvement. One of them relates to measuring the size and nature of temporary or short-term migration of workers. In recent years, there has been a large increase in such migration of workers from States such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal to far-off regions, including Maharashtra and Kerala. These workers may be engaged as agricultural labourers in their own villages for a part of the year, and as migrant construction workers during the other part. Only highly trained investigators can record such labour movements with a degree of finesse.

## WOMEN'S WORK

Another area that needs significant improvement relates to measuring work performed by women. Female labour force participation rates in India are extremely low according to the NSSO. However, there have been concerns that official statistical agencies systematically under-report women's work in rural areas, such as women's participation in animal rearing.

It is clear that the above-referred challenges can be addressed only by improving the coverage and the quality of data collected. However, the sample size of the NSSO's employment survey in 2011-12 was only 1.01 lakh households. According to P.C. Mohanan, who recently quit as NSC member, this sample size is hardly adequate to capture the increasingly complex labour market changes in the country, especially at the State level.

To conduct surveys with a bigger sample, the NSSO or other agencies will have to hire more investigators. It is learnt that the NSSO has only around 1,000 field investigators to carry out its various surveys across the country. The Labour Bureau's employment survey in 2015-16 covered a sample of 1.6 lakh households across the country. To carry out the fieldwork required for this study in around half of the States, the Labour Bureau depended on a total of 400 investigators and 120 supervisors, all engaged on a contract basis.

Finally, the most important concern is whether statistical agencies will be able to retain their professional independence. Regarding the controversy around the NSSO's yet-to-be released survey for 2017-18, Mohanan says that the NSC should have the independence to release the data it collects and parses.

There are clearly no magical solutions to the problem of slow job growth facing India. What is needed are sustained and long-term investment and policy attention in strengthening the productive sectors and in building human capabilities and skills. The proposals in the interim budget try to alleviate some of the symptoms of distress but fail to address the more fundamental issues. While the Indian jobs scene may appear gloomy, ironically, some good may yet come out of the heightened awareness about the problem and how we measure it. □  
*Jayan Jose Thomas is Associate Professor of Economics at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi.*



# ‘Regular audit of core statistics essential’

Interview with **R.B. Barman, former Chairperson, National Statistical Commission.** BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

R.B. BARMAN, FORMER CHAIRPERSON OF the National Statistical Commission (NSC), was member of the Indian Statistical Service before joining the Reserve Bank of India in 1979. He was president of the Indian Econometric Society in 2006-07, Vice Chairman, Irving Fisher Committee on Central Bank Statistics, Bank for International Settlement, Basel, Switzerland, and Member, International Data Forum. He sent a paper to Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2018 on how to improve official statistics but received no response. The gross domestic product (GDP) figures were contested in 2015, and the NSC asked the Central Statistics Office (CSO) to make a presentation, but it was ignored. Barman spoke to *Frontline* about the concerns involving transparency in data dissemination and the role of statistical agencies in the controversy surrounding the release of job data. Excerpts:

**Why was there a problem about the back series GDP data? There were two back series, the second one conducted by NITI Aayog. Considering that it is not a statistical body, is it the correct thing to do?**

There is a major change in the methodology for compilation of GDP in the new series with the base year 2011-12. The Ministry of Corporate Affairs 21 [MCA21] data on the corporate sector are a major improvement, but such data were not available for the period before 2009. There were other changes as reported in “Changes in Methodology and Data Sources in the New Series of National Accounts Base Year 2011-12” published by the CSO. However, with the help of a systematic approach to maintenance of data, which could relate Annual Survey of Industry Data with Corporate Sector Data, the problem of absence of MCA21 data for the

earlier period could have been sorted out to a large extent for manufacturing sector estimates for back series. There are possibilities of many other data quality checking for other sectors, as mentioned in my article titled “Indian Official Statistics: Digital Transformation to Honour Citizens”, published in *Economic & Political Weekly* (June 30, 2018). If such a system had existed, it would not have taken such a long time to release back series, raising a controversy. We need to strengthen our system for collection and maintenance of data, improve the database on modern lines for their collation, relate these data using spatial big data warehouse, and improve timeliness, quality, consistency and coherence to inject greater robustness.

The first one [back series] was a part of a report of a committee headed by Sudipto Mundle and the CSO provided support in the form of Member Secretary to the committee. It mentioned how the exercise was undertaken and spelt out the limitations. One should not go beyond the candid admission made in the report, which

was for public comment. Both Sudipto Mundle and N.R. Bhanumurthy have explained their position. The second was an official release. It is subject to public scrutiny. The role of NITI Aayog has no precedence and has been questioned. GDP figures were contested right from 2015 when the new series was released. The NSC asked the CSO to make a presentation before the Commission. The CSO ignored the NSC. As the NSC does not have administrative powers, no action could be taken.

**Is the NSC’s role only to guide the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)? What kind of challenges and problems did you encounter as NSC Chairman?**

Official statistics is a public good



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**R.B. BARMAN:** “The NSC should have real independence and be empowered with the authority to audit all core statistics transparently.”



that informs, supports and sustains democracy and advances socio-economic development. The NSC's role is to see that the system provides good quality data on an impartial basis to "honour citizens". The Rangarajan Commission recommendation, based on which the NSC was created in 2006, was of the view that "an independent statistical authority free from political interference having power to set priorities with respect to core statistics is needed to ensure quality standards of statistical process". Data on GDP, inflation, employment, trade, etc., are part of core statistics. We tried to work within the ambit of our responsibility as spelt out in the gazette notification of 2006 setting up the NSC. The public can draw their inference about the effectiveness of the NSC from the reaction of the government to criticism on GDP and employment data. The NSC should have real independence and be empowered with the authority to audit all core statistics transparently.

**The Minister informed Parliament that the NSSO was still processing data from July to December 2018 and that the report of unemployment rate at 6.1 per cent in 2017-18 cent was fake. He also said that it was the periodic labour force survey (PLFS) of the NSSO and that the surveys were still being done. He said the job of the NSC was only to guide the government. Is that so?**

It is not true. The first fundamental principle for official statistics, accepted by the government, states that "official statistics provide an indispensable element of the information system of a democratic society, serving the government, the economy, and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social, and environment situation". As governments are judged by their performance reflected in official statistics, among others, they cannot interfere with the independence of the NSC.

**While there is a need for the big data warehouse as you write, will that address the problem of confidence faced over data authenticity?**

Yes, if we can relate micro data with macro aggregates at different levels of aggregation, it will allow for imposing a code of practice to audit the entire system to check how the estimates meet the stipulated quality standards. Not only this, the ability to understand and analyse the nexus relating real sector, financial sector and fiscal sector data will help the economy grow at a faster pace.

**Has there been a situation similar to the present one with the government withholding employment data?**

I am not aware of any previous situation resulting in the withholding of the results of National Sample Survey conducted by the NSSO, after approval by the NSC or the Governing Council. To maintain integrity and credibility of statistics, the system should be independent of the government, as democracy expects. As for the interference with NSS data, I am not aware of any such incident in the past. The NSSO is backed by the expertise of the working group/standing committee consisting of top ex-

perts from the fields of social sciences and statistics and a robust system.

**What then should governments look forward to?**

My only observation is that there should be a system of regular audit of core statistics, including National Accounts and State Accounts, to maintain integrity and comparability of such data.

**The NSC needs to be insulated from political interference. Is there any way the data that was meant to be released can be done by Parliament?**

If an independent statistical authority is vested with production of core statistics by an Act, giving it legal backing as followed in many countries of the West, Parliament could ask them to explain anything as provided under such an Act. But Parliament should not approve finalisation of data. That will go too far and will be against the fundamental principles laid out by the United Nations in 2014 and accepted by the government by a gazette notification on June 15, 2016.

**What plagues the Indian statistical system? Why is it facing a crisis of credibility today?**

Annual Reports of the NSC for 2016-17 and 2017-18 were supposed to be placed on the table of Parliament. We are not aware of what action the government has taken on issues raised in these two reports. Even the report of the Rangarajan Commission, which was set up by the A.B. Vajpayee government, has been implemented in a half-hearted manner. The proposed act to empower the NSC was drafted but not enacted by the United Progressive Alliance government. As a result, the NSC does not have the legal backing necessary for it to derive the authority. Hence, the Indian statistical system suffers from many inadequacies. Look at the statistical system of the United Kingdom and the authority the U.K. Statistics Authority enjoys from its 2007 Act. In the U.K., statistical offices are gradually getting detached from Ministries for being independent in the real sense. Here, the government, through the Minister, controls officers of the Indian statistical system and expects every report to be cleared by the government.

**Several private entities do their surveys on employment and industries, the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE) for instance. How robust are these agencies, especially on information on employment.**

I have seen a presentation by CMIE on their system for collection of employment data. They cover a large sample size regularly and the methodology is in the public domain. If one has to criticise such a method, it has to be specific. I have not seen such a criticism so far. In the absence of such an exercise, the criticism of the CMIE data does not get the backing of objective assessment. In the U.K., under the provisions of the code of practice followed by the U.K. Statistics Authority, there is a system for accepting any data as part of national statistics. We do not have such a system. □



# ‘Cash for votes’ scheme

The proposed cash transfer to farmers on election-eve is a **poorly imagined scheme** that is likely to have little positive impact. An alternative to it is the provision of universal basic services, universal employment guarantee and universal pensions. **BY JAYATI GHOSH**

THE BIG-TICKET ITEM IN THE “INTERIM BUDGET 2019-20” was the announcement of a cash transfer to farmers holding less than two hectares (five acres), of Rs.6,000 a household, to be paid in three instalments of Rs.2,000 each. Estimated to cover around 120 million households, it is projected to cost Rs.75,000 crore over a year. Amazingly, the government also declared that it would provide this amount with retrospective effect from December 1, 2018, so that the first instalment would reach farmers’ bank accounts by end-March of the current financial year. Stand-in Finance Minister Piyush Goyal stated that he had put aside Rs.20,000 crore in the current year for this purpose.

Several features of this announcement stand out. First, it is in clear contravention of the propriety of an interim Budget, which is supposed to be simply a vote-on-account that covers projected taxes and spending until the next government is in place. It is not supposed to commit to significant additional spending for the future, and so this measure and the proposed income tax measures could even be illegal. Every government is allowed to present, at most, five full Budgets; since the Modi government presented its first Budget in July 2014, this would be its sixth Budget—which is precisely why it can only be an interim Budget.

Second, this is the biggest indication so far of the current desperation of the ruling party. A Prime Minister who began by promising “development” and “jobs” as opposed to the “welfare” measures that he regularly denigrated (including the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which he tried to kill, but was forced to continue) has now been forced to thump the table enthusiastically in support of a cash handout to a major constituency whose economic situation has deteriorated during his tenure. All the big expectations that his government would unleash massive growth dynamism so that there would be no need for an



B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

**MGNREGA** work in progress, in Tamil Nadu. The Modi government regularly denigrated the scheme but was forced to continue it.

employment guarantee have been belied; instead, there is widespread rural distress and a serious crisis of rising open unemployment and poor quality job creation. The handout is blatant in its appeal to the farmers who will vote in the coming elections: here is some cash now, and if you re-elect us you will get more over the course of the coming year.

Third, this also betrays a severe lack of imagination in government circles. The proposal is, in essence, similar to the Rythu Bandhu scheme in Telangana, although that is more generous. In fact, the Rythu Bandhu scheme is now being questioned because it relies on land titles to determine the transfers and excludes tenants and women farmers who constitute significant proportions (in some





K.N. MURALI SANKAR

cases, the majority) of farmers. The Budget speech was vague about the beneficiaries and suggested that it would cover all those who are operating land—indeed, the number seems to be based on the Agricultural Census 2015-16, which suggested that there are 125 operational holdings of two hectares or less. But most tenancies in India are unrecorded, and land titles are also a mess in many places, and the government wants to hand over some money to farmers immediately to get some electoral benefit. So it is likely, even inevitable, that the scheme will cover only those who have land titles, including absentee landlords who do not cultivate the land themselves, while the actual cultivators may get nothing.

#### **PALTRY AMOUNT**

Finally, while this involves a substantial budgetary outlay, it is a paltry amount for an individual farming household. It has been widely noted that it comes to only Rs.3.33 per day per head for a family of five people. But more importantly, in relation to average cost per hectare, the amount is pitiful. According to the estimates of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), the average cost per hectare is Rs.30,000 for wheat and Rs.40,000 for rice (using the lower measure of A2+FL, or paid-out costs plus imputed costs of family labour, rather than C2, which also includes imputed rental costs of owned land and equipment, as farmers have demanded). Assuming double-cropping, we can say that costs per hectare vary from Rs.60,000 to Rs.80,000—which means around Rs.1,40,000 a year for a farmer cultivating two hectares. So the promised largesse counts for less than 5 per cent of average cost for such a farming household.

This is only one of the reasons why this hasty, desperate and possibly illegal announcement may turn out to be a bit of a political self-goal by the ruling party. Certainly, the reactions in the farming community thus far have been less than effusive, and some have even argued that it is an insult. There is also the tone-deaf nature of this response: the enormous farmers' marches and protests across the country made very clear and specific demands about land rights, credit, inputs, water management and output prices, but none of those has got more than lip service.

**CLERICAL MISTAKES** in Aadhaar enrolment have deterred the aged, such as these pensioners from Chendurthi village, Andhra Pradesh, from availing themselves of social security pensions and other benefits.

Enter the Congress party, with its own "game changer" announcement of a minimum income guarantee for all households across the country. Politically, it may have been a smart move, wrong-footing the government and taking the wind out of its sails even before the Budget announcement of a cash transfer for farmers. But it is evident that this proposal has not really been thought through either, and the somewhat contradictory explanations suggest that this was also hastily announced so as to dominate the policy discussion.

There are two ways to interpret this particular (and still very general) proposal. Some spokespersons of the Congress party have suggested that this would be an income top-up scheme, whereby families below a certain determined income would be provided an additional amount each month to make up the difference. There are many problems with this approach, which is essentially unworkable and even undesirable in the present circumstances.

#### **IMPOSSIBLE TO MEASURE**

First, how is the government going to determine the income of every household? We do not have such data at present, and they are almost impossible to collect for the vast majority of people who work in unorganised activity. It has been claimed that the Socio-Economic and Caste Census undertaken (SECC) in 2011 can provide the basis for this, but that is absurd because the SECC did not even try to measure incomes and used other indicators to determine poverty. Household surveys that have attempted to measure income (such as the India Human Development Surveys for 2004-05 and 2011-12) come with many caveats and are extremely expensive and time-consuming, making them next to impossible to undertake for the entire population.

In any case, any survey attempting to do this would also be susceptible to being gamed as the incentive would be for every household to understate its income so as to access more cash transfers from the state. But even if



A government that provides income with one hand and takes away important public services and provisions with the other is doing the citizen no favours.

incomes could be determined for each household for a particular year, such incomes would obviously change over time and need not be accurate reflections of the conditions of the household in future periods.

Second, what is the “acceptable” minimum income standard that would be used? Would it vary across States (as it should, given different price levels)? Would that not create problems and contradictions across States vying for shares of the Central allocation for this? Would this minimum standard change according to the other public services being provided (such as for nutrition, sanitation, health and education) and their costs? And how would this be determined?

Third, would this cash transfer scheme be at least partly financed by cutting other services and welfare schemes? This is a hugely important issue because a government that provides income with one hand and takes away important public services and provisions with the other is doing the citizen no favours. In fact, it is likely that such an effort would actually make people worse off as the cash handouts would not keep pace with rising prices of necessary goods and services. There is reason for concern on this issue, given that the Economic Survey a few years ago argued in favour of such cash transfers on the basis of cutting other welfare schemes and so-called “demerit” subsidies, and even suggested that this would enable greater fiscal “savings”.

Any subsidy or welfare scheme has to be considered on its own merits. Many of them serve particular purposes that cannot be subsumed under one “basic income” scheme. For example, maternity entitlements mandated by the National Food Security Act 2009 (which the government has still not fully implemented) are specifically intended to substitute for paid maternity leave for women who do not get such benefits because they are not in formal employment. Scholarships to students are designed to ensure greater inclusion and access of economically and socially deprived young people to education at all levels. And public provision of good quality health and education services is necessary not only to ensure universal access but also because these are sectors plagued by information asymmetries that allow consumers to be duped. The implementation of cash transfers is significantly weakened by the idea, currently pervasive in official circles, that leakages and corruption can be prevented

through the simple expedient of Aadhaar linkage, which is supposed to automatically weed out duplications and “undeserving” beneficiaries. The experience with Aadhaar linkage in the food security and employment programmes is dire: many of the most marginalised and impoverished people have been deprived simply because their biometrics do not match, or there are spelling mistakes in their cards, and so on. The government celebrates these as “savings”, but in fact, they have mostly been denial of entitlements to disadvantaged people. Meanwhile, all sorts of diversion and corruption continue because they occur among intermediaries in other ways that cannot be plugged by Aadhaar linkage.

## THE ALTERNATIVE

It is evident that a system of minimum income guarantee that relies on varied cash transfers to individual households is neither workable nor desirable. But there is another way of thinking about ensuring a minimum income guarantee that would ensure better conditions as well as more employment. This is the combination of universal basic services, universal employment guarantee and universal pensions.

Universal basic services would rely on state provision of good quality public services in health, education, and so on, which would ensure more access, reduce inequalities and increase public employment. Universal employment guarantee to every adult in urban and rural areas for 150 days would be a means of ensuring a basic income to all citizens that is not household-based, does not require any measurement of incomes and provides the dignity of work rather than a handout. Employment schemes can be designed to provide goods and services that improve productivity and the quality of life for all, therefore improving supply conditions as well. Pensions for the elderly and others who cannot work for reasons such as disability, at half the minimum wage, would take care of those who could not take advantage of the employment guarantee.

Obviously, this combination would require a lot of fiscal resources. But so does any scheme of cash transfer that provides a meaningful basic income, rather than a tiny pittance. This combination of universal basic services, public employment guarantee and pensions would generate a lot more direct employment. Therefore, it would also have significant multiplier effects that would further add to economic activity and employment—creating what Hyman Minsky had called a “bubbling up” of growth rather than a “trickle down”. This would also generate more tax revenues, so the net public spending would be much less. And there are ways of raising revenues through wealth and capital gains taxes as well as inheritance taxes, that need to come back to the Indian fiscal policy discussion.

The Modi government’s proposed cash transfer to farmers is a poorly imagined scheme that is likely to have little positive impact. But there is an alternative scheme to regenerate the economy and employment, and this is what needs to get more political traction. □



# Assam's angst

Protests erupt in Assam and other north-eastern States over the passage of the **Citizenship Bill** as ethnic communities fear that it will replace their language and cultural identity markers with religion.

BY **SUSHANTA TALUKDAR** IN GUWAHATI



OPPOSITION to the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019, in the north-eastern States appears to have snowballed beyond New Delhi's imagination. The growing protests reflect a deep sense of fear of being marginalised and losing linguistic and cultural identities if illegal immigrants from Bangladesh are granted citizenship instead of being detected and expelled.

This apprehension has stirred regional parties, students and youth and civil society organisations to raise a united voice against the Bill that seeks to make Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian

**A TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION** activists of 70 ethnic groups of Assam took out in protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, in Guwahati on January 23.

"illegal migrants" from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan legal immigrants, eligible to apply for Indian citizenship.

Thousands of protesters marched through the streets of Aizawl and other parts of Mizoram, some of them holding placards that read "Hello China, Bye Bye India". This was followed by a total boycott of the Republic Day function in Mizoram.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party na-

tional president Amit Shah at the forefront of the campaign for the Bill, the ruling BJP in Assam has chosen to ignore the writing on the wall. At a rally in Slichar town on January 4, Modi said: "Our government is working to get the Citizenship Amendment Bill passed in Parliament." The Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha on January 8. On February 2, addressing a rally at Thakurnagar in West Bengal, Modi reiterated his government's resolve to push the Bill through in Parlia-



ment and asked the Trinamool Congress to support the Bill in the Rajya Sabha.

Aggressive postures adopted by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar in support of the Bill, despite protests in the north-eastern region, indicate

that they see the proposed amendment to the citizenship law as an opportunity to push the Hindutva agenda. "A Hindu cannot be considered an illegal immigrant in India" is the argument put forth by the saffron party and other constituents

of the Sangh Parivar. Ten regional parties, including constituents of the BJP-led North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), met in Guwahati on January 29 at the initiative of Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, Mizoram Chief Minister

## Voices of dissent

THE Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seems to have miscalculated the reactions to the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019, particularly in the north-eastern region, which is in ferment. Not only is the Bill blatantly sectarian and selectively communal in its objective, it contradicts the National Register of Citizens (NRC) whose objective is to sift out "original" citizens from "illegal immigrants" in Assam. Therefore, the groups supporting the NRC are opposed to the Bill as it seeks to give citizenship status to a select group of persecuted minorities. The groups feel this will upset the demographic balance, which is sought to be set right by the NRC.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has been arguing that the "persecuted minorities" of certain denominations have "no place else to go to except India". The burden of the "persecuted migrants", Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh told Parliament, would be shared by the entire country. People belonging to these communities who were designated as "illegal migrants" and had entered the country on or before December 2014 would be naturalised under the amended law.

The BJP's allies, the Janata Dal (United) and the Shiv Sena, have also been critical of the Bill. Opposition to the Bill emerged during the deliberations of the Joint Parliamentary Committee. The JPC report was presented to Parliament on January 7, and on January 8, the Bill was moved and passed. The Bill was introduced in July 2016 and then referred to the JPC, which was to submit its report by December

2016. The JPC issued a press communique seeking the views of the stakeholders. It received more than 9,000 memoranda, held 14 sittings, and undertook field visits to Jodhpur, Rajkot, Ahmedabad, Silchar, Guwahati and Shillong.

The JPC report was problematic even as it pretended to be objective. The introductory chapter seeks to depict Pakistan and Bangladesh as theocracies and by implication intolerant. Their choice to become theocratic states had, the report averred, led to "their organised way of religious persecution for minorities which continued till date". The chapter also included a reference to the "influx of large number of people that has visibly impacted the demographic pattern in several parts of India especially the North East" and the "sufferings of these minorities" compared with other minorities in the rest of the world.

Justifying the need for the Bill, the JPC report referred to a Supreme Court judgment (*Sarbananda Sonowal vs Union of India*, 2005), which pointed to the dangers of the demographic changes in Assam and the implications of the same for the nation. The judgment observed that "as a result of population movement from Bangladesh, the spectre looms large of the indigenous people of Assam being reduced to a minority in their home state. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened and their employment opportunities will be undermined." Ironically, the opponents of the Bill, primarily indigenous groups, argue that the Bill will undermine their cultural and

other identities. The opposition to the Bill has been strident in Assam as it has been found to be in direct contravention of the Assam Accord because it proposes to confer legal status on all non-Muslim minorities who entered the State after 1971.

Representations from Assam pointed out that the Bill would "bring a radical change in the demographic pattern of Assam and pose a threat to the economic, political, cultural and social affairs of the indigenous people". It was unconstitutional as it attempted to provide citizenship based on religion. The feedback received by the JPC from the north-eastern region was opposed to the Bill, with some quarters suggesting that if minorities felt insecure in neighbouring countries, the Indian government could take the issue up with the governments of the respective countries. It was also stated that the Bill would not stand the test of judicial scrutiny as the government had no data of "persecution" of minorities in Bangladesh or discrimination on the grounds of religion.

The argument in favour of the Bill is that there have been requests for extension of visas by members of minority communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh as they could not re-enter those countries for fear of persecution. In September 2015, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a notification giving a one-time waiver for such communities, regularising their stay. The JPC was informed by the Intelligence Bureau (I.B.) that 31,313 persons had been given long-term visas following claims of religious persecution. The break-up was as follows: Hindus (25,447), Sikhs (5,807), Christians (55), Buddhists (two) and Parsis



Zoramthanga and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) leaders and decided to jointly oppose the Bill. Representatives of the Janata Dal (United), the BJP's ally, were also present at the meeting.

The BJP took the lead in the con-

stitution of the NEDA in 2016 in order to have a "Congress-mukt" north-east. The fact that key constituents of the alliance such as the National People's Party (NPP), the major constituent of the ruling coalition in Meghalaya; the Mizo Na-

tional Front (MNF), the ruling party of Mizoram; and the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party, the BJP's coalition partner in Nagaland; joined hands with the AGP and other regional parties to oppose the Bill indicates that the BJP is losing its

(two). This did not apply to refugees of all denominations or from countries other than the three specified ones. It was applicable only to those immigrants from specified denominations who had applied for long-term visas and who had claimed persecution. The Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar or Sri Lankan refugees were not part of this. There is a standard operating procedure for dealing with such groups. Since India is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention of 1951 on Refugees or its 1967 protocol, it is not obliged to treat them as refugees or confer rights on them. "From available data, I think it will be a small number. I feel it is from the human angle as they have left their original countries decades back. They are here; they have become citizenless," the I.B. Director told the JPC, referring to the persecuted minorities.

Some JPC members questioned the need for specifying certain religious communities and suggested that the term persecuted minorities could suffice. The Legislative Department clarified that "persecuted minorities" might negate the objective of the Bill because if a wider interpretation to "minority" was given, the aspect of religious persecution would be lost sight of.

This was like letting the cat out of the bag, with the intent and bias of the government becoming increasingly clear: first, to classify certain countries where, according to it, large-scale religious persecution was taking place, even when the number of applicants who suffered such persecution was not more than 31,000; second, to classify certain specific minorities as having suffered persecution; and third, by circumscribing persecution only of

a specific religious nature.

The dissent notes submitted by many prominent MPs were exhaustive, though parts of them were found to have been expunged in the final report. On January 3, Biju Janata Dal MP Bhartruhari Mahtab, in his note, said the Bill violated the spirit of the Assam Accord. He requested that the Bill be deferred until the NRC was completed and the issue of refugees from Bangladesh addressed. Javed Ali Khan, Rajya Sabha member belonging to the Samajwadi Party, and Saugata Roy and Derek O'Brien of the Trinamool Congress party said separately that "there was no consensus in the committee about the final report" and expressed apprehensions that the Bill would cause "ethnic divisions in Assam". They said that they had moved amendments to remove the reference to these countries as well as the specific communities, but these were defeated by a "show of hands". They pointed out the pitfalls of the NRC where 40 lakh people whose citizenship had come under question, 28 lakh were West Bengali Hindus, 10 lakh were Bengali Muslims and two lakh were Hindus from States other than Bengal and Assam. Bengali Hindus were being harassed by vigilante groups in BJP-ruled States, they wrote.

Mohammad Salim, Deputy Leader of the CPI(M) in the Lok Sabha, pointed out the manner in which all opposition was "voted down" and demanded the inclusion of all refugees and persecuted persons. His dissent note included sections on the betrayal of the Assam Accord and India's compromised refugee policy. He wrote that India, by virtue of its standing in various international protocols, had a re-

sponsibility to all asylum-seekers and immigrants. "To do anything less than that would move India to join the wave of anti-immigration hysteria that has taken hold in Europe and North America and structured into state policy in Israel. Worse than anything, it would be back-peddling on our own tradition of a visionary and inclusive foreign policy."

Congress MPs who gave dissent notes included Bhubhaneshwar Kalita, Pradip Bhattacharya, Adhir Ranjan Chaudhary and Sushmita Dev. Chaudhary, an MP from West Bengal, pointed out that the statement of objects and reasons of the Bill did not explain the rationale behind differentiating between different categories of illegal immigrants on the basis of religion. Sushmita Dev from Silchar, Assam, said that she was in favour of "offering unconditional and guaranteed citizenship to those who have a historical claim to it" though the Bill did not have any clause for securing citizenship.

She lamented the lack of "democratic space" in the draft report. She explained that in the absence of documents, genuine citizens, including linguistic minorities and Assamese-speaking people, were left out of the NRC process. The problem of documentation by those seeking citizenship was acknowledged by the government, she averred and, therefore, by implication the same latitude could be extended to those who had been left out of the NRC. There were no data, she said, on the number of immigrants from Bangladesh in Assam and there was "no way to determine the religion of these people". Bangladesh had denied any illegal immigration from its territory, she said.

*T.K. Rajalakshmi*



grip over the NEDA on the eve of the Lok Sabha election. The AGP quit the BJP-led government in Assam and snapped its ties with the BJP and the NEDA on January 7, a day before the Lok Sabha passed the Bill.

Amidst these developments, the news of a meeting of a delegation of the North East Students' Organisation (NESO), a banner organisation of the student bodies that includes the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), with Congress president Rahul Gandhi with a request to the Congress to vote against the Bill in the Rajya Sabha has triggered a political storm in Assam. This was the first time since the Assam Movement, spearheaded by the AASU, that the student body met Congress leaders to seek their support.

#### **AASU SEEKS CONGRESS HELP**

The State unit of the BJP flayed the AASU for cosyng up to the Congress and seeking the opposition party's support. "It was unfortunate that the AASU has taken refuge in the Congress, which was responsible for the death of 855 people during the Assam agitation," Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and the BJP's State party president Ranjit Kumar Dass said in a reaction to the development.

On January 30, in protest against the Bill, family members of 76 martyrs of the Assam Movement returned the mementos that the Sonowal government presented to them in December 2016. The Assam Movement, spearheaded by the AASU in 1979, culminated in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The Sonowal government had presented the mementos and a cash award of Rs.5 lakh as one-time financial assistance to each martyr's family. The members of the martyrs' families assembled at the AASU headquarters at Swahid Nyas in Guwahati and marched under the banner of the Sadou Asam Jatiyo Swahid Pariyal Samanway Rakhi Parishad to the office of the Kamrup (Metropolitan) Deputy Commissioner and handed over the mementos to the officials there. Family members of other martyrs returned their mementos in their district

headquarters. The BJP maintains that the Congress and the communists engineered the protests. The Congress and the Left parties have also been taking to the streets demanding withdrawal of the Bill.

The AGP, however, said that it was forced to seek the Congress' support as the BJP did not pay heed to the protests. "All eyes are now on the Congress to see what role it will play in the Rajya Sabha to prevent the passage of the Bill," said AGP president Atul Bora. The AGP's position has left election watchers speculating whether a political realignment was in the offing ahead of the Lok Sabha election.

The AASU played a key role in the installation of Sonowal, a former president of the student body, as Chief Minister. Sonowal, who was the petitioner in the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, was conferred the honorific "Jatiyo Nayak" (national hero) after the Supreme Court scrapped the Act in 2005. After the Modi Cabinet cleared the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019, on January 7, AASU and NESO adviser Samujjal Bhattacharya described Modi, Sonowal and the BJP as traitors. "They promised that the Assam Accord would be implemented in letter and spirit and Bangladeshis would be driven out. By passing the Bill in the Lok Sabha, they have proved that they want to create a vote bank of Bangladeshis," he said.

Responding to Sonowal and the BJP's criticism of the AASU's meeting with Rahul Gandhi, Bhattacharya said: "We have urged Rahul Gandhi and other leaders of the United Progressive Alliance and the NDA's [National Democratic Alliance] constituents that are opposed to the Bill to be present in the Rajya Sabha and vote against the Bill."

The student leader reiterated: "Our position is very clear. The Assam Accord must be implemented, and all illegal Bangladeshi migrants, irrespective of whether they are Hindus or Muslims, who came after March 24, 1971, must be identified and expelled. The Bill not only violates the Assam Accord but also wants

to destroy the secular fundamentals of the country." Sonowal, Sarma and other BJP leaders have been shown black flags by opponents of the Bill, and the State witnessed stray incidents of direct confrontation between BJP workers and protesters in different parts.

Delegations of the AASU and the NESO met leaders of the opposition and the BJP's allies in the NDA and urged them to vote against the Bill. Leaders of 70 other organisations, led by the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti and the Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad, and a delegation of journalists and intellectuals led by Prof. Hiren Gohain met Rahul Gandhi separately and urged him to oppose the Bill.

The BJP is pushing its campaign for the Bill in Assam and West Bengal with an eye on the Lok Sabha election. The eight north-eastern States have 25 seats and West Bengal has 42 seats in the Lok Sabha.

Sonowal and State Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma are leading the campaign in defence of the Bill in the State but are silent on the opposition to the Bill by constituents of the NEDA and the BJP units in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. The BJP-led coalition government in Manipur, headed by N. Biren Singh, has passed a Cabinet resolution urging the Centre to exempt Manipur from the purview of the Bill.

In a bid to counter the campaign that the Bill was violative of the Assam Accord and posed a grave threat to the existence and identity of Assamese and other indigenous communities, Sonowal, Sarma and other BJP leaders argued that expansion of the list of Scheduled Tribes (S.Ts) and the constitutional safeguards in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord, such as reservation of seats in the Assembly, local bodies and employment, would turn Assam into an S.T.-majority State, "an invincible fort of indigenous people", and therefore, indigenous people in the State need not fear the Bill.

But this argument has not found favour with the opponents of the Bill. The AGP legislator Ramendra Narayan Kalita asked the State's Par-





**MIZORAM CHIEF MINISTER** Zoramthanga, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma and Asom Gana Parishad president Atul Bora at a convention of political parties of the north-eastern region on the Citizenship Amendment Bill, in Guwahati on January 29.

liamentary Affairs Minister, Chandra Mohan Patowary, whether the government had decided on a definition of the term “indigenous”. The Minister informed the Assembly that the term “indigenous” had not yet been defined. The previous Congress government had formed a Cabinet subcommittee headed by the then Revenue Minister, Bhumidhar Barman, but no consensus could be reached on the definition.

Another effort was initiated by the previous Speaker, Pranab Gogoi; 53 organisations submitted their representations to him. Although Pranab Gogoi prepared a report, a consensus could not be reached, Patowary said. When Kalita demanded to know how the government planned to implement Clause 6 of the Assam Accord if the definition of indigenous had not yet been decided, the Minister said that the government would soon decide on the matter.

On January 9, the Modi government tabled the Constitution (S.T.) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2019, which proposes to include Koch-Rajbongshis, Tai Ahom, Moran, Matak, Chutiya and 36 Adivasi/Tea-tribe communities in the S.T. list. But protesters have pooh-poohed such claims.

Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are already S.T.-majority States with 98 per cent of the Assembly

seats reserved for S.T. communities, but the governments in these States have passed a Cabinet resolution opposing the Bill.

In Manipur, the BJP-led coalition passed a Cabinet resolution urging the Centre to exempt Manipur from the jurisdiction of the Bill. As a mark of protest against the Bill, the acclaimed film-maker Aribam Syam Sharma returned the Padma Shri award conferred on him in 2006.

In Assam, organisations representing the S.T. communities have been spearheading protests against the Bill as they apprehend that the Bill poses the grave danger of indigenous communities being marginalised by demographic change caused by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The Sangh Parivar’s efforts to push the Bill are seen as part of the larger design of imposition of their construction of a religious identity for Assamese and other ethnic communities. They are running the campaign that the Assamese people must embrace Bangladeshi Hindus to prevent them from being reduced to a minority by Bangladeshi Muslims. In the BJP’s political lexicon, Bangladeshi Muslims include not just the post-1971 illegal Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants but also Muslim immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan who came to Assam between 1951 and 1971. The Sonowal

government and the BJP leaders insist that the Bill seeks to grant citizenship to those Hindu Bangladeshis in Assam who had immigrated up to December 31, 2014. They alleged that opponents of the Bill were spreading the lie that the Bill would facilitate new immigration. However, the Bill does not have a cut-off date, which has triggered apprehension that if enacted it will encourage large-scale migration of Hindu Bangladeshis to Assam.

Language and culture are the most prominent identity markers for the Assamese people, and both these markers are multicultural in nature. The Assamese language and culture have flourished with elements from different ethnic languages and cultural practices. Notably, aspirations for the promotion of their own language and cultural identity markers of different ethnic communities have also strengthened the two identity markers of the Assamese people as new elements have emboldened the Assamese identity construction and Assamese nationality construction. Therefore, the attempts to replace these two identity markers with religion have fuelled apprehensions of marginalisation among different ethnic groups which have their own distinct culture. This explains the participation of all the communities in the protests against the Bill in the north-eastern States.

The Assam government informed the Assembly that from 1985 to August 2018, 626,793 cases were registered against “foreigners” in the State. Of them, 103,764 were declared “foreigners” by various Foreigners’ Tribunals, and 108,815 were declared to be Indian. A total of 29,829 “foreigners” were expelled from 1985 until January 20, 2019. These numbers are sure to keep the political pot boiling in Assam and other north-eastern States.

The political developments centring around the Bill in the region is a warning to the BJP that it can ill afford to look at them merely as part of the electoral number game. If the dissenting voices are ignored, the ground will be left wide open for secessionist tendencies to take root. □



# Sounding the bugle

Mamata Banerjee's dharna to "save the Constitution", which drew widespread opposition support, has **set the stage** for the Lok Sabha electoral battle. **BY SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

WEST BENGAL Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has placed Kolkata at the centre of political action in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election. Just two weeks after organising a mammoth anti-BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) rally in which leaders from across the country participated, she took on the Centre by staging a sit-in in the first week of February to "save India" from BJP rule.

Once again, several national-level leaders from across India shared the dais with her in solidarity even as West Bengal, during the three days she sat in protest, appeared to be on the brink of a major constitutional crisis.

The dramatic chain of events on February 3, precipitated by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) knocking on the doors of Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar in connection with the multi-crore Saradha scam, resulted in a near-complete breakdown of relations between the Trinamool Congress government in the State and the BJP-led government at the Centre.

Around 7 p.m. on February 3, a Sunday, a group of CBI officers arrived unannounced at Rajeev Kumar's residence. When refused entry, a serious face-off between the State police and the CBI officials ensued, and the latter were unceremoniously bundled into police cars and driven away from the Police Commissioner's residence.

Soon afterwards, the Chief Minister arrived at Rajeev Kumar's residence. After spending around two

hours in consultation with her party leaders and senior police officials, she announced her "indefinite dharna".

Accusing the Centre of creating a "super emergency" situation in the country, Mamata Banerjee began the dharna outside the Metro Channel in Esplanade in central Kolkata, a place for political demonstrations, where more than 12 years ago as an opposition leader she sat on a historic 26-day fast in protest against the then Left Front government's forcible land acquisition in Singur for Tata Motors' small car project.

On February 5, after conducting the affairs of the State from a raised platform on the roadside, Mamata Banerjee called off her agitation after the Supreme Court barred the CBI from arresting the Police Commissioner. However, the court directed Kumar to cooperate with the CBI in its investigation.

Accusing the BJP government of using Central agencies as weapons against the opposition, Mamata Banerjee said: "Every time there is an election, they use the pretext of chit fund scams and just do whatever they want."

She alleged that National Security Adviser Ajit Doval was behind these moves. "Whatever PM Narendra Modi wants, Mr Doval implements. He is the one who is giving instructions to the CBI," she said.

**WEST BENGAL** Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during the dharna, on February 5.

In April 2013, after the Saradha scam hit West Bengal, affecting the lives of lakhs of investors from the poorer sections of society, the State government formed a special investigation team (SIT) headed by Rajeev Kumar. The main allegation against him is that he suppressed and destroyed key evidence in the investigation while heading the SIT.

In its affidavit filed in the Supreme Court on February 4, the CBI said: "While the said investigation was being done by the SIT, crucial original, primary and fundamental evidence such as laptops, mobile phones, etc., were handed over to the main accused in the Saradha scam





case by the I.O. [Investigating Officer] of West Bengal Police working under direct supervision of Rajeev Kumar. It is submitted that the return of crucial evidence to the main accused by the SIT, despite regular monitoring by the High Court, clearly show connivance of the SIT to a larger conspiracy wherein local authorities have obstructed investigation and made attempts to destroy the evidence prior to the transfer of the case to the CBI by this Court.”

The CBI took over the investigation in 2014 at the direction of the Supreme Court. The investigating agency had repeatedly sent notices to Rajeev Kumar and other members of the SIT team between September 2017 and December 2018, but it had apparently received no cooperation from them. The CBI also alleged that the SIT was “conniving with the accused/potential accused persons and was actively subverting the investigation process”.

The Chief Minister tried to explain why she rushed to the Police Commissioner’s residence after the police forcibly removed the CBI officials, saying that it was her constitutional duty to protect any officer in her administration. “I run an administration. To protect an officer, I am proud to say is my constitutional

duty, my personal duty and my government’s duty. How can they have the audacity to come on a ‘secret operation’ to the residence of a police officer under whom there are thousands of policemen? There is total constitutional breakdown,” Mamata Banerjee said.

Calling her agitation a “satyagraha”, she said she was fighting to protect the institutions from the BJP government. “My dharna is to protect Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Constituion,” she added.

At the dharna site, Mamata Banerjee showed that the last eight years in power had not blunted her combative instincts as she relapsed into the role of a formidable opposition that had once single-handedly defeated the Left Front. As thousands of her supporters gathered, chanting slogans such as “*Chowkidar Chor Hai*”, “*Mamata Banerjee Zindabad*”, the Chief Minister of West Bengal and Modi’s most vocal opponent could be heard shouting: “Please save India! Please save our country. Modi has gone mad.”

Mamata Banerjee orchestrated her protest with speeches, songs and recitations, as eminent personalities from the world of politics, arts and literature joined her on stage in a show of support. Although she

claimed that her dharna was not a political one, the site became a rallying ground for opposition parties to once again show they were united against the BJP.

Among those who visited Mamata Banerjee at the protest venue were Samajwadi Party leader Kiranmoy Nanda, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader Kanimozhi, Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and Telugu Desam Party president N. Chandrababu Naidu.

#### SUPREME COURT ORDER

On February 4, the CBI moved the Supreme Court, and the following day a three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi directed Rajeev Kumar to appear before the CBI and to “faithfully cooperate” with the investigating agency at all times.

The court also made it clear that “no coercive steps including arrest shall be taken against the commissioner of police”. As per the court’s directions, Rajeev Kumar will be appearing before the CBI in Shillong so as to “avoid all unnecessary controversy”. The Supreme Court also directed the Chief Secretary of the State, the Director General of Police (DGP) and the Police Commissioner to reply to the contempt petition filed by the CBI by February 18.

The Supreme Court’s order that Rajeev Kumar was not to be arrested was interpreted by Mamata Banerjee as a victory over the Central government. “It is a moral victory for the people of Bengal, a moral victory for the people of the country,” she said. Addressing the crowd, with Chandrababu Naidu by her side, Mamata Banerjee said: “This dharna was to save India, save the Constitution, save the federal set-up, and we held protest under the banner of Save India.” She claimed she was calling off the agitation at the request of the other opposition parties that had responded to her call for a *mahagathbandhan* (mega alliance) rally against the BJP on January 19.

“On behalf of 23 political parties we urge her to withdraw her dharna.



AFP



Everyone feels that madam [Mamata Banerjee] should end the dharna. We will take up the issue again in Delhi," said Chandrababu Naidu.

The BJP viewed the apex court order as a setback for the Trinamool. "I am thankful to the Supreme Court that now the Police Commissioner will have to face the CBI in Shillong. Now it will be revealed who all were involved in the Saradha [scam]," said Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath at a rally in Purulia district in West Bengal.

"The political histrionics of Mamata Banerjee was brought to a screeching halt by the honourable Supreme Court of India," said Union Textiles Minister Smriti Irani.

While some political observers feel that Mamata Banerjee's decision to stage a dharna over the CBI's action was impetuous and desperate, leaving her vulnerable to allegations of trying to prevent certain uncomfortable truths from surfacing, there are those who also feel that it was a political master stroke, simultaneously targeting the Modi government at the Centre and projecting her as the most visible face of the opposition against the BJP in the upcoming election. "Mamata Banerjee was successful in turning an administrative move by the CBI into a national political movement, and ahead of the Lok Sabha election she has established herself as the most important opposition leader against the BJP," the noted psephologist Biswanath Chakraborty told *Frontline*. "If Rahul Gandhi took centre stage with the Rafale issue, Mamata Banerjee has outdone him with the issue of the BJP using the CBI and other agencies as a political weapon. Other opposition leaders are also seeing her as the main opposition figure against Modi," he added.

Chakraborty feels that this image of being the main political opponent

of Modi will benefit her electorally in the coming Lok Sabha election, with greater polarisation of the minority votes working in her favour.

Even though the Trinamool Congress was part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance under Atal Behari Vajpayee, the relationship between the two parties had been deteriorating over the years, hitting an all-time low with the latest

incident involving the CBI. After Mamata Banerjee organised the mega rally of opposition parties on January 19 to take on the BJP, the gloves are off in the State as the two parties have been tearing into each other even though election momentum has barely picked up in the rest of the country. Barbs and accusations are flying thick and fast as rallies and counter-rallies by the two set the tone for the Lok Sabha elec-

tion. Violent clashes between the Trinamool and the BJP as well as between different factions of the Trinamool itself continue unabated.

On one the hand, the BJP has been steadily strengthening its presence in West Bengal since the 2014 Lok Sabha election to emerge as the main opposition to the Trinamool. On the other, Mamata Banerjee has been consolidating her position as a key figure against the BJP at the national level. In this context, the CBI's timing in knocking at the Police Commissioner's doors has been questioned, and added credibility to the opposition parties' allegation that Central agencies are being used by the Modi government to carry out political vendettas.

The Supreme Court had directed the CBI to probe the chit fund scams four years ago; the question being asked is why there is a sudden flurry of activities just before the election. One of the main targets of the BJP's attacks is the issue of corruption in the Trinamool and the party's close ties with ponzi companies. Mamata

Banerjee herself has not been spared; top BJP leaders, including Modi, have time and again raised the issue of her paintings being bought by chit fund companies at exorbitant rates.

However, Mamata Banerjee's rather extreme reaction was also a little puzzling, particularly when compared with her comparatively less intense outrage during the arrests of some of her close aides, such as former Sports Minister Madan Mitra and senior party leader and Lok Sabha member Sudip Bandyopadhyay. Mamata Banerjee's justification has not convinced everyone either. She said: "I tolerated the arrest of those close to me. But I could not tolerate the insult to a chair. The office of the Police Commissioner is an important one."

"Who is Mamata Banerjee trying to save? Her Police Commissioner or herself?" quipped Union Human Resource Development Minister Prakash Javdekar. Even as Congress president Rahul Gandhi expressed solidarity with Mamata Banerjee at the time of her agitation, West Bengal Pradesh Congress leaders sang a different tune. "If he has not done anything, then why is the Police Commissioner avoiding the CBI?" asked State Congress president Somen Mitra.

Moreover, the presence of Rajeev Kumar, DGP Virendra, State Security Adviser and former DGP Surajit Kar Purkayastha, and Additional DGP (Law and Order) Anuj Sharma at the dharna site raised eyebrows. The Ministry of Home Affairs wrote to Chief Secretary Malay Kumar De to initiate disciplinary proceedings against Rajeev Kumar, which elicited an angry response from Mamata Banerjee, who said: "Rajeev Kumar never joined the dharna. He came to see while I was on satyagraha."

Although Mamata Banerjee ended the dharna, the Centre-State conflict is far from resolved. She has announced that she will be taking her "Save India, Save Constitution" protest to the national stage in Delhi. The battle for Lok Sabha could not have had a more dramatic opening. □



**KOLKATA** Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar.



# Rural rumbles

Disgruntled farmers plan a concerted protest against the government, posing a formidable challenge to the BJP government when the Lok Sabha election is just round the corner. BY **ANANDO BHAKTO** IN NEW DELHI

MANY people attributed the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral defeat in the Hindi heartland States of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh on December 11 to rural distress, in particular the marked resentment of farmers towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP-led government had gone back on key assurances given by him in the run-up to the 2014 election, including price protection for farm produce and debt relief. With the next general election round the corner, Modi is confronted with lakhs of disgruntled farmers, who have joined hands with the anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare.

From January 30, prominent farmers' leaders belonging to the Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangh (RKM), which has been at the forefront of farmers' agitations nationwide in the past two years, sat on an indefinite hunger strike along with the 81-year-old Anna Hazare to press for their demands that include a Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayuktas in all States, complete debt relief, minimum support price (MSP) for crops as recommended by the M.S. Swaminathan Commission, and minimum basic income for farmers. Although Anna Hazare did not attract the kind of media attention he did in 2011 and the fast was called off on the seventh day, on February 5, following assurances made by Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, the latest offensive has set the stage for a more pitched resistance by farmers in the days ahead.

When the RKM, a federation of 130 farmers' organisations, and



**DURING THE KISAN MUKTI MARCH** demanding a special session of Parliament to discuss farmers' concerns such as debt relief and assured remunerative prices, in New Delhi on November 30, 2018.

Anna Hazare held a joint press conference in New Delhi on January 21, they dropped hints that they were likely to take on the Modi government politically and that raking up the Rafale scam would be a critical component of their calculus. During the press conference, Anna Hazare was vocal in calling out the Modi government for the gradual weakening of institutions under its watch. He also enumerated the lacunae in the Rafale deal, and while talking to *Frontline* he insisted that "if a Lokpal had been appointed, the Rafale scam would not have taken place".

Evidently irked by the BJP, and in particular Modi, who until recently did not respond to any of his 32 letters asking for the appointment of a Lokpal, Anna Hazare has plans to lead disgruntled farmers ahead of

the upcoming general election, according to sources in the RKM. A couple of top functionaries of the RKM told *Frontline* off the record that he was contemplating anchoring a full-fledged political movement along with farmers, with the Rafale scam at the core of it.

Although the success of such a plan is uncertain, what is certain is that farmers' conflict with the Modi government is set to be fraught. If that happens, the spectacle of tens of thousands of protesting farmers will be of immense political capital to the opposition and help it fuel the simmering unrest in India's rural belt against Modi's anti-poor and anti-farmer policies. This might pulverise the BJP in the farmer-dominated States of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh,



Haryana and Punjab. Fadnavis, along with Union Minister for Agriculture Radha Mohan Singh, met Anna Hazare at his Ralegaon Siddhi village in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, and assured him on behalf of the Centre that a meeting of the search committee for a Lokpal would take place on February 13 and that a committee under Radha Mohan Singh would be constituted to look into the agrarian issues raised by farmers. The committee would include three representatives from farmers' bodies and a couple of members from NITI Aayog. It was under his insistence that the social activist called off the strike.

But a source in the RKM said that this did not in any way indicate that the government would be able to buy much time from them. Apparently, Anna Hazare and farmers' leaders had had a discussion on their next course of action even before they began their fast. The source revealed that under the aegis of Anna Hazare they had contemplated organising long marches from the Prime Minister's home State, Gujarat, in the coming days, which would spread towards Kashmir and Assam in the north-east and Kanyakumari in the extreme south.

Although the RKM pledges political neutrality, off-the-record interactions with its senior functionaries give one a sense of farmers' indignation with the BJP. The source confirmed that the decision to rope in Anna Hazare was a calculated one aimed at deriving political mileage.

"Farmers are numerically strong, our demands are genuine. But the national media remain fixated with political controversies only," the source said. "Anna Hazare will ensure just that. He has some documents relating to Rafale, which he is currently studying. As soon as the election campaign begins, we will simultaneously launch our long marches focussing primarily on the Rafale scam. Anna Hazare will also raise electorally significant issues such as Modi's unfulfilled economic promises, his *jumlas* [empty promises] and his suppression of important data on jobs and economic

growth. If Modi thinks that farmers cannot affect his electoral prospects beyond the hinterland, he is underestimating us."

Anna Hazare's fast had received notes of solidarity from the BJP's ally, the Shiv Sena, besides the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena led by Raj Thackeray.

#### EMPTY PROMISES

In the run-up to the 2014 general election, Modi asserted in no uncertain terms that if the BJP was voted to power he would ensure remunerative prices to farmers by adding 50 per cent profit into the peasants' input cost. The specifics of his proposal, though, were vague, and in February 2015, barely nine months after he ascended to power, his government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court stating that it would be economically unviable to implement the promised hike in the MSP. In November 2016, the hardship of farmers grew exponentially as the government demonetised the country's two biggest currency denominations. Most economists believe that this broke the back of the farming sector, a cash-driven economy.

Yogendra Yadav, co-founder of the sociopolitical organisation Swaraj Abhiyan, which since its inception in April 2015 has played a pivotal role in highlighting agrarian distress, is of the same view. During an exclusive interaction with *Frontline*, the psephologist-turned-politician said that the "note ban" had inflicted calamity on farmers as it seriously disrupted agricultural funding. A study titled "Impact of Demonetisation in Agriculture Sector", published in *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, also pointed out that demonetisation had led to the loss of perishable products such as fruits and vegetables as farmers were unable to conduct daily transactions in the absence of cash supply.

Yogendra Yadav described the Modi government as "the most anti-farmer government that India has had". Underlining the government's insensitivity to farmers, he said: "The government attempted to amend the

Land Acquisition Act not once but four times, and when it failed it tried to bring it through the back door, through State governments, which only shows its will to snatch land from farmers. Specifically in the case of Adivasi farmers, it has diluted the Forest Rights Act."

As much as 17 per cent of India's \$2.3-trillion economy comes from farming, but the income of farmers has remained stagnant or, worse, has shrunk continually, leading to a compounding debt cycle and a consequent spate in farmer suicides. At least 300,000 farmers have killed themselves since 1995. According to the April 2016 findings of the National Sample Survey Office on the basis of a survey it conducted during July 2012-June 2013, about 52 per cent of the agricultural households in rural India were reeling under debt. The average debt per household was estimated to be Rs.47,000, a significant amount considering the fact that the average annual income of a farmer was found to be less than Rs.20,000 in 17 States.

In last year's Budget, Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said that the MSP for all unannounced crops would be fixed at one and a half times the cost of production. But farmers said the announcement was misleading as the increased MSP was not on the basis of the Swaminathan Commission report, which had recommended the C2 method that takes into account rents, interest on capital and skilled labour rates. Moreover, the government announcement effectively meant that at least 25 crops, for which the government announces the MSP, including paddy, wheat and millets, were out of its purview.

#### FARMERS' INCOME DECLINED

Ahead of last year's election in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Modi tried to allay farmers' discontent by promising to double their income by 2022. But critics have pointed out that he is woefully far from the target.

Yogendra Yadav explained: "The government's own committee has said that doubling of farmers' in-





**ANNA HAZARE** addressing the media on the farmers' issue in New Delhi on January 21.

come would require 10.4 per cent annual growth in farmers' income for the next three years from now. But the government has not been willing to reveal information on how much farmers' income has grown so far. We have only two statements coming from the government. One is the *Economic Survey* of last year, which candidly acknowledged that farmers' income had remained stagnant, and second is the Budget statement this year which said that farmers' income had declined."

#### **CROP INSURANCE SCHEME**

The government has also received flak for its flagship Prime Minister's Crop Insurance Scheme. During the Madhya Pradesh elections, the Congress' star campaigner Jyotiraditya Scindia called it a scam. "The Prime Minister's Crop Insurance Scheme is a big scam, in which Rs.3,000 crore was deducted from farmers' bank accounts without their consent and less than Rs.50 crore was paid to them as compensation against their damaged crop worth Rs.600 crore," he said at a public meeting at Balwadi in Barwani district on November 12.

During a field visit to Madhya Pradesh's farm belt of Malwa-Nimar at the time, this reporter found that most farmers seconded these allegations. At Harsola village in Mhow tehsil, for instance, a farmer, Dashrath Chouhan, told *Frontline*: "We do not have the choice to opt out, and then, it's unaffordable. For ex-

ample, for cotton, farmers have to pay a premium of Rs.1,200 an acre. This means that if a farmer grows 10 acres of cotton, he will have to shell out anything between Rs 8,000 and Rs.10,000 as premium per crop."

Others shed light on how the scheme benefits insurance companies. "When we procure a loan, the bank deducts the premium without our consent. But when our crop fails, there is no provision for early assessment and relief. The *patwari* [assessor] turns up 15 days after the incident and usually does a sloppy job. We cannot claim the insurance benefit individually even though we pay the premium individually. The scheme stipulates that the benefit can be claimed only if the crop in the entire region covered by it fails" ("Farmers' anger", *Frontline*, December 21, 2018).

"As per my study," Yogendra Yadav said, "the insurance companies made a profit of Rs.200 crore in Uttar Pradesh in 2016, and in flood-ravaged Bihar in 2017 they made a profit of Rs.470 crore. Clearly, the private companies have been able to suppress the payment claim."

The agrarian discontent snowballed into a full-blown agitation against the Modi government in June 2017 when in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, the police opened fire on protesting farmers, killing at least six people. Since then, there have been continual protests. In a major show of strength galvanised by the

All India Kisan Sabha, an affiliate of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), nearly 40,000 farmers marched on the streets of Mumbai on March 11, 2018. From June 1, 2018, farmers under the banner of the RKM organised a 10-day blockade along 30 major highways in Haryana, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. On September 5, 2018, thousands of farmers gathered at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi for the Kisan-Mazdoor Sangharsh rally, and on November 29, nearly one lakh farmers reached Delhi to participate in the Kisan Mukti March.

Abhimanyu Kohar, national spokesperson for the RKM, who participated in the seven-day hunger strike in Faridabad, told *Frontline* that they were determined to up the ante against the government in the days to come. When asked about the Modi government's latest offer of a minimum income support of Rs.6,000 a year for farmers, he said it was a "cruel joke".

#### **ATTEMPT TO BUY VOTES**

According to Yogendra Yadav, it is an "insincere and cynical attempt at buying farmers' votes and that too very cheap". "The entire exercise is basically meant not to bring about any long-term change or to give any big, sustained support to farmers, but somehow send one instalment of Rs.2,000 to two crore farmer families just before the elections, avoiding the model code of conduct," he said.

Kohar is confident that none of the government's ploys will work. He said the government's response to their "fast unto death" was "most undemocratic". "In Chandigarh, they [the administration] cut off the electricity and water supply at the site where our volunteers were on fast, and in Faridabad there was not a single visit by doctors to attend to the fasting volunteers," he said. He said the RKM had decided that if no substantial progress was made towards implementing their demands by the end of February, it would go ahead with its nationwide long marches along with Anna Hazare. □



# Record of a lost battle

With **conspiracy theories** doing the rounds over Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's death, often floated by Ministers and members of the ruling AIADMK itself, *Frontline* looks in detail at the reports of Apollo Hospitals, Chennai, and AIIMS, New Delhi, to piece together what happened in the days preceding her death. **BY ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

TAMIL NADU Chief Minister Jayalalithaa's death after 74 days in hospital is now the subject of a commission of inquiry headed by Justice A. Arumughaswamy, a retired judge of the Madras High Court, after questions about the medical treatment given to her were raised within her own party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and by her political opponents, mainly the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). In fact, the DMK, which is the principal opposition party in the State, demanded a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation. The commission, formed in September 2017, is inquiring into the circumstances leading to her death on December 5, 2016, and has been given multiple extensions already.

The probe itself came about because of the factionalism within the AIADMK. The then Chief Minister, O. Panneerselvam, who led a faction within the AIADMK then, staged a "dharma yudh" against Jayalalithaa's close aide V.K. Sasikala and insisted on a probe when conspiracy theories about the former Chief Minister's death started doing the rounds. The matter continued to simmer even as factional politics within the ruling AIADMK took centre stage and resulted in Edappadi K. Palaniswami becoming Chief Minister in February 2017.

With Panneerselvam showing no sign of withdrawing his demand for a



**THE CROWD** outside Apollo Hospitals in Chennai on December 5, 2016.

probe, the Chief Minister, in August 2017, announced the setting up of the inquiry commission and a few days later inducted Panneerselvam into his Cabinet as Deputy Chief Minister. Clearly, Palaniswami's aim, while assuaging the frayed tempers of Panneerselvam, was to alienate Sasikala and her nephew T.T.V. Dinakaran and foil their attempts to take control of the party.

However, Palaniswami's strategy did not silence AIADMK functionar-



**JAYALALITHAA.**

ies, even Ministers, who continued to make conflicting and controversial statements on the death of their leader. This had the effect, perhaps unintended, of embarrassing the government officials who had monitored her treatment. Forest Minister Dindigul C. Srinivasan, while addressing a public meet-

ing in Madurai last year, said leaders had "lied to the people that the leader [Jayalalithaa] ate idlis". He said that none of the functionaries, barring a few, were allowed to see the ailing



Chief Minister though the medical reports of Apollo Hospitals, where she was treated, claimed that periodic briefings about her condition were held with senior Cabinet Ministers and officers.

Recently, Law Minister C.Ve. Shanmugam revived the issue that was thought to have been settled to everyone's satisfaction. Jayalalithaa, he said, should have been taken abroad for treatment. He launched a broadside against Health Secretary J. Radhakrishnan's statement that "Indian doctors are good" and for "misguiding the Cabinet". He also asked why an angiogram was not performed on her soon after she was brought to the hospital. Fisheries Minister D. Jayakumar went a step further and said those who were found to be at fault while deciding the line of treatment for their leader should be dealt with as per "police enquiry techniques".

"These statements on Jayalalithaa's death and other political developments point to only one thing: an attempt to fix the blame on someone for Jayalalithaa's medical treatment," said a senior official. "It is unfortunate that the best professional medicare that was given to her has been questioned," said a physician who treated her. Apollo Hospitals asked the commission of inquiry to form a medical board to evaluate the treatment history of the Chief Minister. "We have submitted nearly 10,000 medical documents relating to her treatment. The commission must form a medical board to understand treatment and terminologies," said the physician. Apollo Hospitals has told the commission that its medical experts would not be available for re-examination at present.

The commission, which has the powers of a civil court, is conducting the proceedings *in camera*. Sasikala's counsel, Raja Senthoo Pandian, told the media that the panel was yet to question Panneerselvam and DMK president M.K. Stalin, "two key witnesses who could untie the knots that have been built around Jayalalithaa's death". On February 5, the commission ad-

joined further hearing to February 11.

A press release from the Health Secretary, issued on March 6, 2017, while placing the medical reports—including the discharge summary from Apollo Hospitals and the medical reports from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi—concerning her treatment in the public domain, claimed that though it was unethical to reveal the details of a patient's treatment under the Indian Medical Council (Professional Conduct, Etiquette and Ethics) Regulations, 2002, the Government of Tamil Nadu had to resort to this act "to put at rest needless speculation relating to the circumstances surrounding the hospitalisation, treatment and sad demise of the late Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu".

In October 2018, the Raj Bhavan wrote to the Justice A. Arumughaswamy Commission saying that it had received no medical records from Apollo Hospitals or AIIMS pertaining to the health of Jayalalithaa, a report in *The Economic Times* said. The government letter was in the context of a communication from the commission seeking information about official communication between institutions such as the Raj Bhavan, the government, the hospital group and AIIMS, the report said. A search of the Tamil Nadu government's Information and Public Relations website and other government websites could not locate the medical records.

#### CONSPIRACY THEORIES

One of the conspiracy theories was about the medical treatment, or the lack of it, given to her at her Poes Garden residence until Jayalalithaa was rushed to hospital, something which Panneerselvam had demanded from the beginning (see "They started ill-treating me", *Frontline*, March 3, 2017). A detailed medical history of Jayalalithaa in the period

before her hospitalisation could not be accessed, though one did get glimpses of it in the medical reports of Apollo Hospitals and AIIMS, New Delhi, whose doctors visited the ailing Chief Minister five times on the directions of the Government of India. Copies of both medical reports are with *Frontline*.

Apollo Hospitals recorded that during her admission on September 22, Jayalalithaa was suffering from "multiple medical problems". She had been an acute diabetic for 20 years and was suffering from hypertension. The reports claimed that she had a history of chronic seasonal bronchitis and hypothyroidism, be-

sides irritable bowel syndrome with chronic diarrhoea. She was also suffering from atopic dermatitis and was on a tapering dose of oral steroids for this. An echo test had been done a year earlier, the report noted. It should be noted here that the physician who was treating her regularly at her home happened to be a relative of



V.K. SASIKALA.

K.V. SRINIVASAN

Sasikala.

In fact, even on the day of her admission to Apollo Hospitals, she, according to press releases of the State government, executed her official duties. She condoled the death of the Carnatic singer M. Balamuralikrishna, who died on September 22, in a press release. On September 21, she inaugurated the Adani Group's mega solar energy project. She also inaugurated various projects and distributed freebies to beneficiaries of welfare schemes.

On September 23, she reportedly responded to messages from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then Tamil Nadu Governor, Ch. Vidyasagar Rao, wishing her a speedy recovery. The Governor visited her later in the hospital.

On September 27, she held a high-level discussion with top officials on the Cauvery issue "in her room in Apollo Hospitals". A month later, on October 27, at 6:30 p.m.,



she affixed her thumb impression on documents relating to the allotment of the party symbol to candidates contesting the Assembly byelection in 2017. A government doctor, P. Balaji, attested it.

These acts supported the claim of the doctors who treated her that she had been intermittently conscious. "The ebb and flow of her condition, though not abnormal in medical history, complicated her clinical progress," said a top Health Department official. He dismissed allegations of a "veil of secrecy" surrounding her treatment and said: "Medical practices do not permit a conjecture of ifs and buts and whys and why nots in the line of treatment. It is a well-laid-out norm."

The Apollo Hospitals' report said that a panel of experts was formed and multidisciplinary discussions were held regularly for a consensus on the line of treatment. Also, a panel of physicians updated the patient's family and a core group of government officials, and a government-designated medical team examined her periodically throughout her stay in the hospital, and all of them "concurred with the treatment plan" (according to the hospital records, "family" in this context meant "Sasikala").

A spokesperson of the hospital said there was no ambiguity whatsoever in her treatment as claimed by some. On September 23, the hospital issued a press release saying merely that the Chief Minister had been admitted with "fever and dehydration". On September 25, it held a press conference to say that she was "recovering well". Dr Richard Beale, Professor of Intensive Care and Medicine, and Consultant, Guy's Hospital and St. Thomas Hospital, United Kingdom, who treated her, said in a recent video that the Chief Minister herself was not inclined to go abroad for treatment.

On September 29 and on October 2, the hospital issued press notes saying that she would have to be in the hospital for a few more days. The hospital also posted her health updates on Twitter. Despite all these steps, rumours and statements about

her health had begun to be circulated widely.

Her medical reports indicated that even while she was showing improvement, she collapsed. Almost all the top cardiologists in Chennai were involved in her treatment, but most of them chose not to share their views owing to the politics around her death. *Frontline* spoke to a medical expert in the United States about the Apollo Hospitals and AIIMS reports. After a careful review of the reports, he said: "The treatment has been outstanding, about as good as you could expect in any advanced medical centre." On the claims made that an angiogram or angioplasty soon after she was admitted in the hospital could have saved her, he said, on the basis of the report: "There was never any indication by history, exam or testing of coronary ischemia which would have demanded an angiogram or angioplasty. Thus an angiogram was not indicated in the first place."

#### APOLLO HOSPITALS' REPORT

The 12-page treatment summary of the Department of Critical Care Medicine of Apollo Hospitals, Chennai, was written in consensus with "all treating physicians". Among those who advised and reviewed the treatment of the former Chief Minister were 17 specialists from various departments of Apollo Hospitals, six specialists from AIIMS, New Delhi, and 12 "external experts" from the U.S., the U.K., Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Vellore and Chennai, including Dr Beale and Dr Stuart Russell, a cardiologist from Johns Hopkins Hospital in the U.S.

The summary claimed that Jayalalithaa was diagnosed to be suffering from multiple issues such as enterococcus bacteremia with septic shock and ARDS (acute respiratory distress syndrome) with secondary pulmonary infections requiring prolonged ventilator support; infective endocarditis of calcified mitral valve with valve perforation, mitral regurgitation (MR) and first degree AV (atrioventricular) block; heart failure with preserved systolic function; uncontrolled type-II diabetes mel-

litus; hypertension; hypothyroidism; asthmatic bronchitis and probable sleep apnoea; H/O irritable bowel syndrome; and atopic dermatitis.

#### DETAILS OF TREATMENT

The Apollo Hospitals' report claimed that on September 22, 2016, their ambulance services were called to the Chief Minister's residence at about 10 p.m. On reaching her house, the team noted that "she was not consistently responding to calls and was also breathless with low oxygen saturations (approximately 48 per cent). Initial pulse rate [was] 88/min and B.P. 140/70. She was given oxygen supplementation through a face mask with which oxygen saturation improved to 98 per cent, and then was immediately shifted to Apollo Hospital Emergency Room (E.R.)." On arrival, she was "noted to have altered sensorium" and was in respiratory distress. A systemic examination revealed "bilateral basal crackles in the lungs, soft heart sounds and clinically normal abdominal examination".

Medical procedures, such as electrocardiogram (ECG) and echo (echocardiogram) were done. The ECG report indicated "suggestive [of] sinus tachycardia (faster-than-usual heart rhythm) with prolonged PR interval". A 2D echocardiogram "revealed normal LV [left ventricle] and RV [right ventricle] functions with no evidence of pericardial effusion". Lung ultra sonogram (USG) revealed "extensive bilateral B profile indicative of pulmonary oedema [fluid accumulation in the lungs]". The report said that Jayalalithaa "was admitted in a very critical condition".

In the initial few hours in the hospital, she was treated for pericardia arrest situation "as per ACLS protocol [Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support, which refers to a set of clinical interventions for the urgent treatment of cardiac arrest, stroke and other life-threatening cardiovascular emergencies] with injection of Atropine and subsequently a temporary transvenous pacemaker was emergently inserted by cardiologist".



She was treated for symptomatic bradycardia (slow heart rate, generally fewer than 60 beats a minute) too.

At that time “serial ECGs and cardiac enzymes were not suggestive of an acute coronary event”. The report further said that it reviewed her “prior medications”, including beta blockers and other anti-hypertensives. She showed improvement. “Although her dyspnea [laboured breathing] did not change significantly on the second day, her tachypnea [abnormally rapid breathing] and oxygen requirement improved and her sensorium also returned to baseline. She interacted with family members and government officials,” the report said.

The report was cautious while profiling her past medical history, which has become a subject of debate today. It claimed that her medical history was significant since her multiple medical problems included obesity, hypertension, poorly controlled diabetes, hypothyroidism, irritable bowel syndrome with chronic diarrhoea and seasonal bronchitis. “She was also on a tapering dose of oral steroids for atopic dermatitis. She had a history of intermittent fever for 5-7 days with increased frequency of bowel movement,” the report stated.

Repeated transthoracic echocardiograms were performed at the hospital to evaluate for possible infective endocarditis. A transoesophageal echocardiogram was not possible initially because of the patient’s tenuous respiratory distress syndrome. But her clinical course deteriorated on the fourth day of her stay when she started to develop a “significant audible wheeze” and increasing tachypnea. “Repeated TTE [transthoracic echocardiogram] was suggestive of slightly increasing MR and left arterial dimensions, but no valve abscesses, conduction delays or other sequelae of infective endo-

carditis [an infection of the endocardium, the inner lining of the heart chambers and valves] needing surgical intervention. Cardiothoracic surgical input was obtained and no acute surgical intervention was deemed necessary,” the Apollo Hospitals’ report stated.

Jayalalithaa slowly responded to treatment, and on September 27 she “was able to interact with government officials from the bedside”. In fact, a press release from the Director of Information and Public Relations issued on September 27, 2016, stated that the “Honourable Chief Minister, Selvi J. Jayalalithaa convened a meet-



**O. PANNEERSELVAM.**

ing between 4:30 p.m. and 5:30 today (27-9-2016) in her room in the Apollo Hospital, Greaves Road, Chennai, on the interim directions issued by the Supreme Court on the Cauvery issue.” The Chief Minister, the release added, was apprised of the directions of the Supreme Court. Chief Secretary P.

Rama Mohana Rao, Advocate General R. Muthukumaraswamy, Adviser Sheela Balakrishnan, Principal Secretary-1 to Chief Minister K.N. Venkataramanan and Secretary-IV A. Ramalingam participated in this meeting.

The Chief Minister, the release said, directed Minister for Public Works, Highways and Minor Ports Development Edappadi K. Palaniswami; Chief Secretary Rama Mohana Rao; Principal Secretary in the Public Works Department, S.K. Prabhakar; and Chairman of the Cauvery Technical Cell R. Subramanian to attend the meeting on the Cauvery issue to be held in New Delhi on September 29.

#### **LAST OFFICIAL MEETING**

That was the last time she attended an official interactive discussion on an important issue in her capacity as Chief Minister. Although the State government issued press releases in her name after she was admitted to

Apollo Hospitals, there are no records to suggest any more active participation in or discharge of official duties by her as Chief Minister thereafter until her death on December 5. The only other thing she did was to affix her thumb impression in October on the application for the party’s candidate contesting the byelection at Thirupparankundram in 2017.

On September 28, the day after the official meeting on the Cauvery issue, Jayalalithaa developed an acute bout of wheezing and breathlessness with worsening hypoxaemia (low oxygen level in arterial blood) and “after obtaining informed consent from the family and core government officials, patient was successfully intubated” (placement of a flexible plastic tube into the trachea (windpipe) to maintain an open airway) and after that a TOE (transoesophageal echocardiogram, an ultrasound of the heart that scans the heart from inside the oesophagus) was performed to stabilise hemodynamics.

The report mentions that the TOE showed no evidence of mitral valve annular abscess or AV ring abscess, suggestive of non-hemodynamically significant MR. The left main coronary artery, ostio-proximal LAD (left anterior descending artery) and left circumflex (curved) and ostio-proximal RCA (right coronary artery) were clear and of normal calibre.

However, the report added that a panel of cardiologists and cardiothoracic surgeons, including Dr M.R. Girinath, Dr K.M. Cherian and Dr L.F. Sridhar, reviewed the patient and the TOE findings and “recommended continuation of medical therapy as there was no indication of emergency surgery”. Further clinical examination, however, suggested that she was suffering from pulmonary oedema, which later emerged as one of the major causes for her death.

Dr Pranatharthi H. Chandrasekhar, Professor, Infectious Diseases Department, Wayne State University, Detroit, U.S., was consulted over phone and on his advice, appropriate modifications were carried out. A panel of intensivists, including Dr Jigi Divatia from Mum-



bai, and infectious diseases specialists, including Dr O.C. Abraham from CMC Vellore and Dr Rajeev Soman from Mumbai, evaluated the case independently and provided inputs. Later, antibiotics were de-escalated. Her condition stabilised.

But on September 30, there was a worsening of respiratory dynamics, which required “escalation of sedation, oxygen supplementation”. Tests revealed worsening of pulmonary oedema. Dr Beale was invited to provide an expert opinion. After extensive discussion and evaluation, he suggested Levosimendan infusion to address the diastolic dysfunction. “He also counselled the family and the government officials about the nature of problems, the need for prolonged ICU and hospital stay and guarded prognosis.” The report said: “He was of the opinion that considering her overall condition she carries a mortality of 40 per cent.”

The following two days went without any significant change in her overall condition. D. Ravi Mehta, Senior Consultant, Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Apollo Hospitals, Bengaluru, was consulted. On October 2, the long-time I.V. access and all central catheters were removed. Subsequently, an experts’ team from AIIMS, New Delhi, held a detailed discussion with the treating team and “concurred with the plan of management and updated the family members and senior government officials. The team from AIIMS and Dr Richard Beale subsequently visited the patient several times in the ICU and provided inputs on care.”

The AIIMS team was formed as per an order of October 5, 2016, by its Director on directions from Union Health Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda. A team of specialists—Dr G.C. Khilnani, Professor, Department of Pulmonary Medicine and Sleep Disorders; Dr Anjan Trikha, Professor, Department of Anaesthesia, Critical Care and Pain Medicine; and Dr Nitish Naik, Professor, Department of Cardiology—visited Chennai from October 5 to October 7, 2016. “The team had a meeting with all the specialists who are looking after the Honourable Chief Min-

ister. They included Critical Care Specialist (Intensivist), Pulmonologist, Cardiologist, Infectious Disease Specialist, Endocrinologist, Gynaecologist and others,” said AIIMS in its report. It filed five reports on the medical condition of the Chief Minister to the Government of India.

Its first report said her transthoracic echocardiogram, done by the treating team, revealed “mitral annular calcification and mild mitral regurgitation. The other valves were normal. The left ventricular systolic function was normal along with evidence of diastolic dysfunction.” On the day of the team’s first visit, she was on ventilator support with invasive monitoring. “Our team examined her and suggested tracheostomy for further management and reducing the sedation. It was also opined that the procedure should be performed by an ENT surgeon in operation theatre.”

#### **‘SURGERY NOT PREFERRED’**

The option of surgical intervention for MR (mitral regurgitation) was discussed. Prof. Naik opined that “immediate surgery at this point of time was not preferred because of very high operative risk”. However, he asked for a close watch to monitor any increase in the severity of MR, development of new lesions or any other possible indication for surgery for infective endocarditis. The team examined her the next day too. Her clinical condition remained the same, which was conveyed to the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu and the Chairman of Apollo Hospitals, Dr Prathap C. Reddy. The report claimed that a tracheostomy was performed on her at 4:30 a.m. on October 7, which was uneventful. She was stable and responded to verbal commands. The AIIMS team observed that she continued to be critically ill.

The report from Apollo Hospitals said that “considering the recurring pulmonary oedema, underlying comorbidities, [the] likely need for long term ventilator support and ease of further care, [a] consensus decision was made to perform an electric tracheostomy. Family and

senior government officials were counselled and consent obtained and tracheostomy performed on October 7, 2016, by Dr Babu Manohar (ENT) in the operating room uneventfully.” She, as per the records, however, continued to suffer from periods of hypertension, tachycardia, pulmonary oedema, etc., thereafter, and the reaccumulation of pleural effusion on both sides of her lungs was noticed on October 9.

Dr Khilnani from AIIMS returned on October 9 to assess the situation. He took a briefing from Dr Babu Abraham, the treating physician, and examined the Chief Minister. There was a change in her respiratory parameters since the pleural effusion in the lungs. The therapy was intensified. She continued to be on full ventilator support and other medications. Dr Khilnani briefed Health Minister C. Vijayabaskar and Health Secretary J. Radhakrishnan about the Chief Minister’s medical condition.

On October 14, a CT scan of the chest/abdomen/pelvis was done. The Apollo Hospitals’ report added: “Patient’s family requested us to obtain the expert opinion of an external cardiologist during the hospital stay.” At various points, Dr Russell and Dr Jayan Parameshwar, Medical Head of Heart Failure and Heart Transplantation, Papworth Hospital, U.K., were consulted over phone and through telemedicine and inputs obtained. Both of them attributed the recurrent episodes of breathlessness and transudative pleural effusion to a combination of diastolic heart failure and capillary leak syndrome and they advised continued diuresis.

Dr Mathew Samuel, senior interventional cardiologist, “evaluated the patient’s clinical condition and concurred with optimisation of medical management and opined that there was no need for an urgent coronary angiogram or intervention”. Hence, the optimisation of cardiac medicines and other medicines on an as-and-when-required basis were administered. Repeated transthoracic echocardiograms “did not show any new worsening of mitral



valve vegetation, wall motion abnormalities or drop in EF [ejection fraction].” The report claimed that the patient “continued to interact and was able to communicate her needs to the nursing and the medical team”.

The condition of the Chief Minister improved gradually over the next five days after the October 9 setback, and she was put on oral feeds. Her overall medical management plan was redrafted, though all medication for cardiac optimisation with a sustained back and perennial care was maintained. Her nasogastric tube was removed and “[she] did not want it reinserted”. Oral nutrition support was added, and the patient was encouraged to take as much protein and calorie-rich food as possible in her oral intake.

The AIIMS team returned to Chennai and evaluated her health from October 13 to October 15. The team studied the reports and had a meeting with specialists on October 14 to decide the future course of action. “This was held in the office of Dr Prathap C. Reddy, Chairman of Apollo Group of Hospitals. After detailed discussions, it was decided not to do any active intervention for pleural effusion and continue same treatment with negative fluid balance and life support,” the AIIMS report said.

The same evening, a videoconference was arranged with Dr Russell in the U.S., in which all treating physicians took part. All the aspects of the medical reports and treatments were discussed. Dr Russell completely agreed with the line of treatment. On October 15, there was a briefing for senior Ministers and government officials, including the Chief Secretary, in the office of Dr Prathap Reddy.

All the details about the progress in the medical condition of the Chief Minister were communicated and discussed in detail. The AIIMS team emphasised and conveyed to the group that complete recovery was going to take a few weeks. The senior Ministers, including the Minister of Health, and senior officers appreciated AIIMS for sending the team three times at short notice. “They

also appreciated the medical advice of the team.” The doctors returned to New Delhi after reviewing the clinical progress on the evening of October 15.

The first three weeks of November passed without any major incident for the patient. Even antibiotics were suspended and physiotherapists from Singapore were invited to provide both passive and active schedules of exercises. She even sat on the edge of the bed and on a wheelchair. On November 14, her tracheostomy tube was downsized to facilitate speech. On November 19, in view of her overall improvement, the patient was moved in a wheelchair out of the ICU to a specially designed high-dependency bed, with round-the-clock nursing and medical supervision.

#### EXPERTS CONSULTED

Dr Venkata S. Ram, a hypertension expert in Apollo Hospitals, Hyderabad, was consulted over phone on the episodic hypertension. He suggested screening for neuroendocrine tumour once the patient’s critical issues were improved. Dr Nikhil Tandon, Professor and Head, Department of Endocrinology, AIIMS, while examining the records and the patient, ruled it out as “highly unlikely”, and it was decided “not deemed immediately necessary” after conveying it to the family and government officers.

Dr Samin K. Sharma, Interventional Cardiologist in New York, was invited by the family for an expert opinion, and he provided inputs. The Apollo Hospitals’ report reiterated that during “the hospital stay including at presentation as well as during episodes of worsening breathlessness there was no symptomatic electrocardiographic (ECG monitor, 12 lead ECG) or echocardiographic (no regional wall motion abnormalities, no increase in LV diastolic dysfunction, no new LV systolic dysfunction, no increasing MR) evidence of

ischemia”. On November 25, the tracheostomy tube was further downsized. After four days, on November 29, Holter monitoring was done, and it “revealed frequent ventricular premature contractions, but no evidence of significant arrhythmia or ST-T changes suggestive of ischemia”.

The AIIMS team visited Chennai again on December 3 with Dr Tandon accompanying it. The team was informed that the Chief Minister was progressing well and was undergoing physiotherapy regularly. On December 3, she reportedly suffered from decreasing potassium levels. She was found to be suffering from sensorimotor autonomic polyneuropathy. But she was fully conscious. She could sit in a chair for 20 minutes or so but could not stand as there was neuromuscular weakness. The team opined that the cause of episodic hypertension (fluctuations in blood pressure) was unlikely to be owing to an endocrine pathology and that “no invasive cardiologic investigation or intervention was indicated in the present condition”.

The AIIMS team interacted with the patient and encouraged her to increase her oral intake and participate more actively during the physiotherapy sessions. “They also agreed that coronary angiogram was not needed emergently and opined that it could be planned at a later date and conveyed this to the family and government officials,” the Apollo Hospitals report said. It added that a consensus decision was taken that further coronary evaluation could be planned electively at a later date. The team returned to Delhi the same day.

A decrease in the patient’s potassium level was recorded on December 4 too. Jayalalithaa’s condition suffered a further setback that day when she vomited after breakfast. She was placed back on the tracheostomy mask as her oxygen requirement increased. The Apollo



C. VIJAYABASKAR,  
State Health Minister.

B. JOTHIRAMALINGAM

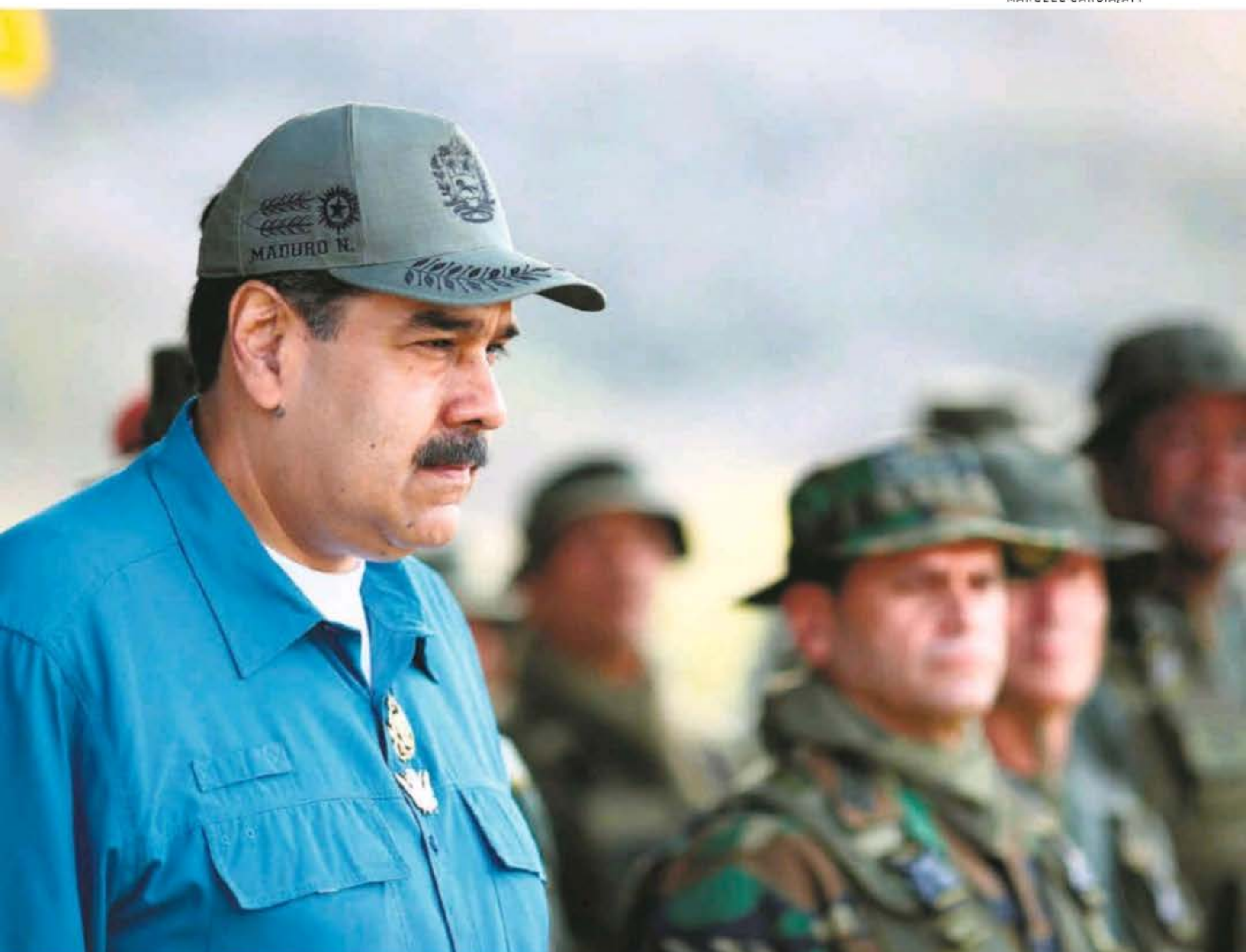


# CREEPING COUP

In an abortive bid to overthrow the elected government of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, the U.S. recognises Juan Guaido as the “interim” President and orders that revenue from its sale of Venezuelan oil be diverted to the puppet regime.

BY JOHN CHERIAN

MARCELO GARCIA/AFP



**PRESIDENT NICOLAS MADURO** addressing the troops at the naval base of Turiamo, Aragua State, on February 3.



THE LATEST ATTEMPT AT REGIME CHANGE in Venezuela by the United States and its regional allies appears to have been planned assiduously.

Unlike the previous coup attempts, including the infamous one in 2002 to overthrow the Hugo Chavez regime, this time the U.S. wanted the job done by hook or by crook.

More and more facts have emerged in the as yet abortive attempt to overthrow the democratically elected government of Nicolas Maduro. For instance, on the night before Juan Guaido declared himself the “interim President”, he had a long conversation with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence. Before that, the pretender to the Venezuelan presidency had held secret meetings with right-wing leaders of Brazil, Colombia and Argentina while waiting for the green signal for the proposed coup from the U.S..

Senior officials of the Donald Trump administration told *The Wall Street Journal* that Pence urged the novice Venezuelan politician to invoke Article 233 of the Venezuelan Constitution to claim presidential powers. Pence assured Guaido that if he did so, the U.S. govern-

ment would back him to the hilt. Pence even took to the airwaves to speak to the people of Venezuela as part of the Trump administration’s ham-handed efforts to sway public opinion there. There were misplaced hopes in Washington, D.C., and a few other capital cities that the mass of the people would rise up in protest on the cue provided by the U.S. or that the military top brass would show the elected government the door.

Article 233, anyway, is not a valid basis for claiming the presidency of Venezuela. It can only be invoked if the sitting President “becomes permanently unavailable”. However, constitutional or democratic niceties have rarely stood in the way of the U.S. governments in their dealings with Latin America. After recognising Guaido as the President, the U.S. went ahead with its plan of denying the Venezuelan people the much-needed revenues from the sale of oil. In his address to the United Nations Security Council on January 26, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on member countries to “pick a side” and to “stand with the forces of freedom”.

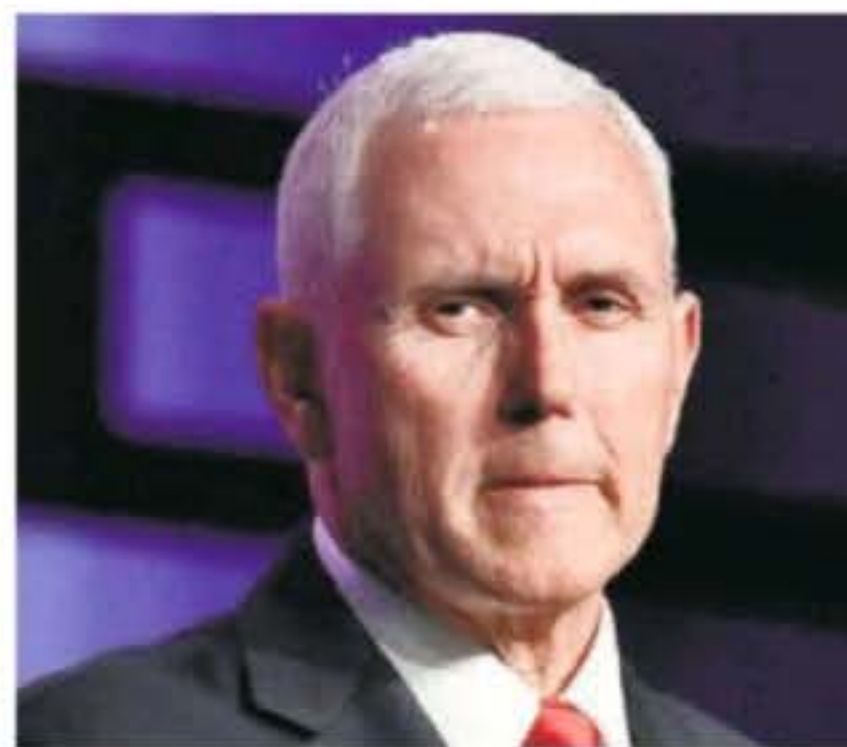
The imperial Trump government decreed that revenue from the sale of Venezuelan oil in the U.S. would be



**JUAN GUAIDO**, Venezuela’s opposition leader and self-proclaimed interim President, at a rally in Caracas on February 2 against Maduro’s government.



**U.S. PRESIDENT** Donald Trump. In comments broadcast on February 3, he said a military intervention in Venezuela was “an option”.



**U.S. VICE PRESIDENT** Mike Pence. He urged Guaido to invoke Article 233 of the Venezuelan Constitution to claim presidential powers.





REUTERS

**MADURO'S SUPPORTERS** at a rally in downtown Caracas on January 31.

diverted to the puppet Guaidó government. "What we're focussing on today is disconnecting the illegitimate Maduro regime from the source of its revenues," declared John Bolton, Trump's National Security Adviser and a notorious neocon war hawk. The oil revenue from the U.S., generated by CITGO, a large oil refiner in the U.S. and a subsidiary of PDVSA, the Venezuelan government-owned oil and natural gas company, is a much-needed source of hard currency for the Venezuelan government. CITGO runs more than 20,000 petrol pumps in the U.S. and owns extensive real estate assets.

*The Wall Street Journal* reported: "The late-night call set in motion a plan that has been developed in secret over the preceding several weeks, accompanied by talks between U.S. officials, allies, lawmakers and key Venezuelan opposition figures, including Mr Guaidó himself." Besides Pence, the leading characters in the plot to overthrow the Maduro government are Pompeo, Bolton and Marco Rubio, the Republican Senator from Florida. Rubio has been the spokesman for the corrupt and rich Venezuelans and Cubans who live in luxury in Miami.

"Little Marco", as he was once derisively called by Trump, has in the last couple of years emerged as a key adviser to the White House on matters concerning Venezuela and Latin America in general. According to reports in the U.S. media, Trump viewed regime change in Venezuela as among the most important priorities of his presidency. The other two issues being Iran and North Korea. It is not a coincidence that Venezuela and Iran are among the countries that have the largest hydrocarbon reserves in the world.

The Guaidó-led opposition has already prepared a blueprint to allow U.S. oil companies to enter Venezuela again. Guaidó has also said that he wants to approach the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to bail out Venezuela. Hugo Chavez and later Ma-

duro saw to it that the country's hydrocarbon resources remained under the control of the state. Chavez had described the IMF and the World Bank as organisations "dominated by U.S. imperialism". While campaigning for the presidential election in 2016, Trump said that the U.S. ought to have seized Iraq's oil assets as spoils of war. Venezuela, which has the world's largest reserves of oil and gas, is a prize the Trump administration covets deeply. "It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could make American companies invest in and produce oil capabilities in Venezuela," Bolton told Fox News.

#### **MILITARY INTERVENTION**

Diverting U.S. national attention to Venezuela came in handy for Trump, who is mired in scandals and the after effects of an ill-considered government shutdown. The Democratic Party, full of liberal interventionists, fell in line with the Trump administration's interventionist policy. Among the prominent Democrats aspiring for the party's nomination to run against Trump in 2020, only Tulsi Gabbard has strongly cautioned against the illegality of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela. Trump once again said in early February that he did not rule out military intervention in Venezuela.

During a media briefing, Bolton was reportedly seen carrying a notepad on which were scribbled the words "5,000 troops to Colombia". According to reports, the Trump administration has been trying to convince the right-wing governments in Brazil and Colombia to participate in a military intervention in Venezuela. The Brazilian Army top brass has apparently cautioned President Jair Bolsonaro against embarking on a military misadventure in a neighbouring country. Colombia's President Ivan Duque is a protégé of Alvaro Uribe, the far-right former President of the country. During his two terms as President, Uribe had in tandem with the U.S.



tried his best to destabilise the Chavez government. Colombia is the U.S.' closest military ally in the region. President Maduro has warned that if the U.S. intervenes militarily, it will face "a much worse Vietnam than you can imagine".

The Trump administration has appointed Elliot Abrams as "special envoy" to Venezuela with the mandate to "restore democracy". Abrams has been a prominent proponent of U.S. intervention in Latin America since the time he served in the Ronald Reagan administration in the 1980s. He was one of the architects of the "Iran-Contra" scam and was convicted for his role in the covert arming of right-wing Contra militias in Nicaragua. He escaped prison because of to a presidential pardon. He is said to have had advance knowledge of the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez when he was serving as a special assistant to President George W. Bush. "I have been a counter-revolutionary for a long time," he boasted way back in 1986. Samuel Moncada, Venezuela's Ambassador to the U.N., accused the U.S. of "manufacturing a case to promote and justify the recolonisation of Venezuela through the imposition of a puppet government in our country". He said that what happened on January 23, the date on which Guaido proclaimed himself as President, was an attempted *coup d'etat* promoted, organised and financed by the U.S. along with a small group of countries in the region and Europe.

The United Kingdom, for instance, is refusing to allow the Venezuelan government to withdraw its gold reserves. The British government is as usual in lockstep with the U.S. Moncada said: "The arrogance of the British elite, who are so used to looting, leads them to believe that they can rob the wealth of all Venezuelans with impunity just because they have become Trump's minority partner." Canada, France and Austria are among those countries that recognise the political gambit of Guaido and his handlers in Washington, D.C.

In France, "yellow vests" protesters have been staging



JIM YOUNG/REUTERS

**U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER** John Bolton at the White House in Washington, D.C., on January 28, when the Trump administration announced economic sanctions against Venezuela and the state-owned oil company, PDVSA.

huge demonstrations since the end of last year demanding the resignation of President Emmanuel Macron and the holding of fresh elections. The French police have been accused of using excessive force in subduing the anti-government protests. The international community has not condemned the heavy police action. On the other hand, the U.S. and its allies have been encouraging Venezuelans to stage violent protests against their government. The Western media deliberately ignored huge rallies, such as the one staged on February 2 by supporters of Maduro. Maduro had extended an olive branch to the opposition, offering to hold early parliamentary elections. "There is no dictatorship in Venezuela; there never will be," Maduro said in a speech.

There are fears that the military option will be next after the Trump administration's failure to get the endorsement of the Security Council or even the Organisation of American States for its regime change plans. An opinion poll taken in January showed that eight out of 10 Venezuelans oppose a U.S. military intervention.

The Venezuelan military remains solidly behind the elected government despite open threats from the U.S. Seizure of oil revenues and gold deposits are messages to the military and the Maduro government that they will be subjected to immense pressure through illegal sanctions. The latest set of sanctions are estimated to cost Venezuela more than \$12 billion in lost revenues in the coming year. This is more than 90 per cent of what Venezuela currently spends on food imports.

In other words, the Trump administration basically wants to starve an already suffering people into submission. In the past five years, the Venezuelan economy has shrunk by half and inflation has gone through the ceiling. Low global oil prices for the past seven years and tough U.S. sanctions since 2017 are mainly responsible for the situation Venezuela finds itself in. It is not surprising that only 36 per cent of Venezuelans have a favourable view of the U.S., as a recent opinion poll revealed.

Throughout the 20th century, the U.S. has blatantly interfered in the internal affairs of Latin American and Caribbean countries. Trump is continuing the trend set by President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had said that it was the duty of the U.S. government to "teach the South American republics to elect good men". When genuinely good leaders were elected, such as Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile, they were overthrown by Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored coups.

The U.S. disrupted the democratic process in several countries, including major ones such as Brazil and Argentina in the 1960s and the 1970s. But those events happened in the 20th century. Latin America has come a long way since then. As Hector Vasconcelos, the president of Mexico's Senate Foreign Relations Committee, put it: "Nothing will contribute more to the questioning of the legitimacy and credibility of Juan Guaido than the support he is receiving from the United States. We are in Latin America, and this should be understood by the White House.... Learn something from history." □



# Perilous truce

The U.S. and the Taliban reach a **tentative agreement** that could finally end the war in Afghanistan, but the Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani is clearly unhappy. **BY JOHN CHERIAN**



EVEN AS REPORTS WERE COMING IN OF THE United States Air Force pounding Taliban positions and the Taliban mounting attacks in retaliation, the two warring sides announced to the world that they had reached a tentative agreement that could finally end the war in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Afghans, most of them innocent civilians, have died as a result of suicide bombings and U.S. air attacks in the past couple of months. The U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, announced in late January that the Taliban had agreed to a ceasefire and had given “a pledge” that it would not allow Afghan territory to be used as a base for terrorism-related activities.

The U.S. declared war on Afghanistan in 2001 following the September 11 attacks on the U.S. The Taliban, which was then ruling the country, had apparently given asylum to Osama bin Laden, the Saudi radical and founder of Al Qaeda, who was named as the architect of the 9/11 terror attacks. At that time the U.S. vowed to defeat the Taliban militarily and eradicate it from the Afghan political scene. However, 17 years later, the U.S. has been forced to face the ground realities and negotiate

**AFGHAN PRESIDENT** Ashraf Ghani (centre) speaks to U.S. negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad (to his right) at the presidential palace in Kabul on January 28.

with the Taliban to end its longest-running and costliest war yet.

The U.S. has promised a withdrawal of its forces from the country. The agreement was reached after six days of talks between the U.S. and the Taliban in Doha in January. The withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan has been a long-standing demand of the Taliban for the cessation of hostilities and the holding of direct talks with the government in Kabul. Until now, the Taliban had refused to have official contacts or dialogue with the government of President Ashraf Ghani.

The two sides have so far only thrashed out the broad contours of a draft agreement to end the war. Many important details are yet to be ironed out before a final peace agreement becomes a reality. Senior Taliban officials have confirmed that special working groups will be formed to set the final dates for the departure of U.S. troops. They, however, are silent on the U.S. demand that



they start talking with the representatives of the Afghan government. As of now, the Taliban continues to characterise the government in Kabul as a “puppet” government. The Taliban is also not yet willing to accept the U.S. demand for an immediate ceasefire.

Already there are voices from within the U.S. political establishment arguing for the retention of troops in Afghanistan. The Senate has voted against the proposal for U.S. troop withdrawals from both Syria and Afghanistan. President Donald Trump has, however, reiterated that he intends to carry out his plans to pull out of “the endless wars” in both countries. President Ghani, who was evidently taken by surprise by the fast-paced developments, appealed to the U.S. not to pull out its troops in haste.

### GHANI'S CONCERN

With the Taliban controlling around 40 per cent of the territory and it having shown its capacity to stage attacks against big cities, the Afghan army will find itself highly vulnerable without the support of the U.S. military. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Ghani revealed that 45,000 Afghan security personnel had been killed since the time he took office in 2014. The Afghan security forces have been experiencing a high desertion rate and their morale is said to be at rock bottom. In his Davos speech, Ghani said it was important for the U.S. to time its departure from Afghanistan carefully.

In an address to the nation in the last week of January, Ghani expressed concern about the deal struck between the U.S. and the Taliban. He said that a rushed deal would once again engulf the country in chaos and anarchy. He pointed out that after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, lawlessness and violence prevailed for a long time and warlords ruled the roost. The mujahideen, who were then the allies of the Americans, did not keep their commitments to the international community and exterminated the remnants of the progressive regime that was in power.

“We insist on measures because we are aware of the experience of Dr Najib,” Ghani said, referring to Najibullah, who resigned as President in 1992 under a peace deal guaranteed by the United Nations. After the capture of Kabul by the Taliban, Najibullah took refuge on the U.N. premises. But ignoring all diplomatic niceties, the Taliban raided the U.N. compound and hanged Najib from a lamp post in central Kabul. “We want peace quickly, we want it soon, but we want it with prudence,” Ghani said in his speech to the nation. “Prudence is important so that we don’t repeat past mistakes.”

In a letter to Trump, Ghani urged him to let the U.S. military to remain in Afghanistan. He suggested that the number of troops could be reduced if the rising cost to the American exchequer was the sole concern. Ghani said reducing the number of troops substantially from the current level of 14,000 would help Washington save \$2 billion in defence expenditure annually.

The Afghan President is upset because the U.S. did



**AN AFGHAN SOLDIER** walks near a crater caused by a suicide bomb attack in Kabul, a 2018 photograph. Afghan security forces are shrinking, and the Taliban holds sway over 40 per cent of the territory.

not keep him in the loop during its negotiations with the Taliban in Doha and other capitals. The Trump administration, Afghan officials fear, wants to impose an interim government in Kabul that would involve power-sharing with the Taliban.

The Afghan government would prefer to discuss such internal political matters directly with the Taliban leadership. “We should not forget that the victims of the war are Afghans, so the initiative for peace should be in the hands of the Afghans,” Ghani said.

The U.S. wants to push an agreement that entails the sharing of power between the Afghan government and the Taliban before the presidential elections in Afghanistan. The Afghan government has announced that the elections will be in July this year. The Taliban, of course, is opposed to the elections. During the parliamentary elections held last year, it disrupted the election process in broad swathes of the country. The Taliban’s attitude could change and become more accommodating if it is also allowed to contest the forthcoming election.

Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban based in Doha, has assured the international community and fellow Afghans that the group does not want to “monopolise” power in a future administration. “After the end of the occupation, Afghans should forget their past and tolerate one another and live like brothers. After the withdrawal, we are not seeking a monopoly of power,” he said in an audio message to a news agency. “The with-





RAHMAT GUL/AP

drawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is a shared responsibility and a pride for all Afghans.”

President Ghani remains opposed to the idea of allowing the Taliban into the government at this juncture. “Afghans do not accept the idea of an interim government—not today, not tomorrow, not in a hundred years,” he said in a recent speech.

The U.S. negotiator Khalilzad denied that the issue of forming an “interim” government was discussed with the Taliban. He, however, admitted that the Taliban wanted the issue to be on top of the agenda in the forthcoming round of talks.

The Taliban has named Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as their chief negotiator for the coming round of talks scheduled to start at the end of February. Mullah Baradar was among the top lieutenants of Mullah Omar, the late leader and emir of the Taliban movement. He is said to command deep loyalty among the rank and file of the Taliban.

Mullah Baradar was released from a Pakistani jail last October. He had run afoul of the Pakistani security establishment for trying to establish communication channels independently with the Kabul government headed by Hamid Karzai in 2010. His hideout in Karachi was raided by the joint forces of Pakistan and the U.S. The U.S. at the time was still hoping to defeat the Taliban militarily. This time it was the U.S. that insisted on the release of Mullah Baradar.

“Zalimay Khalilzad on behalf of the Americans asked us to facilitate in bringing the Taliban to the negotiation table,” the Pakistan military spokesman said. “Pakistan is doing its best to make it happen.”

Trump administration officials have conveyed their

appreciation for Islamabad’s help in facilitating the talks and pressuring the Taliban leadership to give concessions, at least on paper. Senator Lindsay Graham, a Republican who is known for his hawkish foreign policy views, was all praise for the Pakistani government during his visit to Islamabad in the third week of January. He said he would urge the U.S. President to meet Prime Minister Imran Khan at the earliest to help bring about a speedy end to the war in Afghanistan. Graham’s visit to Islamabad followed that of Khalilzad, who met Imran Khan and the Pakistan Army chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa. The visit took place when the talks with the Taliban were in danger of stalling. The Taliban’s reluctance to talk to the Afghan government in Kabul was the main stumbling block. That issue is yet to be sorted out.

The Taliban will be holding a meeting with Afghan leaders in Moscow. Among those attending that meeting will be former President Hamid Karzai and Atta Mohammed Noor, the head of the Jamat-e-Islami party. A cross section of Afghanistan’s political leadership will also be present in Moscow. The only notable absentees will be Ghani and senior members of his government.

Pakistan’s preference for a Taliban-run government in Kabul is well known. It would allegedly provide “strategic depth” for Pakistan’s military. Pakistan was also not happy with the growing influence of India in Afghanistan and its close relationship with the government in Kabul. However, the comeback of the Taliban could prove to be a double-edged sword for the government in Islamabad. It would provide a fillip for extremist groupings in the country, including the local branch of the Taliban, which is at daggers drawn with the government.

#### DISADVANTAGE FOR INDIA

The latest development could leave India at a serious diplomatic and strategic disadvantage in Afghanistan. India is the only country that has not bothered to establish contacts with the Taliban. India has been hoping that the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would continue for the foreseeable future.

Iran, which nearly went to war with Afghanistan when the Taliban was in power, had seen the writing on the wall and started talking to the Taliban late last year. There is no love lost between the two sides, but Tehran realises that the Taliban will have a decisive say in the running of the government in Kabul sooner rather than later. Many of the areas controlled by the Taliban are along the border with Iran. With the U.S. and Saudi Arabia trying to fan insurgency among the minority Sunnis in Iran, good relations with the Taliban are a priority for Iran.

The international community has no option but to give the Taliban the benefit of the doubt. A peaceful Afghanistan will help stabilise the entire region and beyond. The strategic location of the country makes it an important corridor for trade and energy pipelines. The country itself is rich in mineral resources. The long-suffering people of Afghanistan, which has been in turmoil for almost half a century, need a break urgently. □



# Nuclear muscle flexing

The United States' seemingly reckless withdrawal from a 1987 missile treaty with Russia, its push for a Space Force and the expansion of its military budget are part of a **policy to exert power** against the world. BY VIJAY PRASHAD



DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

RECKLESSNESS DEFINES PRESIDENT Donald Trump. Only, those who watch the U.S. government closely yawned when Trump decided to walk away from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty that has been in place between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, later Russia) and the U.S. since 1987. That treaty aimed to eliminate all ballistic and cruise missiles that could be fired from land. It has not succeeded.

The U.S. says that Russia is in violation of this treaty and has accused Russia of placing intermediate nuclear forces in Europe. Russia has denied that it has any such missile battery inside Europe. Facts are irrelevant here. Trump is not motivated by them. It would be silly to

**PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP** and President Vladimir Putin at a joint news conference in Helsinki on July 16, 2018. On February 1, 2019, the U.S. government announced that it would withdraw from the missile treaty with Russia.

spend time looking at maps and charts and Excel spreadsheets.

The U.S. and Russia have almost all the nuclear warheads (about 90 per cent of them) that exist in the world. Each country has nearly 7,000 warheads. The next country on the list is France with 300 warheads, followed by the United Kingdom and China with more than 200 each. Russian warheads are mainly on its own territory, since Russia has only two external bases (in Crimea and in Syria) and some small military facilities in the former States of the USSR, such as in Kazakhstan and Moldova. The U.S., on the other hand, has nuclear weapons stored

## Diary from Trumpland



not only on its territory but also at its military bases as far afield as Japan and through “nuclear sharing” agreements from Germany to Italy.

Withdrawal from any treaty raises tension. Already, both the U.S. and Russia have been developing a new generation of intermediate missiles, including hypersonic missiles, and a new generation of missile defence systems. Those who closely watch the U.S. and Russian military budgets have already seen an inflation in spending towards missiles. The publicly available U.S. military budget is now \$686.1 billion, while the Russians spend \$69 billion—the latter a tenth of the former. Russia, which had hoped to increase its own military spending in 2015, had to hold off on any expansion because of its economic problems (relating to collapsed energy prices and sanctions against it).

It is already clear that the U.S. wants to push for more spending not only on missile defence but on all kinds of new Star Wars systems that would outclass the Russian military capacity. In mid January, before the U.S. pullout of the missile treaty, the Russian Foreign Ministry cautioned against the militarisation of space. The Ministry said: “We are deeply disappointed that the United States has preferred returning to implementation of the next version of the Star Wars programme, instead of building up the meaningful dialogue on strategic stability matters and prevention of the arms race in space.” There was no response from Washington. The Trump administration wants to up the ante, to put military pressure on Russia at this crucial time.

### THE RUSSIAN SHIELD

Why is the U.S. putting this kind of military pressure on Russia? The timing is important. In September 2015, Russian military forces entered Damascus. That intervention placed a shield around Syria. Western attempts to conduct regime change ended. The war continues, but the goal of overthrowing the government in Damascus had to cease. Russian air defence systems and the presence of Russian aircraft made the all-out bombardment of Damascus an impossibility. Without such a “shock-and-awe” bombing campaign, the government in Damascus would not have been weakened. Once this kind of bombing was out of the question, the regime change war had to change gears. Russia had built a shield around Syria.

When the U.S. bombed Iraq in 1991, the Iraqi leadership cowered in Baghdad and wondered in their conversations about the failure of Soviet intervention. Why was the USSR silent, asked Saddam Hussein. His closest advisers were as bewildered. The fact is that the USSR was near collapse. It had no stomach to create a shield around Iraq. From 1991 until 2015, the U.S. found that it had no military adversary in the world. The collapse of Russia after the fall of the USSR had a major impact on the balance of forces in the world. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, under U.S. tutelage, began to expand eastwards towards the Russian border, while the fact of U.S. military domination allowed the West to push

for a trade and financial paradigm that suited Western corporations and banks. Russia gradually rebuilt its military strength. When the West threatened Russia’s two warm water ports (in Sebastopol in Crimea and in Latakia in Syria), Russia intervened hastily to defend them. These interventions took place in 2014 (Crimea) and 2015 (Syria).

Since 2014-15, the U.S. has tried to find a way to weaken Russia’s capacity to interfere in U.S. plots and plans. Most recently, the U.S. and Russia have clashed over Venezuela. The U.S. has, since 2002, tried to overthrow the Bolivarian government in Venezuela. A coup attempted that year failed. Since 2002, the U.S. has tried all kinds of manoeuvres to destabilise the government. Nothing worked until the oil prices tanked and pressure mounted on the finances of Venezuela. In 2014, the U.S. Senate censured Venezuela, pushing for a sanctions regime. The next year, U.S. President Barack Obama called Venezuela a “national security” threat. Trump has since deepened sanctions, egging on the opposition to destabilise the government. Over January and into February, the U.S. ramped up pressure to overthrow the government.

Into this situation entered Russia, first with a diplomatic shield around Venezuela and then with the anticipation of Russian military entry to defend the country from a U.S. attack and with some financial assistance that is necessary for the sinking economy. Over the course of the decade, Russia’s energy company Rosneft has made large investments in Venezuela to revamp Venezuela’s oil infrastructure. Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserves in the world. Since 2006, Russia—and the Russian oil company—has made over \$17 billion in loans to the Venezuelans. It would be as much an economic as a political loss to the Russians if the Venezuelan government is overthrown.

It is clear to the U.S. that Russia needs to be weakened if Trump’s policy of “Make America Great Again” is to become a reality. The withdrawal from the missile treaty, the push for a Space Force and the expansion of the U.S. military budget are part of a general policy to break any sense of parity between the U.S. and Russia. The U.S., under Trump, recognises that Russia has to be sent back to its borders or else it will not be able to shape the world according to its whims. Whether Russia is prepared to be intimidated is another question. So far, it appears that pressure from the U.S. has only emboldened Russia to act more forcefully on the world stage. But there are limits to this since Russia is itself struggling to find a way around the sanctions set in place by the U.S. and the European Union.

Trump’s recklessness is not entirely without a plan. His own personality seems to be defined by a short attention span. But this withdrawal from the treaty and this talk of a Space Force is entirely consistent with a broad strategic agenda to undermine Russian power. It is easy to be distracted by Trump. But in these respects, his reckless and mercurial statements are part of a coherent American policy to exert power against the world. □



# On the trail of the BOWERBIRD

A team of international birders goes to Papua New Guinea to photograph the endemic flame bowerbird and its mating ritual “dance”.

Text By G. SHAHEED

“IT is an iconic bird that looks like a flame in the forest. It is a miracle of evolution and when you see one, I am sure you will be compelled to contemplate on the mysteries of nature.”

A smart and well-informed forest guide thus described the flame bowerbird, acknowledged as one of the most colourful birds on the planet. The impact was a breathtaking experience for an international group of birders in Papua New Guinea, a country of incredible avian diversity that deeply influenced Charles Darwin and his contemporary the explorer and biologist Alfred Russell Wallace and generations of scientists, birders and naturalists.

Papua New Guinea, which has more than 800 species of birds, occupies the eastern part of

New Guinea, an isolated island in the Pacific Ocean. The Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua form the western part of the island. Papua New Guinea has snow-clad mountains, rugged terrain, volcanoes, rivers and unexplored, dense rainforests. The country is inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups and boasts a greater density of languages than anywhere else in the world. It is also home to the spectacular birds of paradise, of which the Raggiana bird is the most iconic, attired with dazzling, ornamental plumes.

The guide continued: “You have to wait in hides patiently if you want to see the flame bowerbird. It is an alert bird. If it gets wind of people around, it may fly off. If some other bird



SUNIL ONAMKULAM

**A TYPICAL LANDSCAPE** of Papua New Guinea.

SABU KINATTUKARA



THE FLAME BOWERBIRD.







**SABU KINATTUKARA.**

perches on the branch, it may fly off. It is a temperamental bird.”

Bowerbirds, numbering about 20 species, are endemic to Australia and Papua New Guinea. The flame bowerbird is endemic to Papua New Guinea. The male has a scarlet head and a golden body. The female is dull and brown. The dance of the bird is incredible and dramatic. Ornithologists say that it is a flamboyant courtship display by the male bird to attract the female. The courtship displays take place around the bower, a nest-like structure. Male birds build bowers on the ground that are made of twigs, sticks, splinter-like roots and dry grass. Some birds decorate the bowers with colourful berries, beetle shells and other shining objects and even colourful bottle tops.

Bowerbirds are the most intriguingly human of birds, according to Professor Jared Diamond, the evolutionary biologist and author of popular science books. But Tom Gillard, the great American scholar of New Guinea, says: “It is perhaps not too much to say that of all the living creatures, short of mankind



SABU KINATTUKARA

**A FLAME BOWERBIRD**  
in its bower.











**RADJAH SHELDUCK.**



GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR

**AUSTRALASIAN SWAMPHEN.**



SABU KINATTUKARA

**BROWN-HEADED** paradise kingfisher.





GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR



GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR

**MASKED LAPWING.**



GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR

**BUTCHER BIRD.**



GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR

**BELFORD'S MELIDECTES.**





SABU KINATTUKARA

itself, bowerbirds are the most bizarre.” While the bower of the flame bowerbird is not attractive, those of the Vogelkop bowerbird of West Papua and the satin bowerbird of Australia are beautiful to look at. The birds use colour pigments to make the bowers attractive aesthetically.

These birds are like artists with a brush, says Mark Cocker, a British naturalist and author of *Birds and People*. Richard Prum, a professor of ornithology at Yale University and the author of *Evolution of Beauty*, says: “No description can really prepare you for the extraordinary architecture of the aesthetic structures created by male bowerbirds to use as their courtship arena. The bowers are their masterpieces created with as much care, attention and discernment as any art work.” Satin bowerbirds use strange blue objects to decorate their bowers. Of the 10,000-odd species of birds on earth, bowerbirds are the only ones to build their nests this way on the ground, according to Cocker.

Bowerbirds do not have terrestrial predators, and wild animals are conspicuously absent in the forests of Papua New Guinea. The only wild animals on the island are the tree-kangaroos and wild boars, and they do not

present a threat to the bowerbirds or birders. Sheer remoteness protects the habitat of flame bowerbirds from human intrusion. Even members of the indigenous tribes do not have access to their habitat because of the altitude of the mountain ranges, which may go up to a height of 16,000 feet (4,877 metres). The terrain is hazardous.

The adventurous group of birders in this story was led by Sabu Kinattukara, a prominent birder and photographer based in Kochi. (See “In search of rare birds”, *Frontline*, June 8, 2018, for his photographs of birds from Africa and Asia.) It was his fifth visit to the country. The group consisted of Michel Sammut, Jesseph Grech and Juan Elleul from Malta; Martin Mengus from Germany; Nial Perrins from South Africa; and Jeaong Seo from South Korea.

The birders first reached Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Road connectivity is still in its infancy in the country, so they travelled by air to some of the birding spots. Kiyung, in the interior of the island, was the starting point of their adventure. Four hours by boat and a one-hour nerve-wracking trek later, they were in the habitat of the flame bowerbird, which consists of





BREHM'S TIGER PARROT.





SABU KINATTUKARA

**VICTORIA CROWNED PIGEON.**



GOVIND VIJAYAKUMAR

**ISLAND THRUSH.**

woodlands and mangroves with marshy surroundings. They had taken antimalarial pills as a precaution.

Narrating his experiences to this writer, Kinattukara said: "The team was particular about sighting the flame bowerbird. They had travelled such a long distance just to see the bird. I planned the trip with some of my friends in Papua New Guinea."

The trip was not without dangers. In 1961, Michael Rockefeller, grandson of John D. Rockefeller, was believed to have been killed by cannibals in West Papua.

His body was never recovered. In 1989, Phoebe Snettinger, the legendary birder of the United States, who had seen and photographed more than 8,000 species of birds in 30 years, was assaulted and raped in Papua New Guinea. A woman of great willpower, she recovered from the trauma and continued birding. Tourists and birders have been attacked and robbed. The government has no control in tribal settlements. The tribal headman's permission is necessary to visit birding areas. Hence, Kinattukara's team was accompanied by armed security guards.

There are nearly 800 tribal groups in the country, speaking around 1,000 languages. There is no written script. Some languages are as different as English is from Chinese. "Most of the highlanders have never ventured more than 10 miles from their homes," writes Jared Diamond in his book *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

The team started trekking after the boat cruise on the Fly river. The forest looked mythical. Different bird calls were heard. When a guide locates the bower, it is a money-spinner for him. He would take different birding groups and get a handsome fee for showing the bird. The first day was sunny. All the birders waited in different hides from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. They had just biscuits and water. By 3 p.m., darkness fell and visibility was low. By 4:20 p.m., they left the hides and reached the lodge by 10 p.m. without having seen the bowerbird.

The cruise back through the Fly river at night was





RIBBON-TAILED  
ASTRAPIA, male.



frightening, said Kinattukara. It was dark and there were tall trees on both sides of the river. Birds of paradise were seen crossing the river. Calls of nocturnal creatures such as owls were heard in the stillness of the night. Although the first day was disappointing, it did not bother the birders because they were used to such situations. "On that day, we entered a totally different and strange forest area. We have never visited such forests. We were happy and thought we could try our luck the next day," said a member of the team.

Dawn was magnificent the next day, and the team reached the hides by 9 a.m. At 11:15 a.m., a flame bowerbird appeared like an angel. It was like a forest flame, a magnificent glow of scarlet, said Kinattukara. Breathless moments ensued, a euphoric situation when sighting a bird that was one of the most beautiful birds on the planet.

Kinattukara took out his binoculars and began watching the bird. He said the bird was endowed with a remarkable optical phenomenon. The pupil of the bird's eye could be seen clearly. And it would rotate, then dilate and contract. The process was repeated. It was a unique optical capacity, like humming birds, which can fly backwards, and owls, which can rotate their heads fully.

The bird gently walked round the bower. After a couple of minutes, it withdrew into the bushes. It was getting dark when a female bird appeared. And the undergrowth obstructed photography. Sitting in their hides, the birders could not see the courtship that was taking place. However, it ended soon, and the birds were seen flying off. "It would have been great if we had seen the male bird fluffing its wings and dancing," said Kinattukara. The team waited until 4 p.m. to have a glimpse of the bird again. But it did not appear. Subsequently, Kinattukara took the team to Solomon Islands in the Pacific, another important birding area.

A short documentary on the flame bowerbird had enthralled birders and naturalists when it was released in 2012. It was filmed by Tadashi Shimada, a celebrated Japanese wildlife photographer and film-maker. "It is the world's first documentary on this particular bird," he said to this writer in an email. "I focussed on the courtship display. I have been deeply influenced by the avian beauty of Papua New Guinea since my visit to this country a quarter century ago," he said. He is organising a major exhibition of his bird photographs from July to September at the Metropolitan Art Museum in Tokyo.

A prize catch for Sabu Kinattukara was the crested satin bird and the Victoria crowned pigeon. The pigeon has visually striking slate blue plumage. It is a turkey-sized bird, endemic to the lowlands and marshy spots of Papua New Guinea. The fan-shaped lacy crest of plumes on its head is a striking feature of the bird. There are three different species with different colour plumage in different parts of the country. All live on the forest floor and fly to the trees to roost. Kinattukara had to wait for three days to photograph this bird. □

*G. Shaheed is chief of legal and environment news bureaus of Mathrubhoomi, Kochi.*



**RIBBON-  
TAILED  
ASTRAPIA,**  
female.



Also, she notes, this is not an evaluative study. Nor is this research interested in offering a history of social movements or mobilisations or public protests in India. In that sense the book is sharply focussed and built on a clear research agenda.

The author recognises the prevalence of a strong link from the mid 2000s to 2012 between social and political mobilisation on the one hand and policymaking and development on the other. She also explains why there is a need to scrutinise the relationship between the growth of mobilisation and the rising demand for equal opportunities, social justice, and so on.

Compared with the Narendra Modi regime, under the UPA I and II governments the relationship between civil society groups and policymaking was robust, especially with the formation of the National Advisory Council in which many distinguished members of civil society groups, accomplished academics and other professionals took part. The author is correct in stating that if we set aside the ideological partners of the Modi regime, conventional civil society groups hardly had any role to play in the post-UPA period. The Modi regime was hostile to many of them, and erected as many hurdles as possible to impede their work. The author forecasts a rather bleak future for civil society interventions if right-wing forces continue to dominate Indian polity and policymaking.

Additionally, the author observes correctly that the Modi regime faced

far fewer protests or agitations compared with what was witnessed during the second UPA term. Does this imply that the Modi regime has been more responsive or has it pre-empted the protests? Or is it a result of a honeymoon period that any regime often enjoys? Given that the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance came to power after 10 years of UPA rule, some of the groups were perhaps considerate, including even Anna Hazare, who is constantly threatening to resume his agitation for a new Lokpal that passes his test.

#### ANNA MOVEMENT

There is growing evidence that the Anna movement was backed by some right-wing think tanks, which raises questions regarding the sincerity or apolitical character that the movement sought to present to the public in its early days. The book presents an elaborate analysis of these developments. The analysis of the Anna movement and the politics linked to India Against Corruption, which forms the second chapter, is the most fascinating part of this research.

However, it cannot be claimed that all such movements began during the UPA regime. India has a long history of movements, although in terms of frequency or scale a perceptible change has occurred. In part, the proliferation of media and competitive coverage encouraged these movements, particularly the Anna movement.

Some reflections, or even a limited narration, on this would have added

further value to this research, but one cannot hold it against the author since she has stated that her decision to set aside the history of movements was deliberate.

Zoya Hasan seemingly connects the current trend to a global context that has impacted politics and the economy. She looks at it from the point of view of the ideological struggle unfolding in the world, particularly from the vantage point of the Left versus Right debate. Readers are reminded rather politely that politics needs to be seen through an ideological lens and is invariably driven with ideological considerations, and that institutions and individuals are merely pawns in the bigger game of ideology.

We learn the following things that are part of the trend: in the domain of economy, state retreat was seen as the only way to address development, which also altered the relationship between state, economy and society; in the social domain, class-centred analysis became obsolete and identities such as caste, tribe, etc., became prominent; in the arena of party politics, one-party dominance was challenged with the rise of multiparty politics led by regional parties, though most of these parties are dynastic in nature. Furthermore, economic growth led to the rise of a middle class that has developed an abiding trust in privatisation.

As part of her attempt to demonstrate the global trend, the author reminds us of the financial crisis in 2008 that also triggered public protests worldwide

against inequality and injustice, particularly in Europe. According to her, these protests were the result of a growing dissatisfaction with economic policies and public institutions that generated pervasive discontent, thus shaking the very foundations of society and politics. The author suggests that various civil society groups comprising non-governmental organisations, voluntary groups and judicial activists, leaders of social movements and human rights activists moved in to mediate and often represent these disgruntled social and economic groups.

Lastly, the author argues that Congress leader Sonia Gandhi was not able to put as much pressure as necessary to enact some laws, particularly the women's reservation Bill. She recognises that the presence of the Left parties in the UPA's first term helped put the necessary pressure for policies such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to be formulated and that their absence in the second term made a big difference to similar policy formulations and weakened the role of civil society.

The book is a valuable intervention by a senior political scientist. Scholars interested in the role of civil society, state and policymaking will profit enormously from it as it will enhance their understanding of political developments of the UPA regime. □

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# Measuring women's work

In this book of collected essays, Professor Devaki Jain constructs an alternative theory of economic life that values work for what it is and moves towards human well-being and dignity. BY C.T. KURIEN

IF the title of the book is somewhat enigmatic, the subtitle immediately reveals its contents as a contribution to the growing body of literature on women's studies. The author is widely known among those who are engaged in women's studies. She is also a high-profile academic, respected for her scholarship as an economist, as one of the founding members of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a member of the South Commission of the 1980s chaired by Julius Nyerere, a leading figure of the United Nations' committees on women's issues, and a participant in all the world conferences on women. She has worked closely with the Planning Commission and was a member of the Karnataka Planning Board.

A constant theme in women's studies is that women's work is not reckoned in calculations of gross domestic product (GDP). Women put in, on a day-to-day basis, much effort at home, in the fields, in gathering firewood and carry-

ing water, but this is totally left out of calculating "output", while work of similar kind that men do and for which they get paid forms their income and enters the GDP. The unfairness of this procedure forms the basis for many to take up the cause of women. Devaki Jain also fights this injustice, but she walks many more miles. The 15 pieces brought together in the volume (papers and lectures) deal with those extra miles, of evidence, analysis, interpretation and a new approach. At the end of the book, there is a bibliography of works consulted and an even more

impressive "Bibliography of Selected Works" by the author that runs into almost 20 pages.

One of the early chapters provides the running theme of the book. "I found that while women were engaged in what in economics is called 'free collection of goods', namely gathering berries and leaves, etc., it was actually a great source of employment and in many ways a contribution to the GDP. But because these goods were called 'minor forest produce' and had no particular status in so-called 'production' and 'employment' concerns, this activity does

not get the attention that in fact it deserved." This is because values are determined not by effort but are based on money and markets. The arbitrariness and injustice of this procedure forms the basis for Devaki Jain to champion the cause of women, especially because what men do and get paid for is based on the unrecognised and time-consuming work that women do.

## CRITIQUE OF GDP

That leads to a critique of GDP, which is a measurement of work largely of what men do and is valued by the market. Consequently, women usually get excluded in discussions of development of which the main component is the increase in the GDP identified as "growth". The basis of the injustice to women is this customary, and perhaps unconscious, systemic exclusion that they are subjected to. Each specific instance of injustice must be exposed and fought against, and that is what women's movements usually do. However, it is more important to go beneath the surface and provide an alternative approach that values work for what it is and moves towards human well-being and dignity. It is in this sphere that Devaki Jain has made her most significant contributions, although much of it remains seminal. When a new frame of analysis of human well-being is perfected and becomes widely accepted, she will be remembered as one of its early pioneers.

This volume provides



## Close Encounters of Another Kind

Women and Development Economics

By Devaki Jain  
Sage, 2018

Pages: xxv + 398  
Price: Rs.1,095





KAMAL NARANG

**IN MEWAT REGION,** Rajasthan, a woman and her two daughters carry fodder for their cattle.

its crucial ingredients. From that perspective, the significant chapters are 9, 10 and 14, that, not surprisingly, are quite autobiographical as well.

Early in her professional career as an economist, particularly through the work of the South Commission and the membership of DAWN, Devaki Jain noticed that “women were bearing the greater share of the burden of poverty, whether measured in terms of scarce resources, food, clothing, shelter, medical care and education, or social hierarchy”. It led her to the conviction that time (and not money) should become the measure of value “which would entail a reversal of the values ascribed to men’s and women’s work”.

It is not surprising that her new understanding of “work” led Devaki Jain

closer to Mahatma Gandhi. For Gandhi, the poverty of the many was the obverse of the prosperity of the few, and he maintained that there was enough for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed.

On the other hand, modern economics maintains that wants are unlimited and follows it up with the perpetual quest for more and more production. If that is the justification for “growth”, increasing inequalities will invariably accompany it as is being witnessed today all over the world. Inequalities result also from the bulging of the “services” sector in the economy, while agriculture and manufacturing, the real productive activities, lag behind.

Gandhi, therefore, exhorted the people of India to undertake constructive work and set an example

by his own use of the charkha to produce thread for handwoven cloth. Once set in motion, it would lead to more productive activity meeting other needs.

Devaki Jain coins the expression “the bubbling up” theory of growth and claims that this alternative theory would argue that putting incomes and political power in the hands of the poor could generate the demand and the voice that would direct productive activity and political mobilisation. Contrasting it with GDP, she quotes another writer who said: “GDP is simply a gross measure of market activity, of money changing hands. It makes no distinction whatsoever between the desirable and undesirable, or costs and gain.... The crucial economic functions performed in the household and volunteer sectors go entirely un-

reckoned. As a result, GDP not only masks the breakdown of social structure and the natural habitat upon which the economy—and life itself—ultimately depend; worse, it actually portrays such breakdown as economic gain.”

Constructing an alternative theory of economic life to replace, or at least seriously challenge, what has now been accepted as conventional wisdom is not an easy task. It is much more than a mental exercise too. If it is to reflect the realities of life, it must arise from life, its struggles, joys and agonies. To Devaki Jain the women’s movement is symbolic of the commitment to that calling. While joining hands with women in the fight against the built-in injustice, Devaki Jain also urges them to go to the root of the problem. □



# Sting operation

An ambitious ensemble novel about women whose lives criss-cross briefly at a riverside resort.

BY ABHIRAMI GIRIJA SRIRAM

**A**SPECTRE haunts Anita Nair's ambitious new novel. Trapped in a piece of finger bone, the ghost of writer Sreelakshmi, "Kerala's Virginia Woolf", has been waiting in a vault for over 50 years when a chance discovery thrusts her into the thick of the 21st century. At a riverside resort in present-day Kerala, the lives of nine women criss-cross briefly, tangentially. One after another, their deepest secrets reveal themselves to Sreelakshmi, the seeker of stories.

Sreelakshmi claims an unusual vantage: "Ghosts and writers are more alike than you think. We can be what you want us to be. We can hear your thoughts even if you don't tell us. We can read the silences and shape your stories as if they happened to us. And I was both: a ghost and a writer." And thus it is that this ghost-writer comes to preside over a procession of life stories, including, in the end, her own.

*Eating Wasps* is a novel of interesting conceits. The title is a throwback to an incident from Sreelakshmi's childhood when she takes a wasp for a bee and chomps hard on it, hoping for a mouthful of honey. She becomes, irrevocably,

"the girl who ate a wasp". An act of innocent curiosity turns into a stinging portent of things to come. To eat wasps, then, is to fly headlong in the face of a humdrum life. It is also to discover, as Sreelakshmi and each woman in the novel does in her turn, that any expectation of sweetness will be rewarded with an acrid dose of reality.

And then there is the conceit of the finger bone. Compared to "a teacher's

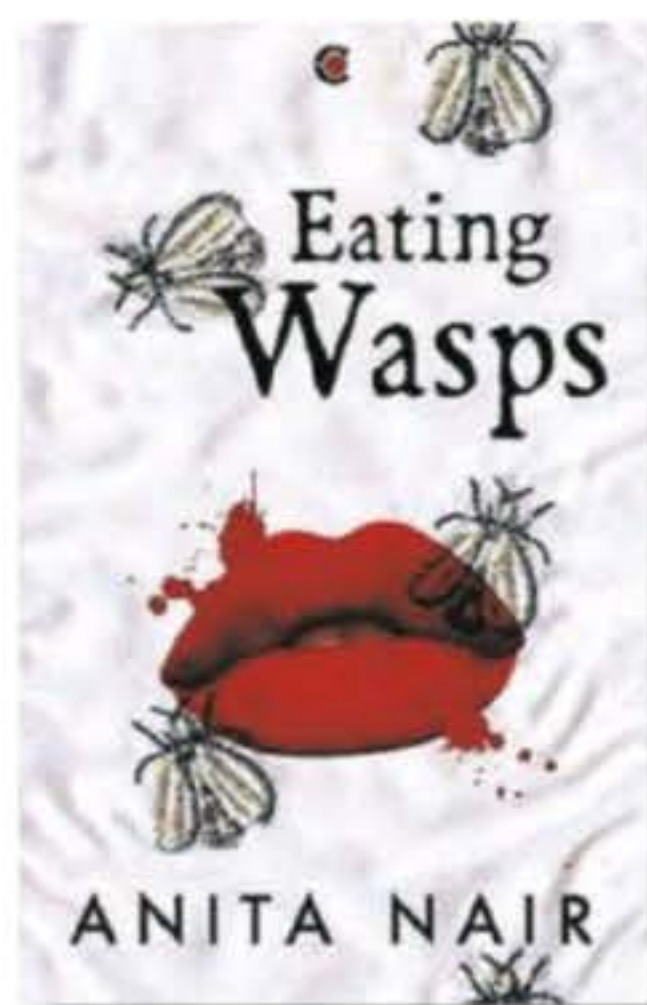
chalk that could write, but not on its own" and "a die about to be cast in some game of chance", it plays the omniscient narrator to a fault.

Passed baton-like from chapter to chapter, the bone divines every dark secret, every scar of violation ever endured by the woman holding it. In many ways, it performs a sting operation, making its stealthy way through the forbidden territory of for-

gotten memories. However, it is less voyeur than empath, feeding as it does on the fear and the rage of women whose lives have not gone the way they would have wanted them to go. Even as it nudges each woman imperceptibly towards her own moment of reckoning, it also brings about a semblance of closure for Sreelakshmi, who after immersing herself in others' stories finally musters the courage to tell her own.

*Eating Wasps* is an elaborate ensemble of hope and heartache, of headstrong women ("goddesses with tummy fat, bat wings and cellulite") who are chastened and thwarted at every step but who soldier on with their choices and disappointments all the same.

The character of Sreelakshmi has obviously been modelled on the legendary Malayalam writer Rajelakshmy, the first woman novelist to win the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award. Like Rajelakshmy, Sreelakshmi crosses boundaries to study science at Benares Hindu University in the 1960s and become that triple anomaly of a successful writer, scientist and single woman; like Rajelakshmy, Sreelakshmi takes her own life at the age of 35. But when Sreelakshmi returns to look back on her life, it is as though a sisterhood has linked hands across time and space. This time, she understands that if only the women survive their broken present, their lives need never be the same again. □



## **Eating Wasps**

By Anita Nair  
Context, 2018

Pages: 256

Price: Rs.599

**The character of Sreelakshmi has obviously been modelled on the legendary Malayalam writer Rajelakshmy.**





**HAREKRISHNA DEKA**, the author of this story, is also a poet and critic. An IPS officer, he was Director General of Police in Assam from 2000 to 2003. After his retirement, he became the editor of the "The Sentinel", an English daily, and later of the Assamese literary journal "Gariyasi".



**RANJITA BISWAS**, the translator of this story, is an award winner for translation from Asomiya into English. She is a journalist and writes on gender, health and the environment.

# Mandir

It was a happy day for the people of this small, almost rural town when a pump was installed to supply water to the temple. The town drew its importance from this mandir. People flocked from far and wide to pay obeisance at the shrine. By now, stories of the Devi's great power and benevolence to the worshippers had, through constant retelling, grown to the proportion of legends. No one cared whether these legends were authentic or not. What mattered was that the Devi was more than a mute piece of stone, that she was alive to their prayers. One of the bhaktas had now arranged for water to be pumped up from the pond nearby. The pump was a convenience that everyone welcomed happily.

The only exception was Hanu. He was incensed by this new device. So far it had been his duty to fetch water from the pond for the bhaktas. The cool water that slaked their thirst had meant a few coins in his pocket, enough for his simple needs. But then, Hanu's livelihood was less important than the convenience of hundreds of pilgrims.

Even so, Hanu could not abandon the mandir. Angry, no doubt, at his loss, he still clung to the premises. The numerous bhaktas might have been ignorant of his connection with the shrine, but the portly purohit knew all about it.

Hanu's appearance did not evoke sympathy. He was ugly. The first thing that struck one was his enormous hump. He looked as if he carried a heavy burden on his back. The protruding upper lip below a flat nose accentuated his resemblance to simian ancestors. His very name was bequeathed to him by his ugly face, and Hanuman had been gradually shortened to Hanu.

Leprosy had made Hanu's body swell, adding to his ugliness. It had eaten away his flesh and the tips of a few fingers and toes had fallen off. Though detected recently, it had already cost

him his allotted place on the verandah of the mandir. These days he sat under the satiana tree beyond the temple complex. Hearing him scream, many visitors believed that he was insane.

But Hanu was not mad. When hunger pangs became unbearable, Hanu's rage burst forth in torrents of abuse. The purohit could do nothing about it, except cover his ears and try to shut out the words. People visiting the temple for the first time threw stones at Hanu as if he were a stray dog. This upset him further and he would make obscene gestures. Then there was no choice but to ignore him.

While Hanu was still working at the temple, the purohit had been kind to him—in his own interest, of course. Hanu had helped with his household chores. Besides, the hunchback also knew of the purohit's weakness for good food. A little secret about an affair with a washerwoman added to Hanu's arsenal which he used mercilessly now, whenever he subjected the purohit to a volley of invective. This was his way of assuaging his hunger and the pain of the festering wounds afflicting his body.

That morning, too, Hanu started his tirade as soon as the purohit entered the temple. "Ai, you bastard, you dhobin's pimp! How dare you let someone else take my place? What have I done to harm you, you parasite? Have I poisoned your pond?"

The purohit tried to ignore the abuses. But after a while, he could not stand them any longer and came out to the verandah. Thank god there were no bhaktas around yet. He shouted back, "Ai, Hanu! Have you gone mad? Why are you soiling your mouth so early in the morning?" Hearing this, Hanu let loose even more obscene abuses. The disgusted purohit covered his ears, saying, "Oh, you mahapaapi, you are soiling the Devi's mandir. In your next life, you'll surely be born a chandaal!"



Hanu laughed out loud. The purohit's outburst seemed to have amused him. "Ha, Ha! Why? Am I better off than a chandaal now? Do you want to know what I can foresee? Kites will peck at your shrivelled body! Now tell me, whom have you allowed to occupy my place? Answer. Answer, you who are about to die."

"Who am I to allow anyone to sit there? What is the mandir committee for? Go ask them. In fact," the purohit continued, "a shop is going to be set up in that corner. There will be a mela on the whole field. The Devi's glory will spread far and wide. Bhajans are to be sung in her praise for seven days and nights. The glorious Devi is pleased and there is to be a grand union of Siva and Parvati. Whoever is lucky enough to witness this momentous occasion will bodily ascend to heaven. Not that an infidel like you would be so fortunate!"

Hanu spat at the purohit. The priest left the verandah in a huff, seeking refuge in the innermost sanctum of the mandir.

"Ai, Hanu!" The voice held both admonition and sympathy. It worked like magic, for Hanu calmed down immediately. Wiping the spittle off his chin, he turned around and saw Ahalya standing there. With a heavily made-up face, hair parted in the middle and a broad band of sindoor in it, Ahalya was a prostitute. If Hanu listened to anybody, it was to Ahalya. Her house was in a corner of the market and she lived by selling her body. Hanu did not know how long she had been standing there, listening to his abuses. Now she reproached him, "Chee, chee, Hanu. Did you have to pollute your mouth even before daybreak?"

"Why are you out so early? Didn't you get any customers last night?" retorted Hanu.

Ahalya was nonchalant. "Who says business is bad? All these traders who have come for the mela..."

"Mela? Why is the mela being held out of season, Ahalya?" Hanu recalled what the purohit had said and wanted to find out more. The mela usually took place in the dry season.

"You simpleton! Don't you know? The Devi has found a partner. And she will be going to her bridegroom's house soon," joked Ahalya.

Hanu could not believe this.

"Be careful, Ahalya. Don't say such things."

But Ahalya was still in a playful mood, and continued, "Ha! When you talk rubbish before the Devi, then it's

not a sin. But if I say something, it's wrong. Anyway, come. I've brought some malpua for you to eat."

Hanu retraced his steps to his place under the satiana tree. Ahalya followed, a little distance between them. Someone had stuck a few stakes in the ground there to mark the site for a shop. Hanu could feel a sudden surge of anger. Since Ahalya was there, he controlled his rage and moved to sit under another tree. The malpua doused the fire in his belly.

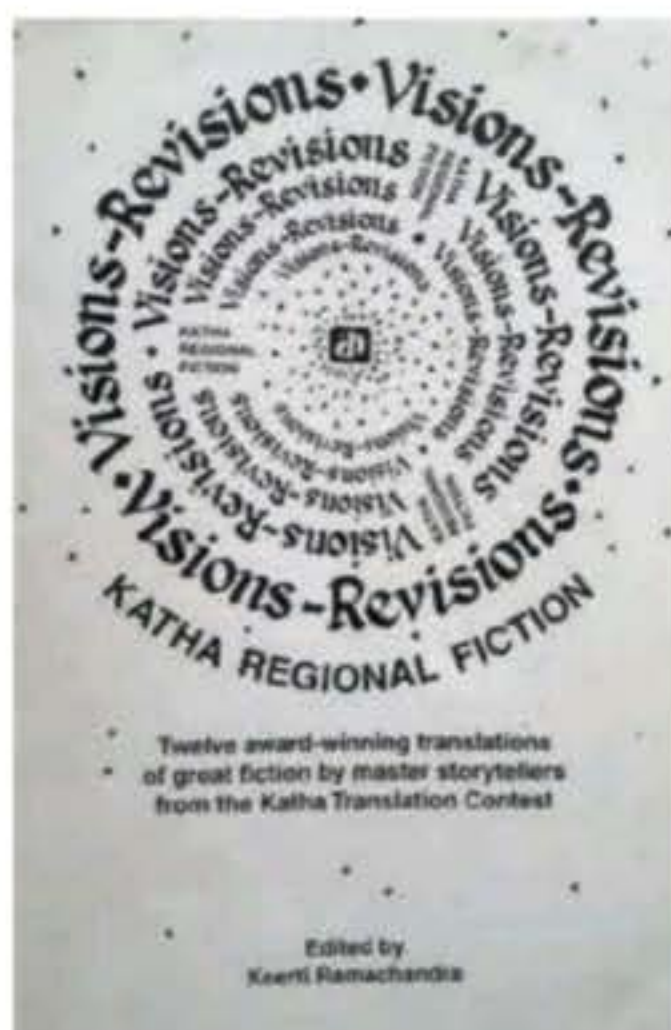
Ahalya and Hanu were old acquaintances. They had met many years ago. Though an ugly hunchback, Hanu had been young and virile then, with a newly sprouted beard. While returning from the mela one day, he had found Ahalya half-dead—raped and abandoned by a gang of drunkards. He had taken her to his hut and nursed her back to life. But for him, she would have surely died. In return, she had gifted him some unforgettable moments one night—an introduction to the pleasures of adulthood. His experience of lovemaking was restricted to that one night. And he guarded it jealously, an experience to be savoured little by little in his thoughts alone.

Now that he was afflicted with the dreaded disease. Ahalya, too, avoided touching him. The sight of his abominably swollen body repulsed her. But she also felt sorry for him. She could understand a little of what the purohit could not. She realised that his behaviour was a reaction to his misfortune, born of his helplessness. It was an expression of his frustration. And the extent of his agony was such that even the Devi did not escape his ire. No one but Ahalya sympathised with him, which is why she often brought him food or some rags to cover his nakedness.

It was Hanu's belief that the mandir's Devi had been cruel and unjust to him. Otherwise why should he suffer like this—he, who had devoted his life to her and had played an important role in the building of the mandir? But for him, this stone-hearted Devi would not have been as important as she was.

It had happened when the pond was being dug—the one which had provided Hanu with a means of earning his livelihood. It was meant to be a convenient source of drinking water for visitors to the bazaar and the weekly haat. The hunchbacked, adolescent Hanu had been allowed to join in this good work.

One day, just as he had started to



**"VISIONS-REVISIONS:** Katha Regional Fiction" edited by Keerti Ramachandra (below), who is a teacher and translator from Marathi, Kannada and Hindi to English.





the din, Hanu's loud voice almost went unheard. Ahalya did not have time to enquire after him. There was, however, no shortage of food for Hanu. Visitors often threw away food, half-eaten. So there was enough for him and the other beggars, though they had to fight for it.

But that did not stop Hanu from ranting. He could not join in the fun because of his physical condition. It made him even more irritable. Most of his abuse was directed at the purohit. But he did not spare the Devi and would describe her body in gutter language. The purohit's warning, "You'll surely go to hell!", only served to increase the volume of the expletives. His disease saved him from a thrashing, perhaps even from being murdered by irate bhaktas.

A day before the Devi was due to leave for her bridegroom's house, the doors of the mandir were closed to the public. There were so many rituals to go through. The Devi had to be ceremonially bathed to make her more radiant for the occasion. She had to be decked out in rich clothes and adorned with jewels. Then she would be placed in a beautiful palki, which was to be carried on a big-wheeled vehicle made to look like a rath. Accompanied by chants and kirtans, thousands of devotees would pull the rath to the hilly abode, where her husband—a block of stone—awaited her.

Suddenly, the procession stopped. The chants were replaced by a deathly silence. The purohit was the first to discern the reason for this unnatural silence.

Once the doors of the temple were closed, the pilgrims thronged the mela. The courtyard of the mandir fell silent. The purohit and his assistants were busy with preparations for the next day's festivities. But the purohit was worried. He was afraid Hanu would defile the holy atmosphere. Fortunately, Hanu had stayed away until then.

Another problem occurred to the purohit. Suppose Hanu wanted to pull the rath with everyone else? The Devi had appeared in a dream and commanded that nobody was to be stopped from drawing the rath on that auspicious day. To overcome this problem, a separate rope was attached to the vehicle, though the purohit hoped Hanu would remain sullen and refuse to join them. At midnight, all the preparations were over. Everyone went home to rest. The mela, too, had broken up.

By dawn, the temple compound was teeming with people. The Devi was already in the palki, behind a

beautiful muslin screen. It would not be removed until she was united with her bridegroom. She would be taken to the foot of the hill on the rath. From there, the members of the committee would carry the palki on their shoulders. The purohit would accompany them, chanting mantras all the way. Bhaktas could follow the palki, at some distance.

The procession began to move forward slowly, led by the members of the committee. The elated cries of the bhaktas rent the air. The sound of conch shells and gongs added to the fervour. Women ululated. Kirtan singers beat their drums and clanged the cymbals. Holding on to the palki, the purohit sat on the rath.

They stopped about three kilometres away, at the foot of the hill. The palki was taken down, the Devi still behind the muslin screen. Even the purohit was not allowed to see her until she faced her bridegroom.

Carefully lifting the palki on to their shoulders, the leaders of the procession moved up the hill. The purohit and the devotees followed. It was an arduous journey. Steep. The path lined with thorny bushes. The fear of snakes. But the expectation of instant salvation egged them on. They huffed their way up, undeterred.

The stone, eight to nine feet high, was visible from quite a distance, standing majestically alone. It looked exactly like a Siva linga. Eager to attain salvation, the bhaktas regarded this piece of stone as an unmistakable sign of Mahadeva. Their cries of praise reverberated in the sky and the space beyond.

Suddenly, the procession stopped. The chants were replaced by a deathly silence. The purohit was the first to discern the reason for this unnatural silence. A man sat cross-legged at the base of the Siva linga, staring at them with bulging eyes.

"Hanu! You sinner! What are you doing here?" screamed the purohit, panic-stricken. "Get away. Move."

But Hanu sat there, unmoving. Absolutely still. The purohit inched forward cautiously. It was as he had suspected. Hanu was dead—had been dead for some time. He held something in his arms. What could it be? On my god! The Devi! Hanu must have stolen the broken-nosed idol last night.

What then had they been carrying in the palki all this while? The palki was still on the shoulders of the carriers. Trembling with fear, the purohit rushed to it and pulled away the muslin screen. The crowd could see that it had accompanied a slab of stone. Hanu had placed the stone there in the dark of the night.

Terror chilled the blood of all present. To the committee members, the palki suddenly seemed to weigh several maunds more. They dropped it abruptly. All eyes now turned to the huge stone, the embodiment of Siva. In the play of sunlight, all they saw was a lifeless monolith, jutting into the sky, indifferent to their plight.

A stampede broke out. The terrified bhaktas rushed down the hill. A snake slithered down the side of the broken-nosed idol in Hanu's arms and disappeared. □

*Story selected by Mini Krishnan*

*Reprinted courtesy the publisher, Katha*



# Viral challenge

With Kyasanur forest disease reappearing in new territories, an intensive scientific study is needed to know how the virus enters the forest ecosystem of the small mammals-tick-monkey-man cycle from the closed bat-tick-bat cycle. BY P.K. RAJAGOPALAN



**VACCINE BEING** administered to prevent Kyasanur forest disease in Shivamogga district on December 31, 2018.

KYASANUR forest disease (KFD) has broken out in new territories in Karnataka. With rapid changes taking place in the ecosystem, one should not be surprised if the disease reaches epidemic proportions. Most of the salient features in the epidemiology of KFD have already been described by Jorge Boshell-Manrique, a Colombian epidemiologist (1968). There are still some areas that need to be studied.

The first serological survey for arboviruses, conducted in 1949, gave many indications that KFD could appear in several areas with ecological conditions similar to that of Shivamogga district in Karnataka, where

the disease was first reported in Kyasanur village in 1957. The reported appearance of new foci in recent years confirms this. Purely to satisfy scientific curiosity, long-term research has to be initiated in several areas to understand the natural cycle of this virus.

## NATURAL CYCLE OF THE VIRUS

While studying the natural cycle of the KFD virus, this writer encountered a colony of insectivorous bats, *Rhinolophus rouxii*, in an abandoned well in a remote village in Shivamogga district in 1969. The bats fed exclusively on insects but

must have also been feeding on the ticks infesting them in their habitat. The bats were found infested with a soft tick, a new species called *Ornithodoros chiropterophila*. The KFD virus was isolated from several of these bats and from the ticks on them and those found on the wall of the wells. There is, thus, a closed bat-tick-bat cycle silently occurring in nature. How the virus has got out of this cycle and entered the small mammals-hard tick-monkey-man cycle is yet to be investigated fully.

In recent years, several States on the western coast of India such as Kerala, Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra and a small pocket in Nilgiris





**HAEMAPHYSALIS SP.**



**IXODES SP.**



**ORNITHODOROS TICK.**



district of Tamil Nadu have reported sporadic human cases of KFD and monkey deaths. Compared with previous epidemics of KFD during 1957-60, the finding of the virus in bats and their tick parasites should have stimulated interest among researchers, particularly since bats are known to carry many viruses (*Frontline*, August 4, 2017).

KFD is a zoonotic disease. The virus exists in an enzootic cycle with the involvement of several species of small mammals and passerine birds that inhabit the forests adjoining human habitations. The virus has been isolated from several species of ticks that attach themselves to small mammals. These mammalian hosts were found to circulate higher titres of the virus for various durations infecting their ixodid ectoparasites, proliferate quickly, and play an important role in the distribution of infected ticks within the range of their movement in the forests. New susceptible hosts replace the ones that are immune in

quick time. Among the ticks are several species of *Haemaphysalis*, the chief vector of diseases of humans, and two species of *Ixodes*, *I. petauristae* and *I. ceylonensis*.

The most important small mammal is the common shrew, *Suncus murinus*, an insectivore often mistakenly classified as a rodent. It is heavily (proportionate to its size) parasitised simultaneously by *Haemaphysalis* (the vector of diseases in humans and monkeys) and *Ixodes sp.* The virus has been isolated from *Ixodes* and *Haemaphysalis* collected from the forest floor and as ectoparasites from rodents and shrews.

#### **TICK BURDENS**

After several years of continuous studies in the forests, it was found reasonable to conclude that small mammals, particularly the shrew, play a significant role in the transfer of infection from *Haemaphysalis sp.* to *Ixodes sp.* and vice versa. This is

important in the epidemiology of the KFD virus since the population of *Ixodes* is higher than that of *Haemaphysalis* during the prolonged monsoon season, when both human cases and monkey deaths are rare. There was evidence that tick burdens were affected by extrinsic factors likely linked to local climate. Intrinsic factors were found to affect tick burdens. Larva and nymph tick burdens were positively correlated with host body size. After controlling for body size, the residual variation in tick burdens for *I. petauristae* larvae and nymphs was attributed to unmeasured qualities of rodent and shrew species. The role of rodents and shrews as important hosts for immature stages of ticks, especially larvae, has to be highlighted.

My studies showed that tick burdens on rodents and shrews were affected by a complex combination of local climate and host factors, making some individuals more likely to contribute to the life cycle of ticks





**THE COMMON SHREW.**

and the enzootic transmission cycle. To better understand tick-borne diseases, one must put more emphasis on intrinsic factors since these may have a major impact on the small mammals' contribution to enzootic transmission.

One of the hypotheses that needs to be investigated is whether ticks of the *Ixodes* genus are the medium of survival of the KFD virus during the monsoon season since they survive for a longer duration during heavy rains. The nymphs of *H. turturis* have also been found to help in the



**RHINOLOPHUS ROUXII.**

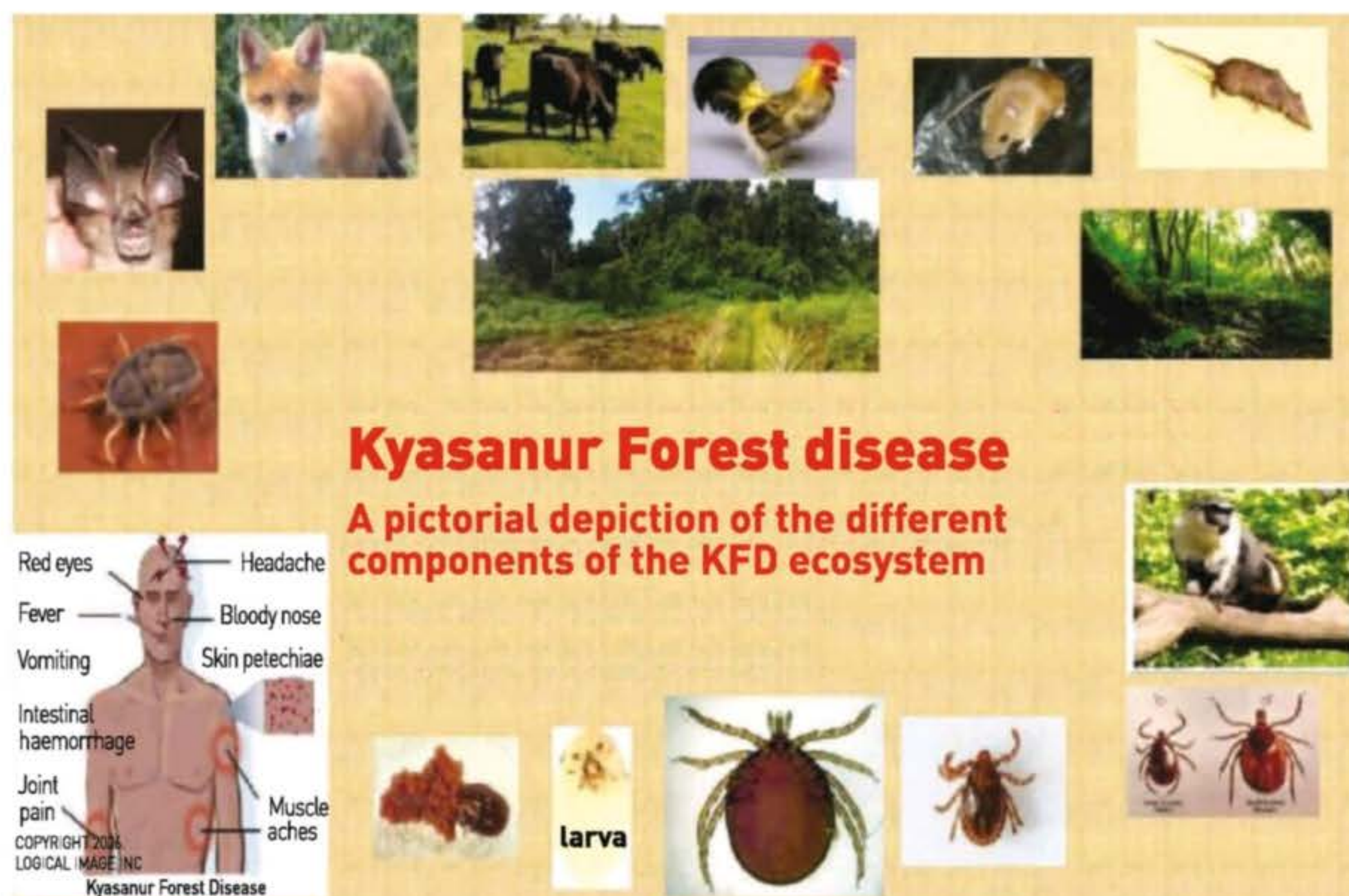
trans-monsoonal survival of the virus. Then there is the question of the soft tick, *Ornithodoros*, from which the KFD virus has been isolated. *O. savignyi*, the vector of African sleeping sickness, is known to live for more than two years as a fed adult. From the closed bat-tick-bat cycle how does the virus enter the forest ecosystem of small mammals-tick-monkey-man cycle?

From a purely academic point of view, if not epidemiological, the mechanism of survival of the virus in the ecosystem must be investigated

particularly when there is no epidemic of KFD in humans or an epizootic in monkeys. Who could explain the sporadic and sudden appearance of KFD human cases or monkey deaths in different parts of India in recent years? It needed high motivation and scientific interest, as displayed by the Rockefeller Foundation, which collaborated with the Virus Research Centre (now the National Institute of Virology) in Pune from 1952 to 1970. (In 1970, the great Foundation, which had worked on Arbovirus Research in Uganda, Brazil, the West Indies and India, among other countries, pulled out of the research and closed down its research stations.)

In order to appreciate the different phases of the natural history of an infectious disease and the degrees of likelihood of its passing from a latent, slow phase to an acute stage, one needs to assess all the possible modifications of the factors involved.

The problem becomes more complex, however, with each intervening factor, be it a vector and an amplifying mechanism involving it,







**A TEAM OF** experts observing ticks on a rat in the Tirthahalli forest area of Shivamogga district on January 20.

or a reservoir or a susceptible receptor. Indeed, when many factors are involved, the flare-up seems so improbable that often one's first astonishment at seeing the process limited to a specific area gives way to wonder that it could happen at all.

Attempting a solution of an eco-epidemiologic riddle as complex as KFD should logically proceed by way of investigations bearing on the following:

1. The possibility of a foreign source of infection (already ruled out);
- 2.) The possibility of local endemic maintenance with periodic flare-up;
- 3.) The dynamics of the maintenance mechanism. Vectors (invertebrates) and vertebrate hosts and their interactions with the vectors and the virus;
- 4.) The possibility of an amplifying mechanism; and
- 5.) Environmental factors and their variations.

A whole set of ecological changes—including deforestation, intensified and changing agricultural practices, and invasion by alien plants—has been developing in the KFD area in close conjunction with a rise in the human population. The pace of this development has increased in the past few decades. These man-made factors appear to be favourable for the eventual enhancement of lurking enzootic pro-

cesses, presumably pre-existing in the area, thus preparing the way for the flare-up. Admittedly, however, only evidence relating to the conditions as they exist today is now obtainable, and such evidence cannot be considered as definite proof of past events.

#### **VIRUS PERSISTENCE**

The KFD virus has been detected in the complex formed by small mammals and their ticks throughout the year. We have seen it carried through three seasons in the temporary reservoir constituted by tick instars. Conditions exist, therefore, to ensure a virus maintenance mechanism. The fact that the bulk of the small-mammal population is made up of relatively inefficient porters and that, except for the squirrel, their levels of tick infestation are far below these levels for monkeys or birds, constitutes a factor favourable to virus persistence. In general, maintenance does not depend on the existence of optimal vector-porter conditions for virus transmission and multiplication since these would lead to exhaustion of the enzootic fuel and to an end of the process.

The data on both tick infestation levels and population dynamics of rodents and shrews point to virus maintenance as a definite possibility. Confirming evidence is, however, still lacking.

So far, the KFD virus has not

been isolated outside the infected area from either porter or vector. An attempt to achieve such an isolation in areas where slow-moving zoonoses prevail would defy most operational capabilities. The KFD virus isolations made at Sagar (Shivamogga district) may well have been the result of feedback by an amplifying mechanism into the slow-tempo cycle, which thus became detectable. As evidence stands now, it is not possible to dissociate the infection of small mammals from that of simians or even squirrels; neither is it possible to affirm that the infection originated in small mammals. The starting point of the 1957 flare-up is thus still in question.

Only long-range, costly and painstaking studies in zones devoid of acute simian involvement could bring final proof of an occult process lurking among small mammals and their Ixodid ectoparasites.

The maintenance of the KFD virus in adults of certain tick species has been demonstrated 14 months after the infection of the larvae; furthermore, adult ticks are occasionally found attached to sick and dead monkeys. These findings, given the constant possibility of transportation of nymphs by birds, cattle and other animals, suggest a mechanism not only of virus maintenance but also of virus propagation. While flare-ups may yet occur in the few spots bypassed so far, it is unlikely that their frequency will be such as to increase substantially the probability rate of human attack. All this is as far as the so-called present infected area is concerned.

In short, KFD flare-ups in many areas are a reality, and their actual occurrence is presumably dependent on attainment of the necessary quantitative thresholds. What are these threshold levels? In-depth, long-term investigations alone, and not casual visits, will throw some light on why KFD is occurring sporadically in different places. □

*P.K. Rajagopalan is a former Director of the Vector Control Research Centre in Puducherry, an institute of the Indian Council of Medical Research.*



# World of disquiet

In the centenary year of its founding, the ILO releases a report that reflects the disquiet felt among the working classes of the world and suggests a “human-centred” agenda to make the world of work more equitable. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI



CH. VIJAYA BHASKAR

**WOMEN WORKERS** on their way to a construction site in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, on December 27, 2018.

IN 1919, as nations grappled with the problem of restoring their economies in the aftermath of the First World War, there was a general consensus that workers, employers and governments needed to come together to tackle the situation where “conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required”. It was acknowledged that the “world of work” had been disrupted, that the situation needed a global response and that labour could no longer be considered a commodity.

This was the genesis of the Inter-

national Labour Organisation (ILO), which observes the centenary year of its founding in 2019. There is a realisation within the organisation that the very conditions that triggered its formation are very much prevalent now and a “human-centred” agenda is imperative for the future of work. Although the reason for the gradual erosion of such an agenda is fairly clear, accompanied as it has been by the growth of capitalism, it would not be incorrect to assume that the disproportionate concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals and the unbridled control of society by the market economy are some of the factors that underlie the tremendous inequalities within countries and between nations.

The nature of the current crisis

from the point of view of labour has been discussed in “Work for a Better Future”, a report by the ILO-appointed “Global Commission on the Future of Work”, a 27-member body co-chaired by the President of South Africa and the Prime Minister of Sweden. The report says that there is a need to enforce and reinforce the social contract by asserting the rights of labour; ensuring the mitigation, if not elimination, of practices like child labour; and enabling the participation of women in the workforce. The report says that the same social contract that lifted millions out of poverty later pushed billions into poverty as well.

There is overwhelming evidence the world over that unrest in the working class is rising steadily, with



the crisis more acute in the “free democracies” of the world. The protests by the “Yellow vests” movement in France for better wages are a recent example of prolonged unrest and street action that has been met with brutal repression. Yet, the protests continue. There is also evidence to show that “new wars” have been waged, mostly by the powers that brokered peace after the two world wars, that have led to more economic insecurity and immigration challenges.

### **SOCIAL CONTRACT**

The ILO report does not go into these contentious areas of neocolonial depredations that have had a tremendous impact on the working classes of the countries that are at the receiving end of them. What it acknowledges is that the formal “institutions of work” that were crafted to enforce the “social contract” have been undermined. Broadly interpreted, this could imply the withdrawal of the state from implementing labour laws and lack of other pro-labour policies. As a remedy, the ILO Commission suggests investment in not only the skills of the workforce but also the “institutions of work”. Another remedy involves investing in decent and sustainable work and to align economic and social policies around it. This is easier said than done as it is precisely by denying opportunities for decent work and by denying the share of their productivity in the wages of workers that enterprises maximise profit, often under the benign protection of elected governments.

A “human-centric” agenda involves expanding, not contracting, freedoms. This entails renewing the “democratic underpinnings” of the labour market, having more “social dialogue” and guaranteeing fundamental rights of work. It also involves developing capabilities to participate in democratic society. The ILO report suggests that investing in lifelong learning of a formal and informal kind—combining foundational skills, cognitive and social skills—is imperative. Whether governments would come forward to invest in such interventions is doubt-

ful as the trend has been more towards squeezing social-sector expenditure and investment. The report cautions that adult learning as part of a lifelong learning strategy will only be possible if there is an assured income and labour market security. In the absence of such security, the incentive to acquire skills will not be there.

While employers, in the government and private sector, need to invest in their workforce, in-house skill development and training has not been taken up as seriously as it should have been. Workers, the ILO report recommends, should be entitled to “training rights” in all types of work even as they continue to enjoy the protection of their salaries. The report actually calls for access to universal quality education, which has been a constant demand of those working in the area of education.

### **RIGHT TO WORK**

One other highlight of the report is its emphasis on the right of workers to remain economically active. Those who wish to work should not be denied that opportunity. It proposes that governments could increase the age of retirement and provide flexible hours for the ageing population

as there are old people who cannot afford to stop working. It recommends a basic pension for everyone, including “increased investment in public employment services”.

The future of work is incomplete without gender equality. The First World War saw a huge number of women leave the hearth and enter the workforce as the men were conscripted in the war. Women played key roles in world peace, especially during the war years and in countries that were under the colonial yoke. Interestingly, the year 1919 also happens to be the centenary year of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, the anti-war activist, feminist theorist and founder of the Communist Party of Germany, who considered women’s liberation inseparable from the struggles and liberation of the working class.

The ILO report has a limited focus on the connection between gender equality and the sexual division of labour, though it makes a case for a greater investment in public care services and a greater interface between the state and care work. The questions that the report raises are not new. In the erstwhile socialist bloc countries and parts of Europe, childcare services by the state allowed women to work. That tradi-



**AT A CALL CENTRE IN AMMAN**, Jordan, a 2016 picture. New business models in the digital economy often end up perpetuating traditional gender inequalities.





MUHAMMAD HAMED/REUTERS

tion has continued somewhat in the “social democracies”, the Nordic and Scandinavian countries and in some parts of Europe. There also seems to be enough anecdotal evidence in advanced capitalist countries such as the United States to show that even double income parents find it difficult to afford private childcare services. The report underscores the importance of care services by the state. The report calls for a “balanced division of care work” between men and women and between the state and the family. “Unpaid care work”, the report says, is a cause for concern.

Even as organisations such as the ILO deal with addressing traditional gender inequalities, including the sexual division of labour, the report notes that new business models in the digital economy are perpetuating gender gaps. Algorithms in job matching are creating gender biases, the report observes. While new biases have been discovered, the section on gender equality is somewhat sketchy, barely touching on harassment at the workplace. It seems a little odd considering that in the past one year, workplace harassment faced by women globally was a talking point. The report could have dwelt a little more on this aspect, especially as there are indications that companies may shy away from recruiting women for fear of being embroiled in litigious sexual harassment cases.

The report dwells substantively on the need for universal social security, or social protection. It estimates that more than half the global population is without any kind of social protection. It recommends a basic universal social protection system from birth until old age, complemented by contributory social insurance schemes and individual savings.

There has been talk of a universal basic income or a minimum income for some time now in India. But there has been little consensus on how much it should be. These are seen as exercises in populist obfuscation, especially as the government is involved. There are models such as the cash transfers under the Bolsa Familia programme of Brazil, but their replication in countries such as India is far from ideal. The Left parties and its trade unions have been pushing for the implementation of a basic minimum wage, which the Right parties have not accepted.

#### UNIVERSAL LABOUR GUARANTEES

The actual crisis confronting the world of work and which the report addresses in the latter half is the need for humane conditions of work. It recommends a universal labour guarantee that includes fundamental workers’ rights, such as collective bargaining and the right of association and basic working conditions that include a living wage, limits on hours of work, and safe and healthy workplaces. That the ILO in its centenary year views a universal labour guarantee as a major goal is a sad reflection of the harsh reality of the world of work, a world that does not seem to have changed much since the post-World War years, especially for labour.

Humane working conditions, as envisaged by the founders of the ILO, were defined by a regulation of the hours of work; adequate living wages; protection from sickness, injury and disease arising out of employment; protection of children, young persons and women; provision for old age and injury; recognition of the principle of the freedom of association (forming unions); and

equal remuneration for work of equal value. The grim reality is that all these conditions are being violated in most countries.

What was already a situation heavily skewed against the worker has become worse with technological breakthroughs such as artificial intelligence, automation and robotics, which threaten to replace human labour by creating “new jobs” that do not necessarily involve hiring labour. A social contract where all the obligations and duties are on the part of the workers is designed to fail.

While the ILO has been guarded in its observations about deliberations that take place at economic summits and the role played by governments at such international forums, there is growing appreciation for those who call a spade a spade. At Davos, Rutger Bregman, a Dutch historian, won many hearts when, during a discussion on universal basic income and shorter working hours, he described the World Economic Forum as an event that was “about saving capitalism”. He created a stir by saying that “wealth wasn’t created at the top; it is merely devoured there”. He told the billionaire community that they should stop avoiding paying tax. The video of a talk show where he featured was circulated widely.

Whether it is the striking workers of “Les Gilet Jaunes” (yellow vests) movement in France who have been protesting since December 2018 against the “one per cent”, the garment workers in Bangladesh or industrial and agricultural workers in India, there seems to be disquiet against disparities. There is a consensus that the model of development predicated on the accumulation of profit has failed the working classes.

The ILO report is significant to the extent that it recognises that the principles that it laid down a century ago continue to be relevant even now. The difference is that in the post-War period, there was a desire to honour the social contract. Today, it has become monumentally difficult to get governments to act on them. □



# Trust deficit

Despite the best efforts of the rail authorities and Japan's JICA agency, local residents in Maharashtra are firmly against Narendra Modi's pet bullet train project. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

"IF you get the details of the route, where the train will be stopping, etc. ...what do you think... [would that be of some help]?" asks a Japanese representative of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in a short video clip. A local man from Maharashtra's Palghar district begins to respond by saying, "We do not want any destruction", but he is interrupted by a woman who boldly steps forward and categorically states: "We don't want to give our land, so details of the route are irrelevant to us. We wish to make it clear that any details of this train that you wish to give us are like an irrelevant story in our lives. We do not want to give our land—that is all."

The feelings of the local people cannot get any clearer than what was said in the video clip featuring villagers who interacted with JICA representatives on January 22 and 23. JICA is the funding agency for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project, which is to be executed by National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited. The project cost is Rs.1.10 lakh crore, of which Rs.88,000 crore would come as a loan from Japan via JICA. The 530-kilometre-long train route will cut the travel time between the two cities from seven hours to less than three. The bullet train is expected to cover the distance at a maximum speed of 320 km per hour. During peak hours, the 10-coach train will depart every 20 minutes.

From the administration's point

of view, such efficiencies are integral to the economic growth of the country. But for the small farmers and tribal people in Maharashtra who will be affected by the project, the bullet train is nothing more than a dangerous disruption to their lives and livelihoods. They have categorically stated that they are not interested in selling their land. They have also said that offers of alternative land will not be entertained as that will tear apart the social and emotional fabric of their lives since villages will be separated. Fully aware that once they sell their land they will have no other source of income, they have decided to band together and protest against the acquisition of their land by the rail corporation.

Their protest has been local but consistent over 14 months, and now JICA has been forced to acknowledge it. For two days in January, a team comprising JICA India chief representative Katsuo Matsumoto, senior representative Kengo Akamine and principal development spe-

cialist Mihir Sorti met with the local people in Palghar; earlier, another team met with affected villagers in Gujarat.

Brian Lobo of the Kashtakari Sanghatana said that the JICA team met farmers from Bharodi in Bhivandi taluk and then proceeded to Mhatardi village, where the Thane bullet train station was proposed. They then met local people in Kotbi in Dahanu taluk and Dhamangaon and Amgaon in Talasari. The next day, the team interacted with farmers in Hanuman Nagar and Kalale villages in Palghar. Lobo said that the villagers "repeatedly said they will lose their only means of survival. They stated they were being forced to give up their lands, without their free, informed and prior consent."

Mobilising the anti-bullet train movement are groups such as the Kashtakari Sanghatana, the All India Kisan Sabha, the Bhumi Adhikari Andolan, the Bhoomi Sena, the Adivasi Ekta Parishad and the Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti. They say that in promoting his pet project, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has violated the Panchayat Extensions to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996, which was enacted to ensure self-governance through traditional gram sabhas for people living in Scheduled Areas in the country.

Palghar is a Scheduled Area, and most of those who will be displaced by the project in Palghar and Thane are tribal people and small farmers. The activists said the project also violated the United Nations Charter of

The project enjoys the backing of both State governments and has the blessings of Modi.





BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**REPRESENTATIVES** of the JICA agency in discussion with residents of a village in Palghar district.

Indigenous Peoples. Further, environmental rules will also be violated, especially in Mhatardi village, where mangrove wetlands will be destroyed during the laying of the rail lines.

After meeting with the villagers, the JICA team said they understood the concerns and found them “reasonable” and that a report based on the “actual ground reality regarding the bullet train” would be submitted to the governments of India and Japan.

Opposition to the bullet train began as soon as it was announced. In September 2017, when Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe were laying the foundation stone for the project in Ahmedabad’s Sabarmati, tribal organisations held a black flag demonstration in Palghar. Since then, villagers have steadily refused to part with their land and it is only of late that the administration has changed its tactics.

Instead of a public declaration of the rates that will be paid for land, they have started individually approaching landowners.

On January 17, before the JICA visit, a parcel of private land was acquired by the Palghar district admin-

istration. A mere 0.4 hectare, the acquired piece was still symbolic of the battle that had been fought and the battle that lay ahead. The price at which it was acquired, Rs.34.69 lakh, was acceptable to the owner Shrikant Ram Vilas Pande of Bilalpada village. Activists and those opposed to the sale of land are concerned because the hefty amount may tempt others.

“Hearing the actual price of their land is far more persuasive than knowing the general rate that is being offered per acre. It is a common practice to do this to persuade people to sell,” said a retired bureaucrat experienced in project-related land acquisition. The state seems to have pressed the right psychological buttons because it is understood that other farmers have approached the administration expressing curiosity about what they might expect for their land.

Of the 530-km-long track, 108 km lies in Palghar for which 302.53 hectares are required. Some 221 hectares are privately owned. The rest is state and forest land, which will likely be cleared swiftly. Seventy-three villages in Palghar and 31 in

Thane districts will be affected by the train’s route.

JICA and the rail corporation have networked extensively among the villages, but the residents are largely unmoved. In fact, one attempt at networking by the rail corporation aroused the ire of the local people. The rail corporation has been trying health and drinking water outreach programmes.

A clinic was opened in Palghar last November, but local people forcibly shut it down saying that they could not be hoodwinked this way to sell their land. It was only a brief victory for them as the survey work continued unabated even though landowners persisted in rejecting purchase offers and even tried to prevent surveyors from entering their land.

The project enjoys the backing of both State governments and has the blessings of Modi. Surveyors have been given police protection and allowed to carry out their work and, in effect, enter private land.

Palghar has so far been the hotbed of protests. Residents here have a better knowledge of land acquisition and resettlement than others. Some were resettled here after their homes and lands were taken over for a canal irrigation project of the Surya river about 30 years ago. These people are vociferous in their protests. They say they will be doubly displaced if the bullet train project takes away their land.

Interacting with villagers via an interpreter, the JICA team asked them why there was such mistrust of the government. According to Lobo, the people retorted saying that they could not trust a government that had not fulfilled its promises to other project-affected persons who had “been left high and dry even 40 years later”.

Some families in Hanuman Nagar were displaced by the Surya canal project and still do not have their names on the land records despite land having been officially allotted to them.

Trust, clearly, is not something the bullet train’s promoters can expect. □



# Art on the street

The **Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha**, held recently, sought to take the art forms of north Chennai to other parts of the city in an attempt to democratise them. BY **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

IN Chennai, a silent revolution is moving music, art, dance and conversations on polity and policy, bringing them out of the air-conditioned auditoriums and boardrooms in a bid to engage people directly. The moving force behind this initiative is T.M. Krishna, who is seen by a

section of puritans as the *enfant terrible* of Carnatic music.

Simply named Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha (Chennai Street Arts Festival), it began as an art festival intended to cater to people outside closed performance spaces and has now grown to include conversations

on a wide variety of subjects.

“A movie, *Vada Chennai*, has been released. Show me one person from Harbour to Ennore [in north Chennai] who has any resemblance to anyone in the movie,” a resident of north Chennai challenged a panel of speakers in an open dialogue organ-



M. KARUNAKARAN



ised by Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha in a hall in Mylapore in central Chennai in end January.

The director Pa. Ranjith, who was on the panel, agreed with him: "What you are saying is correct. You would have watched many movies, some of which have a village setting as a background. The question that needs to be asked is if everyone in a village is good. There might be one good person. Now he becomes a symbol of the entire village. In a slum setting in a city, one person might be a bad element. But does he represent everyone? No. Still, he becomes the symbol of that slum." According to him, this happens because of the manner in which movies are projected.

The discussion continued on different aspects of life in north Chennai and on the stereotypical notions about the entire area. Many of the

points raised have no answers or solutions, but the initiative helped many people who lived in other parts of the city get a glimpse of how reality and perception differed from one another and how a powerful medium, in this case cinema, projected an altered perception of reality.

#### SEVERAL CONVERSATIONS

Several such conversations and collaborations in the field of the performance arts form a hallmark of the Theru Vizha, which has done a lot to break stereotypes in the few years that it has been in existence. The conversation is a sequel to the efforts in bringing art forms that have not traditionally been performed in an auditorium setting into these spaces. This was in response to the criticism as to why traditional or folk art forms were not being allowed into the hallowed portals of "sabhas".

In fact, this criticism arose about five years ago, soon after the first public performance of classical music in the first year of the Urur Olcott Kuppam Festival in Besant Nagar. The question was now that the classical music form had been brought to a fishing hamlet when would the maligned art forms get a space in a sabha to perform? Showcasing some of the traditional and folk performances in an auditorium in Mylapore was part of this effort to break the class distinction in art forms.

But not all sections of society welcome such initiatives. The team that put together the event believes that experiencing the art form will slowly remove preconceived notions of the art.

Once there is a debate about the art form, the conversation will move into the dominance of caste, the hegemony of culture and the tyranny of identity. The team thinks that it is also time to have a dialogue-starter branded something like "Mylaporeil Vada Chennai" (north Chennai in Mylapore).

In the last leg of the festival, the focus was on north Chennai. On February 1, residents of Driver's Colony in Korukkupet, a suburb in north Chennai, witnessed a Bharatanatyam performance by the students of Chathurlakshana School of Fine Arts. Breaking the rigid confines imposed by the manner in which the art form had been performed, the students danced to the "Poramboke" song of T.M. Krishna. [The song begins with the word "poramboke", which is used to denote a wastrel.] It did not matter that the stage was set in a narrow lane on an elevated platform. Vehicles whizzed past, drivers honked and commuters wondered whether it was yet another meeting of a political party. But many of the people occupying the chairs at the Theru Vizha did not care: they cheered aloud and whistled in approval.

The Theru Vizha, which began as Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha five years ago, is more about the democratisa-



**A PERFORMANCE** at Korukkupet on February 2.





R. RAVINDRAN

**SINGER T.M. KRISHNA** performs at the fourth edition of the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha at Elliot's Beach in January 2018.

tion of art and conversation than about the purity of art. Hence, it is common to hear the wind messing up the acoustics and the blaring horns from vehicles plying past, and even experience the occasional interruptions because of unforeseen factors. After bringing classical music and dance to the fishing village of Urur Kuppam in south Chennai and taking folk performances to concert halls, in this edition the festival expanded its horizon to fishing villages in Korukkupet and Kasimedu in north Chennai, a move that necessitated the change of name.

#### PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION

The vizha began on January 13, with a photographic exploration of the Korukkupet market. Over the next few days, art forms of north Chennai travelled to Mylapore, a stage show was performed in Besant Nagar in south Chennai, and a Paraiattam was

staged in Besant Nagar before the show moved back to Korukkupet and Ennore in north Chennai.

Asked how the vizha evolved to be what it is today, Krishna said it had had its own organic growth. "We never thought of building or expansion or anything of the sort. So, after about three-four years at Urur Olcott

Asked how the vizha evolved to be what it is today, T.M. Krishna said it had had its own organic growth.

Kuppam, we were discussing other spaces such as Chemmencherry [south of Chennai, an area where the Tamil Nadu government bundled off all slum dwellers]. We had also done work with Ennore with the 'Poromboke' song. So Ennore was also there in the back of our mind. The exploration was to see what kind of creative engagements can happen," Krishna said.

The stereotypical notions about north Chennai were another reason for the vizha to move to this space. The initial path was set by the conversations that the team had with the people of Korukkupet and Ennore on democracy, rights, education, freedom, expression, and self-assertion. "Then we began thinking: what kind of conversations do we want to build? It is two things. One was to re-establish north Chennai as a cultural space with so many hues and so many different cultures. We do not realise that Vysarpadi [a suburb of Chennai] is not the same as Royapuram, Royapuram is not Korukkupet, Korukkupet is not Tondiarpet. All these discussions came in. And also what were the things that people were celebrating there. What are the art forms featured [there]? Also what art forms are not featured there? So, the conversations were twofold: one was asserting cultural diversity of the space, and two, what are the art forms that people there want to have a glimpse of," Krishna said.

Korukkupet also has Tamil settlers from Myanmar. So the vizha had stalls selling food that was a modification of the cuisine that people had brought along from Myanmar.

Where does the vizha go from here and who gets to make that decision? "We never thought in terms of where it goes," said Krishna. "Usually, it has bounced from one space to another, one thing to another. So, I don't know. We need to think this through. It is usually a collective decision.... This whole thing is volunteer-driven. But one thing is certain. Any engagement needs to have meaning and continuity. It is not just about doing an event," he said. □

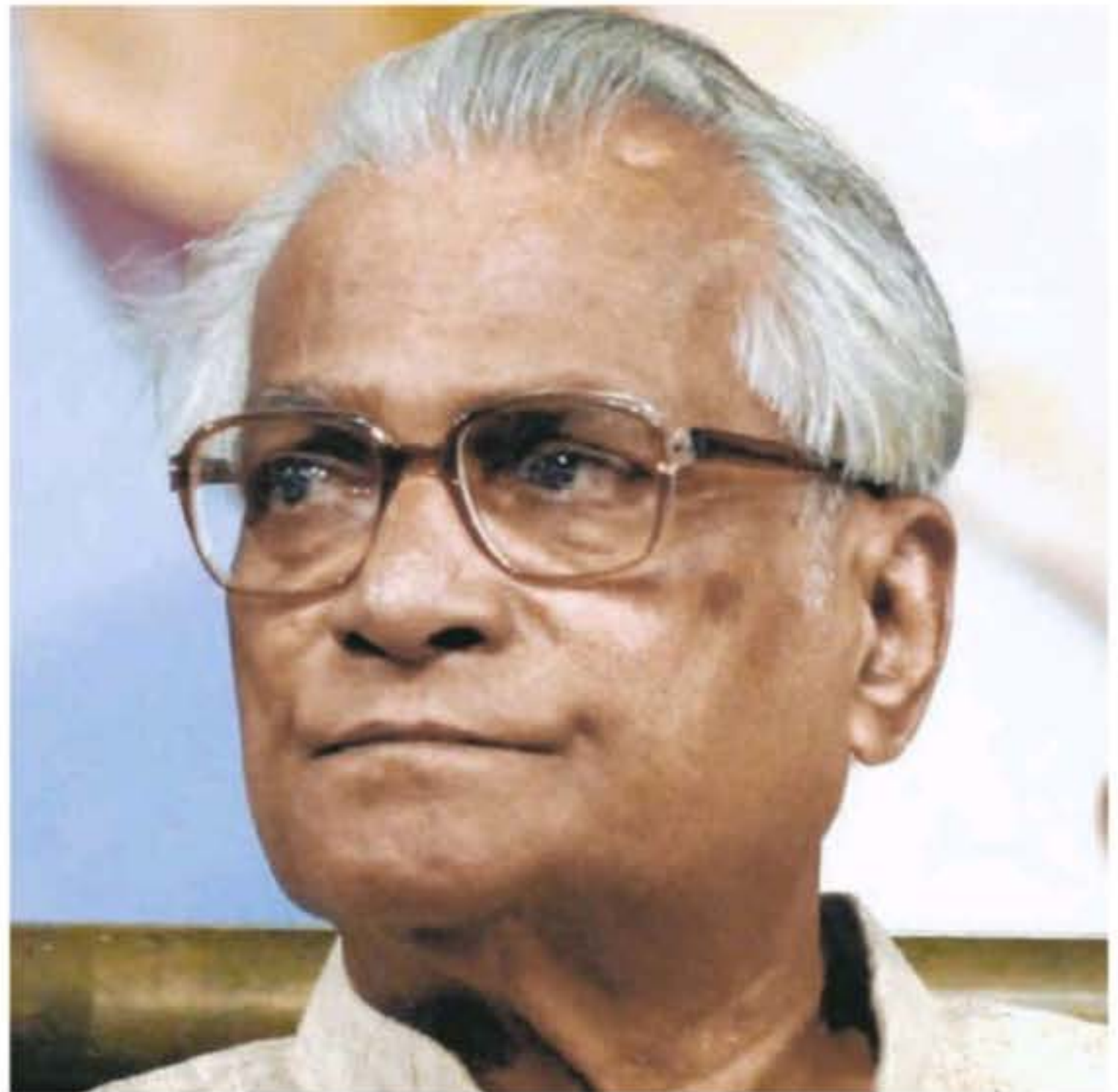


# Man of extremes

George Fernandes' (1930-2019) personal life and political career saw **many highs and lows** and this is generally attributed to his mercurial mind. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**

POLITICAL analysts and fellow politicians have often used figurative expressions to describe George Mathew Fernandes' diverse attributes. Firebrand, rebel, giant killer, rabble-rouser, master organiser, disruptor, visionary, maverick, bundle of contradictions, turncoat, and fickle and unreliable person were some of the encomiums and expletives that they employed. Indeed, all political leaders get branded in contrasting ways, depending on the political orientation of those who are describing them, but even so the sobriquets Fernandes earned were unique in their multifariousness. Equally exceptionally, each depiction seemed to fit him well at different junctures of his personal life and political career.

This aspect of Fernandes came up during a discussion in the mid 2000s with Hariraj Singh Tyagi, a veteran socialist leader from Meerut in Uttar Pradesh and a close associate of Fernandes for nearly three and a half decades. (Tyagi passed away in December 2009.) I had sought Tyagi's views on this rather unique status Fernandes seemed to enjoy. "That is because George could well be the epitome of the word 'mercurial'," responded Tyagi. "Even a cursory look at his journey through life and politics would underline this. He was at the same time progressive and regressive, a self-proclaimed adherent to secular ideals and also one malleable before fundamentalist interests, a votary of peace and disarmament as well as of aggressive initiatives in the name of national security, an



K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

anti-corruption crusader at one point and later one who had no qualms about compromising with vested interests steeped in corruption. There was nothing constant about his personality. He could flip-flop, driven by deep convictions on the one side and unadulterated political expediency on the other. His personal life, as well as his political career, was marked by such highs and lows, once again underscoring the mercurial element."

Asked to elucidate on Fernandes' fundamental motives in taking these divergent positions and charting a

fluctuating political trajectory, Tyagi said that the motives were also mercurial, though he was consistent about two things: adherence to a simple lifestyle highlighted by his penchant for wearing crumpled kurta-pyjamas and realpolitik opposition to the Congress through most of his life. (There was one aberration to this rule as Fernandes had briefly supported Charan Singh, as the Jat leader got around to seek Congress support and become Prime Minister in 1979.)

Born in a Christian family in Mangaluru in Karnataka, Fernandes



displayed a rebellious personality at an early age. His father, John Joseph Fernandes, wanted him to study law, but rebelling against him Fernandes quit studies after matriculation. He was, self-professedly, attracted towards priesthood, an idea that his mother, Alice Martha Fernandes, supported. Fernandes moved to the Saint Peters seminary in Bengaluru at the age of 16 to get trained as a Roman Catholic priest. However, in a matter of two and a half years, he rebelled again, this time against the rectors of the seminary who, according to Fernandes, practised an anti-Christian way of life that perpetuated social inequality.

Soon after, Fernandes adopted "Freethought" as his personal philosophy and trade union activity as his vocation. He started this line of activity in Mangaluru by organising transport and hotel industry workers but soon moved on to Bombay (now Mumbai). In the metropolis, he found a job as a proofreader and persisted with trade union activity inspired by socialist thought. It was at this time that he came in contact with Ram Manohar Lohia, whom he referred to as his mentor in later years, and Placid D'Mello, a fellow Mangalorean hailed as the champion of dock workers' rights in the 1940s and the early 1950s. D'Mello died in 1955, but by that time Fernandes had acquired the status of a firebrand trade unionist and was perceived as a true follower of the D'Mello school of social and political activism.

Fernandes' stature grew steadily in Mumbai's political circles. He was elected to the Bombay Municipal Corporation in 1961. He was Municipal Councillor for seven years. Even before his last term ended, he contested the 1967 Lok Sabha election from Bombay South constituency and earned the sobriquet of "giant killer" when he defeated S.K. Patil, the legendary freedom fighter, Congress leader, three-time Mayor of Bombay and Minister in the Cabinets of Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. Fernandes' upset victory practically put an end to Patil's political career.

He was celebrated as one of the big south Indian leaders to make an impact in post-Independence national politics.

Fernandes' political manoeuvres in the 1960s earned him the sobriquet of political and organisational disruptor. Right through the 1960s, he made a striking disruptionist impact on his political outfit, the Socialist Party. During these years, he was part of the many tumults and splits among the various socialist political formations and played an important role in the formation of the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) in 1964. Through these manoeuvres he rose to the position of general secretary of the SSP in 1969. But by 1971, it was clear that Fernandes had lost his grip over the Mumbai trade union scene as he focussed his attention on national politics. This became evident when he returned to Bombay South constituency to contest the Lok Sabha election. This time he was not only defeated but had to forfeit his deposit. Fernandes never contested an election in Mumbai after that. Mumbai had lost its charm for the mercurial politician.

#### **FIREBRAND IMAGE**

However, he rediscovered his firebrand image at the national level through the all-India railway strike in 1974. He joined hands with other Left parties, including the communist parties, and played an important role in the formation of the National Coordinating Committee for Railwaymen's Struggle, which brought together not only all railway unions but also the Central trade unions across various sectors. The strike started on May 8, 1974, and acquired the proportions of a national strike, with workers from diverse sectors participating in it. The Indira Gandhi government detained thousands of workers and leaders across the country in order to crush the strike. There is little doubt that the mass resentment that manifested through the strike was one of the important factors that impelled Indira Gandhi to impose the Emergency in June 1975, although the other immediate triggers included

the Allahabad High Court verdict that held her guilty of misuse of government machinery for her election campaign.

When the Emergency was imposed, Fernandes managed to go underground. According to many of his friends and associates, he joined hands with a clutch of people to engineer a blast at a public meeting of Indira Gandhi. This was later called the Baroda dynamite case. The blast plan did not work out, and Fernandes was found and arrested from Kolkata on June 10, 1976, nearly a year after the Emergency was imposed. The photograph of him after the arrest (Fernandes was seen defiantly raising his handcuffed fist) became one of the major protest icons of the anti-Emergency movement. When the Emergency was lifted in 1977 and the Lok Sabha election took place, Fernandes was fielded by the newly formed Janata Party, a conglomeration of different parties that opposed the Emergency, from Muzaffarpur constituency in Bihar. He contested the election from jail since he had not been released despite the lifting of the Emergency and won by a record margin.

Fernandes was made Industry Minister in the Morarji Desai government. As a Minister, Fernandes once again revived his firebrand image when he ordered the ouster of the computer multinational International Business Machines (now known as IBM) and Coca-Cola for not diluting their shareholding in their Indian associate companies. But the continued stint in power effected yet another mercurial twist in the leader. Dumping his ardent advocacy against the domination of multinational corporations, he pushed through a technical collaboration with the German engineering giant Siemens and Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd despite stiff opposition from his comrades in the 1974 strike, the workers of BHEL.

Then came one of the most striking flip-flops of his political career. Throughout his tenure as a Minister in the Morarji Desai government (1977-79), he had repeatedly sig-



# Mathematical bridge-builder

**Michael F. Atiyah** (1929-2019) was a prominent member of the scientific establishment in Britain, where he dominated the mathematical scene and established Oxford as a major centre for geometry. **BY T.R. RAMADAS**

SIR Michael Francis Atiyah was one of the major figures of 20th century mathematics. He was a master of modern geometry and a crucial agent in its rapprochement with theoretical physics. He passed away on January 11, a few months short of his 90th birthday.

Michael Atiyah's father, Edward Selim Atiyah, was Lebanese and a civil servant in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, then a British colony. His mother, Jean Levens, was Scottish. Of his father, Atiyah said: "My father's main dream was to go to Oxford. He wanted to convert himself into an Englishman. It didn't quite work out. When he came back to Sudan, he found he wasn't part of the English class structure; he was regarded as one of the lower classes although he was Oxford-educated and regarded himself as culturally English. That turned him over a bit. He became an Arab nationalist to some extent. All his life was divided between wanting passionately to be English and yet sympathising with the Arab political position within the British Empire." (I have relied on the incomparable biography available at <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/>

Atiyah.html for information on Atiyah's life.)

Those who met Atiyah in his prime would have recognised a certain brisk British type: always impeccably dressed and who spoke in confident, clear, declarative sentences, with a twinkling sense of hu-

mour that put the listener at ease. His was a short, slightly stocky figure, but through force of personality he dominated any room he was in. Although he was an internationalist by temperament and held for three years a prestigious professorship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, United States, it was clear that he felt most at home in Britain, where he was a prominent member of the scientific establishment and where he dominated the mathematical scene and eventually established Oxford as a major centre for geometry. After retirement from Oxford, he moved to Edinburgh and back to his Scottish roots.

It is often said that there are two tribes of mathematicians: the problem-solvers and the theory-builders. There is in fact a third group, the bridge-builders, of whom Atiyah was the archetypal example. It is this aspect of the man that I would like to convey in this article.

(An aside: In the 1990s, Atiyah gave a public lecture at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) in the Homi Bhabha Auditorium, a majestic structure perched on the rocky south Bombay shore facing the Arabian Sea. Unfortu-



TIFR ARCHIVES



nately, I do not have access to the text, but I remember well his description of the roles of the theoretical physicist and mathematician in the exploration of the mathematical universe, or at least those parts of it that were of interest to him at that time. A theoretical physicist is an explorer who jumps from island to island and reports back on the flora and fauna that she has seen; a mathematician then builds the bridges linking the islands. The physicist roams far and wide and gets impatient with the mathematician who is in it for the bridge-building—a punchline, somewhat self-deprecating and clearly only half-meant.)

To set the stage, one first needs to understand how mathematics, like the natural sciences, took its modern form in a process that began in the 19th century and culminated in the emergence of some grand narratives in the 20th century. Most of this happened in Europe.

Euclid's construction of geometry was concerned with the deduction of mathematical truths by systematic reasoning from a set of axioms. In spite of this, for much of the ensuing two millennia, mathematics proceeded on the basis of ingenious calculations based on intuitive justifications. As these became more and more baroque, the practitioners began to feel the need to moor their reasoning in solid ground. This resulted in careful constructions of mathematical objects and subtle definitions.

By the early decades of the last century, two great branches of mathematics had been cleared of obscuring overgrowth and given a recognisably modern form: these were analysis (which grew out of the study of calculus and infinite sums) and algebra (which grew out of the study of number theory, polynomial equations and symmetries). Much of the foundational work happened in Germany.

The third great branch of mathematics, geometry, was late to this spring-cleaning. This was partly because, notwithstanding Euclid, the subject itself was a late developer. Its component parts—topology (“rub-

ber-sheet” geometry), Riemannian geometry (the study of distances on curved spaces), algebraic geometry (the grown-up version of “coordinate geometry”) and algebraic topology (which deals with puzzles such as those involving the Königsberg Bridge and much more sophisticated problems that are attacked by attaching algebraic structures to topological objects)—came into focus only in the latter half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century.

Although the British have to their credit many scientific revolutionaries—Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, James Clerk Maxwell, Michael Faraday, Paul Dirac and Francis Crick among them—their mathematics shied away from grand theorising, leaving this to the Continentals, in particular Germany and France. It is fair to say that at the turn of the century, British mathematics was overshadowed by developments on the Continent. Even when this changed with the advent of J.E. Littlewood and G.H. Hardy, who revitalised analysis and analytic number theory, British work in algebra and geometry tended to be not of the same order as that on the Continent, albeit with some exceptions, notably the work of William Hodge, F.S. Macaulay and John Todd.

All this changed with Atiyah.

Atiyah's doctoral thesis was written under the supervision of Hodge. Atiyah's first substantial work was in collaboration with Hodge. With its combination of differential geometry and algebraic geometry, it foreshadowed the bridge-building instincts that would later characterise his work. In this and in later work, he quickly assimilated modern formulations of geometry and topology and tools that were largely developed in France (by Henri Cartan, Elie Cartan, Jean Leray, Alexandre Grothendieck and Jean-Pierre Serre) with important contributions from the Japanese mathematician Kunihiko Kodaira.

Then began the first of the major collaborations that would be a feature of his work. Together with the German mathematician Friedrich

Hirzebruch, Atiyah developed a major technique in topology called “topological K-theory” that succeeded in answering many outstanding questions in geometry.

## INDEX THEOREMS

Then followed two decades devoted to deep questions regarding partial differential equations and geometry, which culminated in the “index theorems” and their cousins. This was the product of collaborations with Isadore M. Singer, Raoul Bott, Graeme Segal and the Indian mathematician Vijay Kumar Patodi.

The index theorem of Atiyah and Singer is undoubtedly a high-water mark of 20th century mathematics. It brings together differential geometry, topology and analysis and subsumes and unifies many similar theorems that went before. It is only fair that I try to give a flavour of its content. (Believe me that it is in fact easier to understand than the Big Bang or the double helix, which are routinely referred to in the lay press!)

The theorem concerns itself with “systems of elliptic linear partial differential equations on compact manifolds”. A manifold is a “space” on which calculus can be done; it is compact if it is bounded in a suitable sense. Maxwell's equations governing the propagation of electromagnetic waves are examples of partial differential equations. When a partial differential equation is “elliptic and linear”, it has finitely many solutions out of which any solution can be built. A system of elliptic partial differential equations is a collection of such equations and has an “analytical index”, essentially built out of the numbers of solutions of the equations in the system. The analytic index does not change if the system is subject to small changes, and the Atiyah-Singer index theorem gives a formula for the index in terms of some geometric and topological data associated with the system.

The mid 1970s saw a simultaneous realisation among theoretical physicists and mathematicians when the equations (due to Chen-Ning Yang and Robert Mills) underlying modern theories of the fundamental





TIFR ARCHIVES

**MICHAEL ATIYAH**, on the occasion of the International Colloquium on Vector Bundles on Algebraic Varieties at the TIFR, Bombay (now Mumbai), in 1984. M.S. Narasimhan is also in the picture.

forces of nature at the subatomic level are put in the proper mathematical language, they involve subtle geometric objects, and that the non-linear partial differential equations which encapsulate these physical laws are pregnant with geometric information. This was the start of an intense period of communication between physicists (primarily those interested in theories of the fundamental interactions) and mathematicians (primarily geometers). Atiyah was at the heart of this interaction, as were physicists such as Richard Ward, Roger Penrose, Gerard 't Hooft and Alexander Polyakov. A particularly fruitful partnership began between Atiyah and the incomparable Edward Witten, who combines within himself the qualities of a physicist of the first rank and a Fields Medal-winning mathematician. In the decades that followed, the public dialogue between Atiyah and Witten set much of the agenda of the field that came to be known as “geometry and physics”.

During the 1980s and 1990s. Atiyah together with Bott, Witten, Nigel Hitchin and many others used insights and techniques from quantum field theory and in particu-

lar the Yang-Mills theory and the Seiberg-Witten theory to shed light on many questions in mathematics. (The most spectacular and unexpected applications of these ideas were due to Simon Donaldson, Clifford Taubes and Witten.) In particular, Atiyah was one of the inventors of “topological field theory”. As the century drew to a close and the attention of many theoretical physicists moved to string theory, Atiyah was one of its most prominent supporters in the mathematical community.

#### **ELECTRIFYING LECTURER**

Atiyah was an electrifying lecturer who communicated mathematics with clarity and passion. In his research papers and expository writings, he cultivated a light touch that combined a sense of rigour with an informal and elegant style that became the Oxford “house style”.

There were significant interactions between Indian mathematicians and Atiyah and his mathematics. I already touched upon Patodi, who was a student of M.S. Narasimhan at the TIFR and wrote a series of ground-breaking papers (first on his own and then jointly with Atiyah, Bott and Singer).

This work in turn had as its basis a technique pioneered by S. Minakshisundaram, which had to do with the geometric information encoded in an infinite sum (“asymptotic series”) representing solutions of the partial differential equation governing heat propagation on curved spaces. In the early 1980s, Atiyah and Bott asked the innocent question: What if strong interactions were the only forces at work and space-time was two-dimensional? This led to a new approach to a proof of a celebrated theorem of Narasimhan and C.S. Seshadri and a new derivation of the famous formulae of Gunter Harder and Narasimhan—formulae that had been derived by entirely different methods. (Atiyah arranged for many students of Narasimhan to go to Oxford. While still a graduate student, I myself spent an idyllic six months at the Mathematical Institute there and carefully read the paper of Atiyah and Bott in its “preprint” form, and it played an important part in my later work.)

Atiyah was an Honorary Fellow of the TIFR. In 2005, he chaired a review committee to assess the performance of the School of Mathematics at the TIFR in the previous decade.

Atiyah’s mathematical achievements were universally recognised. He was awarded the Fields Medal in 1966. In 2004, the Abel Prize was shared by Atiyah and Singer “...for their discovery and proof of the index theorem, bringing together topology, geometry and analysis, and their outstanding role in building new bridges between mathematics and theoretical physics”. There were many other honours, among which, I suspect, he particularly cherished the knighthood (1983) and the presidency of the Royal Society (1990-95). □

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# A defiant life

Krishna Sobti (1925-2019) wrote on a range of issues such as Partition and women's sexuality and identity with a rare candour and opposed the establishment's dictatorial ways to the end. BY ZIYA US SALAM

FOR the last six weeks or so of the life of the illustrious writer Krishna Sobti, the noted writer-poet Sukrita Paul had the best seat. As Krishna Sobti battled issues of old age, Sukrita Paul looked after her with tender care. Day and night, she was there. During the last four days of her life, Krishna Sobti hardly spoke a word. "She would just constantly say, 'I love you' to me," Sukrita Paul recalled, adding: "But at that time, she said the same thing even to some people she was not particularly fond of. I remember there was a lady whom she never wanted to see at her home, she said the same to her. I guess, towards the end it was a liberation of the mind for her. It was a culmination point of sorts."

Even just a week before her condition deteriorated, Krishna Sobti was her usual fiery self. Whenever any news of a fresh incident of violence came, she would urge those around her to speak up. Silence was not an option. "She talked of the climate of the country. She was disturbed at the goings-on," says Sukrita Paul. Interestingly, around the same time, the creative being in Krishna Sobti would come to the fore. That is when she would talk of the creative process of writing, what led to poetry, the changing meaning of words, and so on. Of course, she missed her husband, Shivnath, too. She married him in 1995 when she was 70 and lost him a few years ago. Her eyes would well up when she thought of him.

Throughout her life, Krishna Sobti never hankered for attention,



**KRISHNA SOBTI** during an interview with "The Hindu" at her residence in New Delhi in 2017.

but it always came her way. She lived and wrote on her terms. She was accepted, felicitated and celebrated the same way. To her, writing was a celebration of life. Whether it was the phase in the late 1950s and 1960s when she did not shy away from expanding on a woman's sensuality, or the time she wrote *Zindaginama*, in which she brought alive a small village in pre-Partition days where people from different castes and religions lived peacefully until news of riots broke, she wrote what she felt and stayed fiercely true to her written word.

Incidentally, *Zindaginama*, termed the "abridged Mahabharata of our times" by the Hindi poet Ashok Vajpeyi, was supposed to be the first part of a trilogy Krishna Sobti never completed. However, in that single volume, and the saga behind its delayed and revised publication, lies the story of Krishna Sobti

the writer and Krishna Sobti the woman.

She first penned the book in the initial years after Partition, titling it *Channa*. The book was peppered with Punjabi words, along with some Urdu and Persian. Her editor, probably driven by stereotypes or market dictates, changed the words to Hindi equivalents, but Krishna Sobti would have none of it. She preferred to withdraw her book rather than see it go through an editor's scissors, insisting that a book was the author's baby. That spirit, combined with creativity, stayed with her to the end. In the last few years of her life, she opted to return the much-cherished Sahitya Akademi Award and Fellowship rather than be seen in the company of an establishment accused of high-handedness and dictatorial ways. The process of "award wapsi", initiated by Nayantara Sahgal as a protest against the state's dictatorial



ways and the increasingly intolerant social climate, found its culmination in Krishna Sobti.

If in 2015 her returning of the Sahitya Akademi award made headlines in Hindi newspapers, a couple of years later many wondered aloud whether she would accept the Jnanpith that was conferred upon her. She surprised many by accepting it, although she could not hold herself back from saying: "Look at the timing!" The timing may have been wrong but not the recipient. Gurdial Singh, who translated *Zindaginama*, was honoured with the Jnanpith award in 1999, nearly two decades before Krishna Sobti. After she had withdrawn *Zindaginama*, Krishna Sobti moved on quickly. Soon enough, her writing was occupying prime space in the world of wordsmiths and lovers of literature. Two of her short novels, *Daar Se Bichhudi* and *Mitro Marjani*, caused more than a ripple.

Through these books, for the first time, a woman's search for her identity entered intellectual discourse. They talked of a woman's sexuality with rare candour. *Mitro Marjani*, in particular, which talked about a woman's body and her needs, became an emblem for feminists in the years to come. But Krishna Sobti did not confine herself to issues of identity or sexuality. She went on to tackle psychology in *Surajmukhi Ke Andhere Mein*, about the life of a woman criminally assaulted and how the attack affected every aspect of her life. *Ek Ladki*, like her previous works, had conservatives raising their eyebrows.

Every work of hers was the talk of the town, including *Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan*. It was not difficult for Krishna Sobti to reproduce the original ethos for this book. She was born in Pakistani Gujarat in 1925 and studied at Fatehchand College in Lahore. She moved to Delhi at the time of Partition to join her parents who were already there. There was a touch of wistfulness to *Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan* and understated criticism.

Channa's original manuscript



AMRITA PRITAM.

was brought out by Rajkamal Prakashan many years later. Krishna Sobti was persuaded to work on the original in the late 1970s. It saw the light of day in 1979 as *Zindaginama: Zinda Rukh*, and the next year she won the Sahitya Akademi award.

*Zindaginama* refused to fade from public memory. Some three decades later, its English translation by Neel Kanwal Mani with Moyna Mazumdar was published. For Krishna Sobti, though, it continued to be a lived experience. In 1979, five years after the novel was published, the noted writer Amrita Pritam came out with a work titled *Hardatt ka Zindaginama*. Krishna Sobti took it to be too close to her own title and decided to sue Amrita Pritam. What followed was a painful, long-drawn-out legal battle, with the court deciding in favour of Amrita Pritam in 2011, six years after her death. For Krishna Sobti, *Zindaginama* was her baby. And like a proud parent objecting to a neighbour christening her baby after her child, she made her objection pretty clear.

She loved *Zindaginama* intensely, yet she did not allow it to bog her down. Not only did she give readers more than a peek into the world of women, she transcended gender too. Although happy to project a female perspective of things, she was not averse to trying out a male pen name for a while. She wrote under the name Hashmat and penned "Hum Hashmat" pieces on many of her writer friends such as Nirmal Verma, Manohar Shyam Joshi and

Bhisham Sahni. Many years later, when the book was pushed at literary festivals and placed alongside Krishna Sobti's other books, many wondered why, so well-disguised was Krishna Sobti's pseudonym.

Amid the ripples and waves she made in the world of literature, Krishna Sobti continued to raise a storm against the establishment, forever refusing to kowtow to the powers that be. In 2010, much before the "award wapsi" spree hit the headlines, she turned down the Padma Bhushan, arguing that "as a writer, I have to keep a distance from the establishment".

She stayed loyal to her word when in 2015 she joined the likes of Nayantara Sahgal, Uday Prakash and Chaman Lal in returning their awards to protest against the lynching of Akhlaq and the murder of rationalists such as M.M. Kalburgi.

The move created an uproar for a while. Soon, though, the media moved on to other stories. Krishna Sobti, too, preferred the peace and quiet of her world to conferences and literary festivals. Having made a point with her action, she retreated to her East Delhi residence and started writing all over again.

Yet, towards the end of her life, she realised that this was not the time to keep quiet. In an interview to *The Hindu* in April 2017, she asserted: "The war the present government is fighting against its own citizens now can destroy India." She recalled the horrors of the past. Partition, in retrospect, was bearable, not so the present challenges, she said. "Those were different days, a different season in our country. We were so proud of our political leaders. India was poised to become a great democracy. Unfortunately, the opposite is now happening. All our great institutions are being taken over by radical elements."

From her bed at home and when she was in hospital, Krishna Sobti urged the writers' community in particular and thinking Indians in general to fight on because losing was not an option. On January 25 this year, she passed away, defiant to her last breath. □



# Murky dealings

Cobrapost's claims of DHFL having engineered India's biggest banking scam cast a shadow on the functioning of the NBFC sector. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

HOT on the heels of the IL&FS (Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services) scam in October last year come insinuations of another major scandal in the non-banking financial companies (NBFC) sector. Touted to be much bigger in scale than the Saradha and Nirav Modi scams, the latest scandal involves the promoters of Dewan Housing Finance Corporation Ltd (DHFL), who have been accused by the investigative news portal Cobrapost of engaging in financial misappropriation.

Terming it the "biggest banking scam in Indian history", Cobrapost alleged that DHFL's controlling shareholders siphoned off more than Rs.31,000 crore of public money through secured and unsecured loans and advances to dubious shell companies, illegal round-tripping, tax avoidance and insider trading; the company's total bank loans amounted to Rs.97,000 crore.

The money was used to buy equity and private assets in India and abroad, including the United Kingdom, Dubai, Sri Lanka and Mauritius, according to Aniruddha Bahal, editor of Cobrapost. The news portal said that it analysed public records available with the public authorities and information available in the public domain to arrive at these conclusions.

On January 29, Cobrapost held a press conference with the advocate Prashant Bhushan and former Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha. Demanding a special investigation team (SIT) probe by the government



**COBRAPOST** founder Aniruddha Bahal at a press conference regarding an alleged financial scam by DHFL, in New Delhi on January 29.

to look into the charges, Bhushan said that a "nexus of holy cows" had been created in the financial system. "If the banks had done some due diligence, they would have known that the loans given to DHFL had been virtually siphoned off by shell companies. Therefore, it is absolutely clear that many people in several public sector banks are involved in the scam," he said.

DHFL denied the charges and called the exercise a "mischievous misadventure by CobraPost with a *mala fide* intent to cause damage to the goodwill and reputation of the company resulting in erosion in shareholder value".

In a conference call with mediapersons, investors and analysts, chairman Kapil Wadhawan said that DHFL had never lent to a shell company, adding that neither the com-

pany nor its units had made any political donations.

In a statement to the Bombay Stock Exchange on the day the scam broke, the company said: "DHFL today received an email at 8:44 am in the morning, with a follow-up reminder one hour later, seeking answers to 64 questions from CobraPost, many of which were laced with political innuendos. We are shocked and surprised to receive this inquiry this morning, although CobraPost had announced its press conference last Friday, i.e., January 25, 2019, to disclose an alleged financial scam.... We understand, for the last several weeks, an anonymous note has been making the rounds with similar defamatory and scurrilous allegations. The real intent of this exercise appears to be to destabilise the company and the



market equilibrium besides hampering our meeting ongoing obligations. We are also concerned about the timing and the holding of the press conference before the stock market close and days before the interim budget.”

DHFL is a publicly listed housing finance company and is regulated by the National Housing Bank (NHB) and the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), among other regulators. It lends money, especially to promoters engaged in slum rehabilitation, housing development and other real estate businesses.

Cobrapost sought to know how the listed entity could give secured and unsecured loans to dubious shell companies, which could then be converted into private wealth for promoters. Over five days after the allegations, DHFL's share fell by nearly 40 per cent as the markets debated this news.

#### DISBURSAL OF LOANS

DHFL's net worth, according to its audited financial results for 2017-18, was Rs.8,795 crore. Cobrapost said the company took loans from banks and financial institutions to the tune of Rs.96,880 crore, including Rs.31,312 crore in the form of non-convertible debentures, Rs.36,963 crore from banks, Rs.2,965 crore in external commercial borrowings, Rs.2,848 crore from the NHB, Rs.9,225 crore in public deposits and Rs.13,567 crore from other sources. It disbursed Rs.84,982 crore in loans and advances to other entities.

According to its annual report, DHFL secured loans from 32 Indian banks and six foreign banks. They include State Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Bank of India, Canara Bank and HDFC Bank. Cobrapost said that it then lent substantial sums to shell companies, which were created just to siphon money out of DHFL and channel it elsewhere, mostly to companies in which the promoters, Kapil Wadhawan, Aruna Wadhawan and Dheeraj Wadhawan, and their proxies and associates had personal interests.

The main charges against the promoters of DHFL were that they created dozens of shell entities,

largely with a nominal capital of Rs.1 lakh each, and divided them into small groups of two to four companies, with many of them having the same or similar addresses and having the same set of initial directors, and in many instances having the same group of auditors.

The company also disbursed huge loans to these shell companies mostly without any security or collateral, and the proceeds appeared to have been used for the creation of private assets in India and overseas, Cobrapost said.

The news portal alleged that DHFL disbursed loans amounting to thousands of crores of rupees to these shell companies in the name of secured loans against slum development projects without any due diligence or checking of collateral or maintaining adequate debt-equity ratio.

It did so by disbursing the loans in single tranches, instead of following the established norm of disbursement in stages against progress of the project works, and ensured that most of the shell companies hid the name of the lender, that is, DHFL, the terms of loan and the terms of repayment in their financial statements to be submitted as required by the law.

These shell companies were accused of engaging in illegal insider trading in violation of SEBI takeover regulations to the tune of approximately Rs.1,000 crore; creating offshore assets of approximately Rs.4,000 crore; and having bought Wayamba, a Sri Lanka Premier League cricket team, by using loan money dubiously advanced by DHFL. Cobrapost also claimed that DHFL advanced money to several companies in Gujarat and Karnataka ahead of the State Assembly elections and gave crores of rupees in donations to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

According to the portal, the company disbursed a total of Rs.1,160 crore to various Gujarat-based companies for projects that were either put on hold by municipal corporations or suspended.

For instance, Satyasankalp Buildcon LLP took a loan for Swam-

inarayan Green City with an environment clearance of Rs.150 crore, whereas the loan advanced by DHFL was for a sum of Rs.680 crore. The rest of the money was allegedly for the Swaminarayan Business Park, which the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation suspended for violation of the norms of the General Development Control Regulations. DHFL also disbursed a total of Rs.1,320 crore to different companies of Karnataka under various schemes and projects.

#### POLITICAL DONATIONS

Around Rs.19.5 crore was given as donation to the BJP between 2014-15 and 2016-17 by RKW Developers Pvt. Ltd, Skill Realtors Pvt. Ltd and Darshan Developers Pvt. Ltd, respectively. All these donors were linked to the Wadhawans, Cobrapost said. Of the three companies, RKW Developers, with a donation of Rs.10 crore in 2014-15, did not show any donation on its balance sheet. Similarly, Skill Realtors donated Rs.2 crore in 2014-15 but failed to show the amount on its balance sheet.

While receiving and reporting these donations, the BJP failed to provide the permanent account number (PAN) details of these donor companies. This is in violation of the provisions of Section 182 of the Companies Act, 2013, which governs corporate funding to political parties, said Cobrapost.

Interestingly, the Mumbai-based RKW Developers contributed Rs.10 crore to the BJP in 2014-15, but in 2012-13, the company posted a loss of Rs.24,77,828. In 2014-15, the Mumbai-based Skill Realtors donated Rs.2 crore to the BJP but recorded a measly profit of Rs.26,914.

Darshan Developers, which gave Rs.7.5 crore to the BJP in 2016-17, reported a loss of Rs.7,69,68,968 that year and losses of Rs.5,13,406 in 2013-14 and Rs.4,650 in 2014-15, respectively. In 2015-16, the company posted a measly profit of Rs.2,82,691.

Cobrapost pointed out that Under Section 182 of the Companies Act, and provisions of law, as of 2014, a company had to be profitable be-



fore it could make any monetary contributions to political parties and a company could contribute not more than 7.5 per cent of the net profits earned during the three preceding fiscal years. Also, all such donations had to be shown in the account books of the donor companies.

As per the Companies Act, this violation is punishable with six months' imprisonment and a fine up to five times the donated amount.

Claiming serious violations of several civil and criminal laws and regulations, Cobrapost said that there was a massive deviation by the company both from the industry practice of lending and from good corporate governance norms.

"There is also significant deviation from related party policy of the company on material disclosure of information in all of the cases where the shell entities are actively suppressing facts on terms of borrowing, terms of repayment and the institution they are borrowing from. In certain cases, no agreement in black and white can even be found in public records which are to be mandatorily disclosed," said the news portal.

#### **MULTIPLE VIOLATIONS**

Listing other "irregularities", Cobrapost said that DHFL violated SEBI regulations, NHB norms and various sections of the Companies Act relating to political donations, auditing and investment limits.

It also attempted to evade capital gains tax, made unexplained investments, delayed deposits of tax deducted at source (TDS), and committed deviations in disclosures in its financial statement while violating sections of the Indian Penal Code by misappropriating public money and converting it into various movable properties for its own use.

The company also stands accused of criminal conspiracy with various persons in concert and dishonestly disposing of properties in

violation of several legal contracts, having committed wilful "criminal breach of trust" and having fooled DHFL's shareholders and common investors, and engaging in laundering. If these violations have indeed taken place, they happened right under the nose of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the SEBI and the Union Ministry of Finance, besides the monitoring mechanisms of the banks, the auditing agencies, the Income Tax Department, rating agencies, and so on.



**KAPIL WADHAWAN**,  
Chairman, DHFL.

"Not only does the scam point fingers squarely at the inefficient corporate governance of NBFCs as a whole, but it also questions the dubious role public bodies have played in effecting the scam. It is a clear case of complete connivance amongst public and private figures," said Cobrapost.

As far as political donations go, it must be noted that in 2017 the government brought an amendment to Section 182 of the Companies Act that in effect enables dubious political funding without any consequences. However, it remains to be investigated whether the donations by DHFL were in violation of Section 182 as it applied then.

Pointing to a possible Panama/Paradise connection, Cobrapost said that DHFL also advanced loans of Rs.650 crore and Rs.635 crore to Kunjbihari Developers Pvt. Ltd and Edico Ventures Pvt. Ltd respectively. Kunjbihari was a 100 per cent subsidiary of Edico Ventures, itself a subsidiary of Archway Services Pvt. Ltd, which had a large investment (equivalent to the loan amount) in a company associated with the Panama and Paradise leaks.

As per its annual report for 2016-17, Edico Ventures invested \$4.34 million (Rs.19 crore) in Larimar Holdings Ltd and \$300 million (Rs.1,364 crore) in Tanzanite Holdings Ltd. Both these companies were linked to the Paradise and Panama leaks, as claimed by the Interna-

tional Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Explaining the backstory to the DHFL saga, Cobrapost threw light on a battle over NBFCs between the RBI and the Finance Ministry. By the end of 2018, the RBI and the Finance Ministry had come to loggerheads over the formation of policies to regulate and control NBFCs. Following the collapse of IL&FS, the infrastructure finance company, after it defaulted on payments to lenders, NBFCs faced an enormous liquidity crunch as corporates lost faith in them.

This led to NBFCs squeezing lending to micro, small and medium enterprises and prompted the government to step in and take control of IL&FS in a bid to contain the damage done to the financial ecosystem. While the RBI rooted for much stricter governance, the Ministry looked for a quick fix by providing NBFCs with a special liquidity window.

Cobrapost said that if the Ministry had had its way, NBFCs like DHFL could declare bankruptcy or show that loans, which were in reality spurious transactions to shell companies, had been defaulted on.

The investigative portal also stated that ignoring the RBI's warnings and the market's dire state, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley tweeted: "The government will take all measures to ensure that adequate liquidity is maintained/provided to the NBFCs."

Cobrapost warned that if the government were to take over DHFL, as it did IL&FS, without a thorough investigation into its affairs by agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Serious Fraud Investigation Office and the Enforcement Directorate, then the Wadhawans, who it claimed were the principal beneficiaries of the scam, would go scot-free.

Even as the regulators and financial authorities look into the veracity of these claims and charges, the scandal has led to fears of how it will impact the economy and what repercussions it will have for the larger financial system. □



# Fall of an icon

The sacking of Chanda Kochhar, ICICI Bank's former CEO and MD, for violating the bank's code of conduct raises questions about the present-day corporate governance. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

CHANDA KOCHHAR, the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Managing Director (MD) of India's largest private bank, ICICI Bank Limited, was sacked with retrospective effect on January 30 following a high-level internal probe that found her guilty of violating the bank's code of conduct with regard to conflicts of interest.

The fall of the poster woman of the corporate world came as a shocker and raised uncomfortable questions about the standard of corporate governance in major financial institutions such as ICICI. It is also seen as a cautionary sign for Indian businesses and the corporate community.

Several senior bankers opine that Chanda Kochhar's removal was the right thing to happen and that it was time perpetrators of fraud and corrupt practices were exposed and charged for their misdeeds.

The Kochhar-ICICI Bank drama has been playing out since March 2018. The denouement was quick, and for the celebrated banker, the finale was harsh. Apart from terminating her services, the ICICI Bank board decided to claw back bonuses paid to her since April 2009, hold back unpaid amounts and divest her of her stock option entitlements. Chanda Kochhar may have to pay back bonuses and penalties amounting to upwards of Rs.25 crore. Worse still, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) will look into whether she and her husband, Deepak Kochhar, are involved in money laundering schemes.



CHANDA KOCHHAR.

ICICI had been reasonably lenient with its CEO ever since the nepotism and impropriety issues surfaced. She had gone on "leave" but continued to hold a position on the board and, according to employees, came to the corporate office from time to time to hold meetings. Eventually, the board constituted an internal committee, headed by Justice (retired) B.N. Srikrishna, to probe the allegations of corruption.

However, in January 2019, the bank was compelled to sack her because of the first information report (FIR) filed by the CBI against Chanda Kochhar, Deepak Kochhar and Venugopal Dhoot, head of the Videocon group, and the report of the Srikrishna Committee, which found her guilty of "ineffectively dealing with conflict of interest and due disclosure or recusal requirements". The CBI has booked the

three for criminal conspiracy, cheating and corruption. The agency accused the CEO of dishonesty and "abusing her official position" by sanctioning loans to the Videocon group. It alleged: "ICICI Bank, under Kochhar, sanctioned 'high value' loans to Videocon Industries, violating the bank's lending policies, in exchange for an investment by the consumer electronics company's owner in a business headed by Kochhar's husband." It says it may investigate the role of senior officials, including the former Chairman of ICICI Bank K.V. Kamath, in the Videocon loan sanctioning cases. Kamath is a respected banker who took the ICICI group to new heights.

The case is essentially as follows: Chanda Kochhar took over as ICICI bank chief in 2009. The period between June 2009 and October 2011 saw the bank sanctioning loans worth Rs.3,250 crore to the Videocon group. Chanda Kochhar was on the sanctioning committee. The allegation is that it was a *quid pro quo*. As she sanctioned the loan, Videocon invested in NuPower Renewables, a company floated by her husband.

Investigations by the CBI revealed that a day after ICICI disbursed a Rs.300-crore loan to Videocon International Electronics in 2009, NuPower Renewables received Rs.64 crore. According to ICICI, Videocon's exposure has caused it losses amounting to Rs.1,730 crore. A few days after the CBI filed the FIR, Justice Srikrishna released his report. From the sections released to the press, it appears



that the committee was convinced by the evidence that Chanda Kochhar was guilty. "To charge someone as powerful as Kochhar is an extremely difficult task. Justice Srikrishna is not a pushover as we know. Between his scrutiny and the evidence, they would have had ample proof to come to this conclusion," says a senior partner in a Mumbai corporate law firm.

A section of the report reads:

"The Enquiry Report, with the scope period of April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2018 (unless specific information required enquiry into transactions or facts of an earlier period), concluded, primarily on account of ineffectively dealing with conflict of interest and due disclosure or recusal requirements, that Ms Chanda Kochhar was in violation of the ICICI Bank Code of Conduct, its framework for dealing with conflict of interest and fiduciary duties, and in terms of applicable Indian laws, rules and regulations.

"The Enquiry Report also concluded that her lack of diligence with respect to annual disclosures as required by the bank in terms of its internal policies, the ICICI Bank Code of Conduct and applicable Indian laws, rules and regulations on her interests (direct or indirect) towards avoidance of conflict of interest, when considered that the bank's processes were dependent solely on the directors discharging their fiduciary duty to recuse themselves and avoid conflict, implies that the bank's processes were rendered ineffective by her approach to such disclosures and avoidance of conflict."

Soon after the bank issued the termination statement to the media, Chanda Kochhar said in an official release that she was "utterly disappointed, hurt and shocked by the decision".

Typical of banks and corporate bodies, no negative information comes out in the public domain unless an insider squeals. According to a former ICICI executive (who wishes to remain anonymous), there were some rumblings in the bank about Chanda Kochhar's high-

handed ways. In early 2018, two employees filed complaints to the bank stating that top executives had breached rules and that they were declaring inflated profits by approximately \$1.3 billion over eight years by delaying provisioning for 31 non-performing asset (NPA) accounts.

Following the complaint by a third whistle-blower in March 2018, the bank took the matter seriously and asked its audit department to look into the allegations. The whistle-blower apparently said that the bank had issued hundreds of letters of credit to entities related to its troubled corporate borrowers to help them avoid defaults and pre-empt their becoming NPAs. Simultaneously, the Reserve Bank of India began a probe of 26 loan accounts among the list of 31 given by the whistle-blowers.

#### EASY LOANS

Bankers say loans were sanctioned easily those years. The market was buoyant and not much emphasis was placed on compliance and due diligence. One bank executive said: "In fact, the slowdown we see now is owing to all those bad loans that were given so readily. But when you are a public company, portraying a wrong picture is not fair to investors."

By May/June 2018, the pressure on the bank to investigate Chanda Kochhar had built up. Until then, the board led by M.K Sharma had backed her, saying that due process was followed and she was not culpable in the case. Eventually, the wrongdoings unravelled when the Securities Exchange Commission of the United States insisted that the bank delve deeper into the complaints. The bank had to comply as it is listed on the New York Stock Exchange and, therefore, bound by U.S. regulations.

Chanda Kochhar issued a statement saying that she would be on leave from June 2018 to facilitate an independent investigation. The bank continued to support her and permitted her access to her office. However, in October 2018, several factors such as the media glare, indications that the probe would go against her,

criticism of the bank for its poor governance and the poor stock performance of the bank forced Chanda Kochhar to resign from all positions she held. Sandeep Bakshi, head of ICICI Prudential, has taken over as the bank's CEO. Interestingly, on the day Chanda Kochhar resigned, the bank's stock price went up by 5.8 per cent to Rs.320.

In her defence, it is said that between 2008 and 2013, the Indian banking industry was sanctioning loans liberally and conflicts of interest were not a serious concern. But, owing to the generosity of banks, there has been a ballooning of bad loans, says a former ICICI executive. Chanda Kochhar is a victim of that era, and her "I am invisible attitude" eventually did her in.

Chanda Kochhar was the epitome of success. A qualified chartered accountant and management graduate and one of Kamath's proteges, she was singularly responsible for building the bank's retail business. By 2006, the ramped-up retail business contributed close to 66 per cent of the bank's balance sheet. Although there were a few senior colleagues contending for Kamath's position when he retired, Chanda Kochhar pipped everyone to the post and took over as CEO and MD in 2009.

Over time, she gained a reputation as a shrewd, capable and hard-nosed banker. She was one of the top corporate executives in the country, often representing India at international events such as the World Economic Forum. She tried to prove that she had broken the glass ceiling and shown how women could balance career and family. She even made several public declarations on gender equality in corporate India. Business journalists would often say ICICI is Chanda Kochhar. However, when the going got tough, the bank's board said the "person cannot be bigger than the institution". There are theories that she could be a victim of the current regime's plan to prove it is committed to checking fraud in the economy. Was it easier to nail Chanda Kochhar when big defaulters are still on the run? □



# BHARAT RATNA FOR A FUNDRAISER

Nana Deshmukh has been conferred the Bharat Ratna for 2019. He neither enriched Parliament nor the public platform nor the press with his contributions. **He enriched the Jana Sangh, with money.** He was a born fund collector and a born political operator. BY **A.G. NOORANI**

**A** GOVERNMENT in a democratic country, governed by the rule of law, wields executive power solely, exclusively for a public purpose. It cannot use state property or state power for personal or party ends. Award of Bharat Ratna, the highest honour the Republic of India can confer, to Vijay Mallya or Nirav Modi or Mehul Choksi would provoke outrage. Nana Deshmukh does not fall into this category, which is cited only to illustrate the principle that the power to confer state awards is not an unlimited one. That principle applies very much to Nana Deshmukh.

He did not deserve to be in the same company as the others who received that highest honour. He was not a politician in the same class as A.B. Vajpayee or, for that matter, any others of stature such as E.M.S. Namboodripad, A.K. Gopalan and Acharya Narendra Dev. Prem Bhasin gave his life to the socialist movement. After retirement, he repaired to a public library to read newspapers and became one of the country's finest political analysts.

Nana Deshmukh neither enriched Parliament nor the public platform nor the press with his contributions. He enriched the Jana Sangh, with money. He was a born fund collector as he was a born political operator. He was prepared to stoop to any depth to secure a partisan objective. He lied on oath before a High Court judge and inflicted on him a document that the judge found to be fabricated. He took sanyas from politics because he fell out with Vajpayee and L.K. Advani after 1979. He re-

mained close to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), and at least on one crucial occasion flung a potshot at them when they went on one of their frequent trips to the RSS' headquarters in Nagpur, in penitence to seek guidance and forgiveness.

As one of the general secretaries of the Janata Party, he made a Faustian pact with Charan Singh to divide the spoils of office after the Assembly elections in 1977—the Jana Sangh to rule in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi, and Charan Singh's Bharatiya Lok Dal to rule in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Orissa (now Odisha). Have you ever heard of such a cynical deal before? Prime Minister Morarji Desai and Jagjivan Ram wanted each legislature party to elect its leader. They were overruled (Nana Deshmukh, *RSS: Victim of Slander; A Multidimensional Study of RSS, Jana Sangh, Janata Party and The Present Political Crisis*, Vision Books, 1979, pages 52-53).

The pomposity in the subtitle is reflected all over the book. Read this: "The moral degradation and loss of direction of India's politics affected the younger generation, as it had to. The youth power of the country came to the fore through the movement launched for 'total revolution', it gave proof of its courage and sacrifice in the fight for freedom from dictatorship during the dark days of the Emergency and helped the frustrated opposition to attain power, but it has again lost its way. In the absence of able leadership with a constructive outlook, it is again getting involved with purposeless agitations, frivolous campaigns and subversion. If we want to utilise the power of the youth for constructive purposes we will have to set an example, the youth of the country would have to be convinced that power is not the only goal of politics, that the leadership does not hanker after it for its own sake."

Pray, what example did *he* set? He came into his own neither as a mass leader nor an Member of Parliament but as an "organisation man", an operator and fund collector. By the 1970s, he had won the confidence of a powerful but gullible newspaper tycoon, a Mumbai industrialist and a wealthy colleague. Madhu Limaye, his socialist colleague in the Janata Party, found that Deshmukh went back on an understanding. "He kept quiet. This was nothing but perfidy" (Madhu Limaye, *Janata Party Experiment: An Insider's Account of Opposition*





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**JUNE 5, 2004:** Nana Deshmukh (right) with A.B. Vajpayee on the occasion of Sampurna Kranti Diwas in New Delhi.

*Politics, 1975-77*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1994, Vol. 1, page 561).

Deshmukh's big success came when he inveigled Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) into accepting the RSS' support in his movement against corruption and for the ouster of Indira Gandhi from power. He became general secretary of JP's Lok Sangharsh Samiti and did the running of the samiti. JP was the leader, the mascot. JP was a poor judge of people; his confidence was abused by many. We do disservice to history by withholding censure of JP for his sorry lapse in accepting RSS support. We are still paying the price for a sorry betrayal by a noble soul. From being an outcast the Jana Sangh became "respectable" as did the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1989 under V.P. Singh.

#### DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA'S DEATH

Before all this lay a sordid event revealing Nana Deshmukh in his true colours—his disgraceful conduct before a judicial inquiry. "Report regarding the facts and circumstances relating to the death of Shri Deen Dayal Upadhyaya by Honourable Mr Justice Y.V. Chandrachud (Commission of Inquiry)" is still relevant in all its 160 pages.

Upadhyaya, president of the Jana Sangh, died on a train journey on the night between February 10 and 11, 1968. On February 10, 1968, he left Lucknow in the evening for Patna by the Sealdah Express. The train left Varanasi at about 1:40 a.m., and after stopping at Kashi for about five minutes, it steamed into Mughalsarai at about 2:10 a.m. But Upadhyaya was not on the train. Ten minutes later, his body was found lying near a traction

pole 748 feet from the end of the platform of Mughalsarai station where the train had halted. He was found clutching a five-rupee note in his hand. The last time anyone saw him alive was at Jaunpur, shortly after midnight.

One M.P. Singh, who travelled in the adjoining cabin of the same coach, saw someone enter Upadhyaya's cabin at Mughalsarai and walk off with his file and bedding. This man, he identified in the court, as Bharat Lal. Together with Ram Awadh, Bharat Lal was charged with murder and theft. Both were acquitted of the capital charge, while Bharat Lal alone was convicted of the theft of the belongings of the deceased. He appealed to the Allahabad High Court. The Sessions judge remarked in his judgment that "the offence of murder not having been proved against the accused, the problem of truth about the murder still remains".

Over 70 MPs demanded a commission of inquiry to ascertain the truth. The Government of India promptly agreed and appointed Justice Y.V. Chandrachud of the Bombay High Court as the sole member of the commission. Although, strictly speaking, parties are not arrayed before a commission of inquiry as prosecutor and accused, in reality the Jana Sangh was very much the prosecutor before the commission. Upadhyaya's murder was politically motivated, it said. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), to whom ironically the case had been specially entrusted to ensure independent investigation, was attacked for deliberately suppressing the political origin of the crime by giving a commonplace slant to it and making scapegoats of two notorious railway thieves.

Vajpayee appointed a committee to collect the facts



relating to the death of Upadhyaya. Nana Deshmukh was appointed as Chairman of that committee. He co-opted one Ramacharya Pandey to assist him. The report of the committee was placed by Deshmukh before the Central Working Committee of the Jana Sangh, which was held in Bhopal on the March 22 and 23, 1968. The report was simultaneously released to the press. It was published in an official publication of the Jana Sangh called *Apni Gatividhi*, dated April 15, 1968. Deshmukh, Sherlock Holmes and Joseph McCarthy rolled into one, saw the chance of a lifetime to emerge as a national hero. He began by putting forth his charge. He gave evidence on oath before the commission and also put forth before it a crucial document. He accused two of the "internal threats" identified by RSS chief M.S. Golwalkar, Muslims and communists, of complicity in the murder.

### THE DESHMUKH COMMITTEE REPORT

Deshmukh reckoned that if he could get the commission to indict Muslims and communists for the murder he would emerge as a national hero eclipsing Vajpayee, whom he disliked. Let the report speak for itself.

"The case of the Jana Sangh was that Upadhyaya was murdered for political reasons. He used to collect information regarding anti-national activities and he used to keep that information in a file and some diaries. The fact that the file and the diaries have not been traced is said to support the case that certain Muslim organisations had held Shri Upadhyaya responsible for the communal riots at Meerut. Some communists were willing to lend a helping hand to the communalists. Upadhyaya was being shadowed by suspicious characters. Ultimately, the communists and communalists joined hands and took the help of Major Surendra Mohan Sharma for perpetrating the murder of Major Sharma who is the son-in-law of V.N. Sharma, who in turn is said to be closely connected with Dr Faridi, the president of 'Majlis Mushawarat'.

"Major Sharma travelled by the I Class compartment of the FCT bogie from Lucknow so that he could wait for an opportune moment to execute the conspiracy. At the other end, namely, at Mughalsarai, the communists had taken the necessary steps to further the object of the conspiracy. It was as a part of this scheme that Prabhu Singh Bhati of the GRP Mughalsarai had gone on leave on the 10th afternoon, feigning sickness.

"Known communists, like Prabhu Singh Bhati, Ramdas the ticket collector, Pranav Kumar alias Dada Ghosh, Satyanarayan Tiwari, Munne Lal Gupta and Dr Shivtahal Mehta were moving about in a suspicious manner round about the time of the murder. Upadhyaya was murdered in the running train after the train left Zafarabad at 12:41 a.m. Strange sounds coming from the I Class compartment were heard by persons travelling in the Third Class compartment of the FCT bogie after the train had left Zafarabad.

"The deceased must have been struck on the right side of his head, while entering the 'B' Cabin with the right side towards the corridor. Thereafter, he must have been thrown on the berth, with someone sitting on his chest



DEEN DAYAL UPADHYAYA.

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and someone on his legs. Upadhyaya must have been then carried to the lavatory near the 'A' Cabin and held in a position in which the blood from injury No.1 would fall directly on his right shoulder.

"As the murder was pre-planned, the news of Shri Upadhyaya's death had spread in Varanasi even before the dead body was identified by Vishwanath Prasad Agarwal. The conspirators gloated over their success and spread the news immediately on coming to know that the purpose of the conspiracy was fulfilled." When the suspicion fell on communists, some of them like Dr Shivtahal Mehta, Munnellal Gupta and Satyanarayan Tiwari absconded.

The CBI was not spared. The murder was committed in the running train and the dead body was subsequently placed near the traction pole in order to simulate an accident.

The CBI manipulated the discovery of articles belonging to Shri Upadhyaya and concocted evidence to show that the recoveries were made from the house other than that of Lalta Kalwar. By resorting to this expedient, the CBI could make scapegoats of two notorious railway thieves, Bharat and Ram Awadh. (Nana Deshmukh, Jana Sangh Witness No.51). According to them, Upadhyaya used to collect information against anti-nationals and kept that information in a file or a diary.

The Commission of Inquiry found: "(1) That Shri Upadhyaya was pushed out of the running train when he was standing near the door of the I Class compartment of the F.C.T. bogie. (2) That he dashed against Traction Pole No.1276 and died an instantaneous death. (3) That the injuries found on his person were caused in a single transaction. (4) That the injuries could not have been caused inside the compartment.... That the murder of Shri Upadhyaya was accompanied by an immediate theft, which shows that the two are part and parcel of the same transaction.... That there is no reliable evidence to show that the missing file contained any matter of polit-



ical significance. That the murder was not committed for political motives. That neither the left communists nor Dr Faridi nor any communalists are connected, directly or indirectly, with the murder, and that there is no substance in the accusation that the CBI acted *mala fide*.”

The judge explained: “I have dealt exhaustively with the charge that Shri Upadhyaya’s murder was committed for political motives, as that was one of the important points involved in my inquiry. On the 12th February 1968, some Members of Parliament had expressed a fear on the floor of the House whether in India politics had become so unsafe for politicians that one had to pay for one’s political beliefs by one’s life. I can say with a certain amount of confidence that nothing that has come before me can support the accusation that there was any politics in Shri Upadhyaya’s murder. Undoubtedly, he had political rivals but his death is the rash and extempore handiwork of mere thieves.”

The Jana Sangh’s witnesses were disbelieved. That included the star witness, Deshmukh himself. There were no bloodstains on the floor of the compartment. Justice Chandrachud, who became Chief Justice of India 20 years later, said: “Shri Ramacharya Pandey has stated in his diary Ex.40, in the weekly memo ending with the 3rd of March that Dr Faridi and Prabhu Singh Bhati were the brains behind the conspiracy. I have already rejected the charge that Bhati was connected with Shri Upadhyaya’s murder. I must now consider the validity of the charge against Dr Faridi.

“Dr Faridi, a *Muslim*, is a heart specialist practising at Lucknow. He owns a house in Lucknow, a part of which is let out to a company called ‘Cipla’, of which Shri V.N. Sharma is the Branch Manager. On the 17th January, 1966, V.N. Sharma’s daughter was married to Major Surendra Mohan Sharma, who commanded a Field Battery Regiment at Namkom, near Ranchi. Major Sharma had taken one month’s leave from the 14th of January and he returned to his headquarters on the evening of the 11th February. He went for regimental exercises on the 12th. [Note, the judge’s reference to Faridi as “a Muslim”.]

“I have rejected as unsubstantial the allegation that Major S.N. Sharma was in any manner connected with the death of Shri Upadhyaya. I have held that he travelled by the train service coach and that no one masquerading as Major Sharma travelled by the FCT bogie, at any stage of the journey between Lucknow and Mughalsarai. This conclusion necessarily implies that Major S.N. Sharma was not used as a tool by Dr Faridi. Nonetheless, it is necessary to examine the charges against Dr Faridi a little closely.

“The Jana Sangh has examined three witnesses in support of its case that not only communists but Muslims like Dr Faridi had conspired to commit Shri Upadhyaya’s murder. These witnesses are Maheshya Datta, Shivraj Bahadur and Sardar Jagjit Singh, all three were disbelieved.

“In my opinion, the charge against Dr Faridi that he is connected with the murder of Shri Upadhyaya is base-

less. *It is significant that in the report of committee appointed by Shri Vajpayee, of which Shri Nanaji Deshmukh was the Chairman, there is no reference to Dr Faridi whatsoever. Surely Nana knows that* [emphasis added, throughout].

“The case of the Jana Sangh is that Shri Upadhyaya used to collect information regarding anti-national activities and keep it in a file and some diaries. As the file which Shri Upadhyaya was carrying with him has not been traced, it is urged that the file was taken away for a political purpose. It could not have been taken away by a mere thief. Nanaji Deshmukh and Ashwini Kumar, the organising secretary of the Bihar Jana Sangh, have stated in their evidence that Shri Upadhyaya used to collect information about the activities of the anti-nationals....

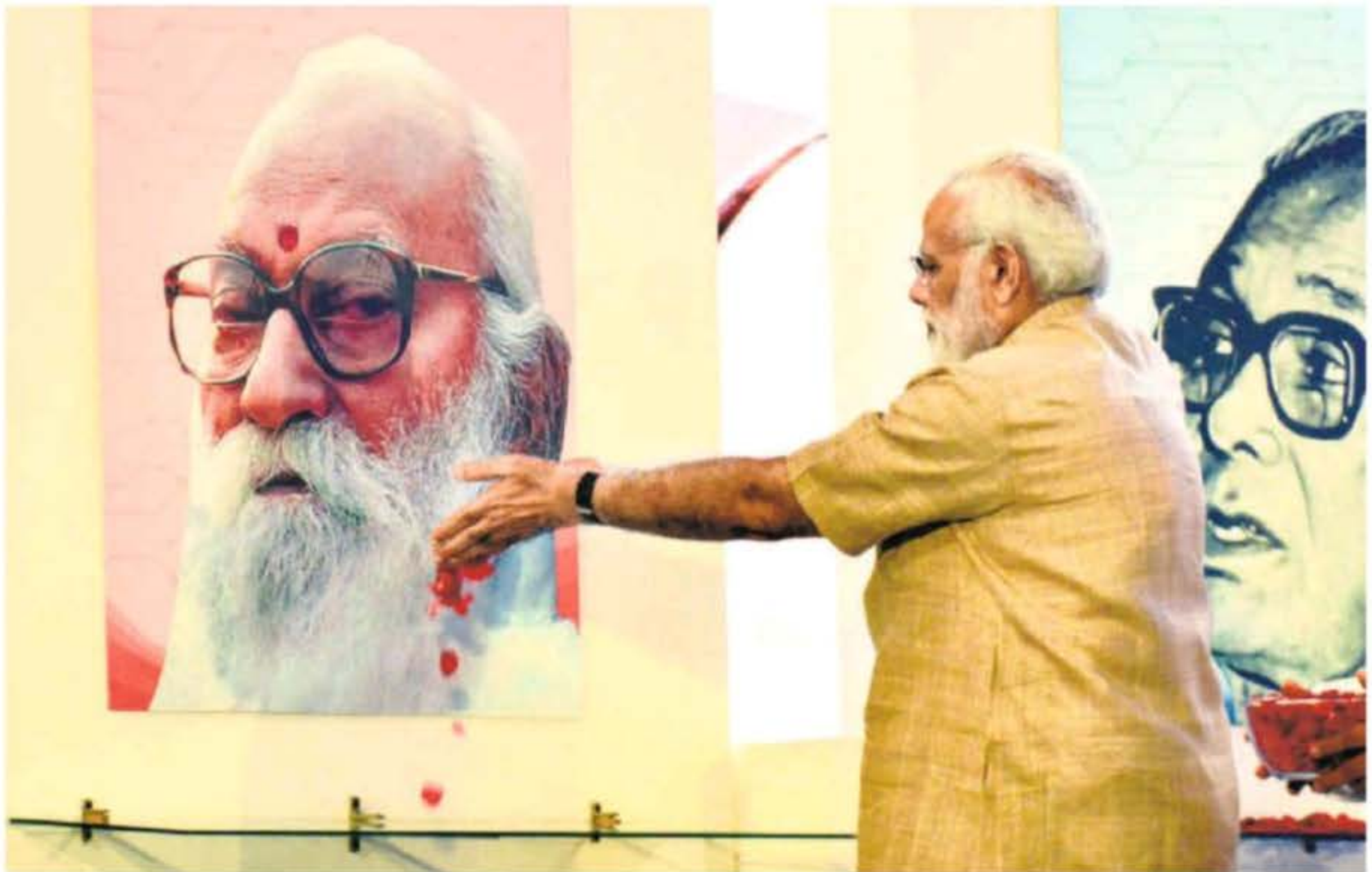
“I am however unable to hold that the particular file, which was stolen at Mughalsarai from Shri Upadhyaya’s cabin, could have contained any secret or important information regarding anti-nationals. It is remarkable that in the report of the committee presided over by Nanaji Deshmukh, there is no reference at all to the file or the diaries. In paragraph 8, the report says that ‘Almost the entire luggage of Panditji has been recovered except a bag containing books, a pillow and a slate-coloured chaddar.’ If the file contained important matter, the report would have undoubtedly referred to it, especially when reference is made to the other articles, which were not traced.

“Kailash Pati claims to have been supplying secret information to Shri Upadhyaya for about six years. It is surprising that he has not produced a single letter written by Shri Upadhyaya acknowledging receipt of the information. In fact, there is no evidence that there was any correspondence between the two. Kailash Pati has taken the easy course by saying that Shri Upadhyaya did not reply back to him. That is impossible to believe. A person as methodical and meticulous as Shri Upadhyaya would not have failed to send a simple acknowledgement, though without discussing the nature of the merits of the information supplied to him.

“The CBI recorded Kailash Pati’s statement on the 3rd of April 1968, which is Ex.14. He did not even suggest in that statement that he used to supply any information to Shri Upadhyaya. He only stated that he had gone to receive Shri Upadhyaya at the Patna Station first on the 10th night and then on the 11th morning, but Shri Upadhyaya did not come by either train. Lastly, Kailash Pati did not file any affidavit before the commission, which normally he would have done if he was in possession of such an important clue.

“In my opinion, therefore, though the file which Shri Upadhyaya had taken with him on the journey has not been traced, there is no satisfactory evidence to show that the file was in the nature of a precious political document. As the file has not been traced, so have the books not been traced. Experience shows that thieves promptly part with stolen articles, which have a market value. Files and books are valueless in the eye of the receiver, though they may be otherwise worth their weight in gold.”





V. SUNDERSHAN

Ramacharya Pandey, a graduate of the Calcutta University, edited a weekly called *Jan Deep* published from Lucknow. He had written a dozen books of poetry. He became a member of the Jana Sangh in 1960. He was a confidant of Nana Deshmukh, who co-opted him on his committee of investigation.

“He says that he received the news of Shri Upadhyaya’s death at about 9:45 a.m. on the 11th of February, 1968, while he was sitting in the Jana Sangh Karyalaya at Lucknow. He immediately passed on the information to the Jana Sangh leaders, including Nana Deshmukh. Nana told him on phone to proceed to Mughalsarai immediately and collect the relevant information regarding the death of Shri Upadhyaya. Ramacharya says, he accordingly contacted several persons from day to day and noted their names in his personal diary, Ex.40. He says that he maintains the diary regularly. The diary contains other personal jottings also....

“Frankly, I am unable to appreciate how just a day or two after the death of Shri Upadhyaya, Ramacharya would go about conducting a sort of parallel investigation. At that stage, the anxiety of all concerned was to cooperate with the police who were investigating into the murder. Nothing had happened, till then at any rate, to cast any doubt on the fairness of the official investigation.”

Now comes this damning part. “I cannot accept Shri Nanaji Deshmukh’s statement that he told Ramacharya on the 11th morning on phone that he should collect the relevant information. Nanaji was then in Bombay and knew nothing about the murder. In fact, there is a good basis for doubting that Ramacharya at all telephoned

**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi paying a floral tribute to commemorate the birth centenary of Nana Deshmukh, in New Delhi on October 11, 2017.

Nanaji from Lucknow on the 11th morning. Om Prakash Chatwal of the Lucknow Telephone Exchange, who was examined before me by the CBI, has stated that *no trunk call was made from telephone number 23509 (Lucknow) to Bombay on the 11th of February 1968. 23509 is the telephone number of the Jana Sangh Karyalaya, Lucknow, where Ramacharya says he received the information about Shri Upadhyaya’s death.*”

In short, Nana lied. There was no phone call. “The entries of the 12th of February would put the smartest and the most experienced investigator to shame. So efficient indeed was Ramacharya. In one day he claims to have been able to contact almost all the principal actors in this mysterious drama. If the diary is authentic, to Ramacharya must go the credit of having solved the riddle of Shri Upadhyaya’s death within a short span of two days. The CBI took a little over two months and a half to file the charge sheet against the two accused. The learned Sessions judge took a year to decide the case. I have been grappling with this mystery since February 1970. But, Ramacharya concluded on the 12th of February 1968 that communists (whose names are mentioned in the entry) were concerned with the murder and that the five-rupee note was planted to simulate an accident. The entry of the 12th leaves me but with one feeling, that it was made months after....

“I will now turn to another variety of entries showing



that the diary has been written subsequently. In these entries Ramacharya, like a seer, has made advance reference to coming events. For example, under the date 17th of February, it is mentioned that the itinerary of Shri Upadhyaya (which is Ex.58) was handed over to DIG Lobo by Nanaji on that date. Nanaji has admitted that Ex.58 was given by him to DIG Lobo on the 2nd of March 1968. There is an endorsement to that effect on Ex.58 itself.

"This in my opinion proves beyond any doubt that the diary was written out subsequently in support of a certain theory that was to be made out. Could Deshmukh have been ignorant of this?

"Ramacharya claims that Ex.40 is his personal diary and not a mere record of the investigation done by him. I am sorry to say that the diary is pre-eminently a record of the investigation made by Ramacharya. Pages after pages of the diary are blank. 13 days in March, 27 days in April... and all the 31 days of July are completely blank. I do not think that any life could run such a blank course for so long a period. And, Ramacharya is a poet and a politician. If there was no political event worth noting in the diary during those days, his muse at least could not have so cruelly deserted him. In any event, a personal diary can always have enough food for thought in the shape of the endless problems of personal life.

"I will refer to one more improbability in the investigation conducted by Ramacharya and leave the matter there. On the day that Shri Upadhyaya died, the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal Ministry was in power in U.P. The Jana Sangh was a constituent of the Dal and in fact Shri Ram Prakash, who belongs to the Jana Sangh, was the Deputy Chief Minister. It is impossible to believe that Nanaji would ask Ramacharya to conduct a parallel investigation on the 12th when one of the leaders of the Jana Sangh was occupying a high place in the U.P. Cabinet. The Ministry fell on the 17th and President's Rule was introduced in U.P. on the 25th of February. There was, therefore, no reason for Nanaji to suspect the bonafides of the police, at least till the 17th.

"It is no pleasure to distrust political workers but Ramacharya seems to have identified himself so completely with the cause of his party that he permitted his vision to be blinded. He put himself in a position where he could not see truth from falsehood. I must express my disapproval that anyone should have been a party to the fabrication of a document for the purpose of producing it as evidence" (page 121). Ramacharya was lent Deshmukh's tool.

#### WITNESSES DISBELIEVED

Stronger censure was surely due. Deshmukh said on oath that he spoke to Ramacharya on the phone from Bombay to Lucknow. There was no STD then. The official of the Lucknow Telephone Exchange said that there was no such call that day and produced the record. In plain words, Deshmukh perjured himself. Witnesses are not just picked and put in the witness box. They are first tested for their veracity. Almost all Deshmukh's wit-

nesses were disbelieved. Murli Manohar Joshi was disbelieved, too (page 126, paragraph 10). He contradicted Deshmukh. Both spoke under oath. The commission censured Joshi (page 127, paragraph 12). Was Deshmukh not aware of the fact that Ramacharya Pandey's diary, which he so confidently produced before the commission, was, as the commission noted, a fabricated document on the face of it—"written subsequently" (page 120, paragraphs 99, 100, 101 and 102).

Evil intent is carried out by evil means. In this case, a torn paper cutting was put before the commission plus evidence regarding a planchette. Read these paragraphs at pages 92 and 123. Dr Kataria, a reputed surgeon, is not an independent witness.... "There is an interesting sidelight to Dr Kataria's evidence. The Jana Sangh produced before me a truncated cutting from *Organiser* dated the 18th of February 1968. It says that one could make "the following" statement after discussing the matter regarding Shri Upadhyaya's death with Shri Ram Prakash, Shri Balraj Madhok, Shrimati Khanna and 'a leading surgeon'. In that cutting, what follows has not been included. It has been cleverly cut out. That the reference in the cutting to "a leading surgeon" is to Dr Kataria is clear from the diary of Shri Ramacharya Pandey in which, under the date 13th of March 1968, he refers to a cutting from *Organiser* dated the 18th of February in regard to 'Dr Kataria'.

"It is interesting to have a look at the whole of the news item dated the 18th of February. It says expressly at page 2, that according to the opinion of 'a leading surgeon of Delhi... only the sudden stroke in the head causing instantaneous death, can explain the closed eyes and the calm face'. Reading this, one can understand why the whole of the cutting was not placed before me. It is clear that the initial opinion of Dr Kataria was that death must have occurred instantaneously as a result of the head injury. He has now made a valiant effort to establish that death must have supervened an hour after the injuries were caused. Who else put the torn cutting but the man who led the Jana Sangh team before the commission—Nana Deshmukh.

"It seems to me that in their moment of grief, those interested in Shri Upadhyaya were groping in the dark to discover the truth. They did not even hesitate to consult the planchette but they were not satisfied with the answers they got there. As reported in *Organiser* dated the 10th of March 1968, the planchette favoured the theory that a drunken man with a masked face knocked on the door of Shri Upadhyaya's cabin, entered the cabin, twisted his arm, sat on his chest, and hit on his head before the train had reached Varanasi, but while the train was travelling at a slow speed. This theory was found unsuitable and was dropped. In a quest for a more plausible theory, politics was imported into the crime. I do not think that either planchette or politics can yield a correct solution to the problem before me."

Before he demits office as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi must confer a Bharat Ratna on Murli Manohar Joshi. He deserves it as much as Nana Deshmukh did.□





# MELA FOR POLITICS

The Yogi Adityanath government gives scant regard to facilities for devotees at the Kumbh Mela; instead, it turns the event into a public relations exercise. BY PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI AT KUMBH MELA IN ALLAHABAD

PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI

THE Kumbh Mela, which attracts the world's largest congregation of devotees, is an event held every three years at one of the four places considered sacred by Hindus in India: Prayagraj in Allahabad, Haridwar in Uttarakhand, Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh and Nashik in Maharashtra. The event, which is included in UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is organised on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar; the Shipra in Ujjain; the Godavari in Nashik; and at the Sangam—the confluence of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati—in Prayag. It is an event that presents a multifaceted view of

**AT THE KUMBH VENUE** on February 4, milling crowds were held up for hours resulting in a stampede-like situation.

the Hindu religion in all its resplendent glory. Sadhus and saints of different sects, who shun public life, participate in the event, making it an occasion for the common people to interact with them. The spectacle continues for several days before the holy men retreat to their realms. The event has traditionally been kept away from politics, and the government in power is expected only to make civic arrangements for the convenience of the pilgrims and to ensure law and order.

The 2019 Kumbh at Prayag in Allahabad, however, has been appro-

priated by the Uttar Pradesh government to showcase it as one of its achievements. Mega advertising blitzkriegs touting the mela as an unprecedented logistical exercise have appeared in print and electronic media channels. Although no estimate is available at the moment, apparently Rs.5,000 crore has been spent on the mela to create "facilities" for visitors. The official propaganda would have one believe that impeccable facilities have been provided: tents, toilets, pontoon bridges (to reach the Sangam), drinking water and, of course, a "selfie point". The



government also boasts about providing shuttle bus services and e-rickshaw facilities for the needy.

But this correspondent's first-hand experience is that this is the worst-organised Kumbh in recent times. Lakhs of tents have been erected on the banks of the Ganga, but these are bereft of beds or blankets, contrary to government claims. There are rows and rows of toilets, a symbol of the Narendra Modi government's big achievement (Swachh Bharat programme), but not a single one has water inside. One has to carry water from a long distance.

The worst experience was with regard to conveyance and crowd management. A day before the *shahi snan* (a ceremonial bath taken by saints of different akhadas, or religious groups) on February 4, an auspicious day according to the Hindu calendar, the government decided to stop all vehicular movement some five kilometres ahead of the venue. The police were deployed heavily to ensure compliance. Officials said shuttle bus services and e-rickshaws would ferry people close to the venue.

However, as this correspondent herself experienced, not a single shuttle bus or e-rickshaw was seen on the road leading to the Sangam ghat on the afternoon of February 3 or the next day. Elderly and sick people were seen trudging long distances on foot. Men and women carrying heavy bags on their heads and children in their arms, who had come from far-off places, were huffing and puffing their way to the ghat. There were practically no arrangements for their return too after the *shahi snan*. But this was just the beginning of the nightmare.

### ZERO CROWD MANAGEMENT

On the day of the *shahi snan*, all hell broke loose at the Sangam ghat. Apparently, people who had zero knowledge of crowd management and who had no idea what a *shahi snan* is had been put in charge. Predictably, it led to a stampede-like situation at many points on the way to the ghat. To facilitate movement to the Sangam, pontoon bridges were laid. But on the day they were supposed to

be used, all the pontoon bridges were, inexplicably, closed, that too without any announcement. As a result, lakhs of people heading towards the Sangam were abruptly stopped with bamboo barricades by lathi-wielding policemen.

This correspondent was caught in the milling crowd and was witness to several people getting suffocated and fainting, women crying while trying to save their small children from getting crushed, and people falling in the melee or losing their footwear, shawls and other belongings in the process. Not a single volunteer was visible when the crowd surged.

Lakhs of people who were stopped in their tracks abruptly turned to the main Sangam road which was to be used by the 14 akhadas for the *shahi snan* of their seers, resulting in complete chaos. While the convoy of akhadas (decorated vehicles carrying saints) got stuck in the jam on their way to the *shahi snan* with people coming from the opposite side on the same road, policemen tried to make way for them. The saints got so angry at the arrangements that they announced their decision to boycott the next *shahi snan* on February 10 if crowd management was not improved.

Policemen on duty were a nervous lathi-wielding lot while private volunteers were facilitating the movement of either VIPs or those known to them.

### 'JINXED'

Several saints this correspondent spoke to said this kumbh was jinxed from the beginning because the government, in its zeal to claim credit, had politicised it. First, they said, it was pronounced as a purnakumbh while in reality it was only an ardhakumbh, and thus the ire of the gods was earned as these things were to be decided on the basis of planetary positions. On the very first day of the magh mela, January 14, there was a fire in some tents of the Digambar Akhada in Sector 16. A fire engulfed the Yogi Gorakhnath Mahasabha Akhada in Sector 15 on February 5, immediately after the *shahi snan* got

over. Incidentally, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath belongs to the same akhada, and the fire destroyed the luxury tent that he was supposed to use. An adjacent tent, which was in use by the vice president of the Yogi Mahasabha, Baba Balaknath, was also gutted in the fire. Although no casualties have been reported, the entire luxury furnishings in the two tents were destroyed.

If there was any doubt that Yogi Adityanath was using the Kumbh as a public relations exercise, he held a Cabinet meeting at the Kumbh venue on January 29 and held a media briefing there, announcing the construction of two expressways, one from Meerut to Prayag and another one in Bundelkhand. Not only this, Yogi and his Cabinet Ministers took a collective dip in the Ganga after the meeting, with the media going berserk over the "religiosity".

But it is not just Yogi who is doing politics from the Kumbh ground. Shankaracharya Swami Swarupanand Saraswati, for instance, has been waxing eloquent on his plans for a grand Ram temple at Ayodhya while criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi for failing to build the temple. He also announced that the foundation of the temple would be laid on February 21. He is known to be opposed to the BJP and is close to several Congress leaders. Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad who are also camping there have displayed a model of the Ram temple.

Many people who come to the Kumbh Mela for a spiritual experience find this mixing of religion with politics jarring. A group of youngsters from Chennai told this correspondent they only wanted to see the huge congregation of people and take a dip in the Ganga. They said they would have been happy if the government had just attended to the logistical details. The huge promotion is still making its presence felt in the city of Allahabad and surrounding areas. Reports have been coming in of huge crowds that are being stopped arbitrarily at railways stations, bus stands and on roads going berserk and indulging in violence. □



# RISING TREND



India recorded growth in both exports and imports in the April-December period. **By Ramesh Chakrapani**

India's overall exports (merchandise and services combined) in the April-December 2018 period reached an estimated \$396.73 billion, recording a growth of 13.79 per cent over the corresponding previous period, according to latest data from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry.

However, overall imports in the period under review were also up, growing 14.63 per cent to touch an estimated \$479.46 billion. The overall trade deficit for the period was \$82.72 billion. Merchandise exports and imports clocked a deficit of \$141.20 billion, while the services sector, for which data were available only up to November, recorded a trade surplus of \$58.48 billion for the April-November period, as per available figures.

April-December merchandise exports grew 10.18 per cent year on year to \$245.44 billion, while imports grew 12.61 per cent to \$386.65 billion.

In the services sector, exports grew 20.18 per cent to \$151.29 billion, while imports posted 23.84 per cent growth to reach \$92.81 billion.

December merchandise exports were worth \$27.93 billion, up 0.34 per cent from \$27.83 billion in December 2017. However, in rupee terms, the exports were up 10.48 per cent at Rs.1,97,535.86 crore compared with Rs.1,78,802.77 crore in December 2017.

Merchandise imports in December reached \$41.01 billion (Rs.2,90,032.95 crore) compared with \$42.03 billion (Rs.2,70,015.44 crore) in December 2017, recording a fall of 2.44 per cent in dollar terms but a rise of 7.41 per cent in rupee terms.

Oil imports in December 2018 were \$10.67 billion (Rs.75,486.52 crore) compared with \$10.35 billion (Rs.66,458.79 crore) in December 2017, which were 3.16 per cent higher in dollar terms and 13.58 per cent higher in rupee terms.

Oil imports in the April-December 2018 period reached \$108.10 billion (Rs.7,55,255.78 crore) compared with \$75.67 billion (Rs.4,88,125.91 crore), up 42.85 per cent in dollar terms and 54.73 per cent higher in rupee terms.

## India's exports by region (Value in ₹ crore)

Region	Apr-Dec 2017	Apr-Dec 2018*	Growth (%)	Share (%)
Europe	277,724.33	331,525.73	19.37	19.41
Africa	120,842.71	146,854.74	21.53	8.60
N. America	257,231.96	306,676.41	19.22	17.95
S. America	41,505.71	50,327.02	21.25	2.95
Asia	711,580.21	837,368.89	17.68	49.01
Total**	1,436,614.25	1,708,454.86	18.92	100.00

\*provisional \*\*Includes Baltic and CIS states and unspecified regions

Source: DGCI, Kolkata

## India's imports by region (Value in ₹ crore)

Region	Apr-Dec 2017	Apr-Dec 2018*	Growth (%)	Share (%)
Europe	344,727.59	411,733.94	19.44	15.14
Africa	178,217.88	218,589.54	22.65	8.04
N. America	166,813.29	227,395.31	36.32	8.36
S. America	102,243.60	113,448.58	10.96	4.17
Asia	1,316,742.68	1,697,239.25	28.90	62.40
Total**	2,214,370.92	2,720,028.71	22.84	100.00

\*provisional \*\*Includes Baltic and CIS states and unspecified regions

Source: DGCI, Kolkata



Exports & imports			Exports & imports		
(\$ billion) provisional			₹(in crores) Provisional		
Exports*	December	Apr-Dec	December	Apr-Dec	
2017-18	27.83	222.77	1,78,802.77	14,36,614.25	
2018-19	27.93	245.44	1,97,535.86	17,11,905.60	
% growth	0.34	10.18	10.48	19.16	
Imports					
2017-18	42.03	343.34	2,70,015.44	22,14,370.92	
2018-19	41.01	386.65	2,90,032.95	26,97,306.82	
% growth	-2.44	12.61	7.41	21.81	
Trade balance					
2017-18	-14.20	-120.57	-91,212.68	-7,77,756.67	
2018-19	-13.08	-141.20	-9,24,97.09	-9,85,401.22	

\* including re-exports

### April -December imports (\$ billion)

Oil imports		Non-oil imports	
Apr.-Dec 2018-19	108.10	Apr.-Dec 2018-19	278.54
Apr.-Dec 2017-18	75.67	Apr.-Dec 2017-18	267.66

### Exports top in value

December 2018 (in \$ million)

Engineering goods

**7,162.11**

Petroleum products

**4,207.78**

Gems and jewellery

**2,610.90**

Organic &amp; inorganic chemicals

**2,008.32**

Drugs and pharmaceuticals

**1,659.76**

Readymade garments

**1,374.30**

### Imports top in value

December 2018 (in \$ million)

**Petroleum, crude and crude products**  
**10,672.32**
**Electronic goods**  
**4,250.25**
**Machinery (electrical and non-electrical)**  
**3,081.22**
**Gold**  
**2,568.32**
**Pearls, precious and semi-precious stones**  
**2,526.25**
**Coal, coke, briquettes, etc**  
**2,262.07**

### India's top export destinations (Value in ₹ crore)

Destination	Apr-Dec 2017	Apr-Dec 2018*	Growth (%)	Share (%)
U.S.	227,446.19	271,877.74	19.53	15.91
U.A.E.	141,256.72	157,711.76	11.65	9.23
China	60,654.27	88,634.30	46.13	5.19
HongKong	70,381.90	66,428.37	-5.62	3.89
Singapore	50,609.46	56,707.07	12.05	3.32

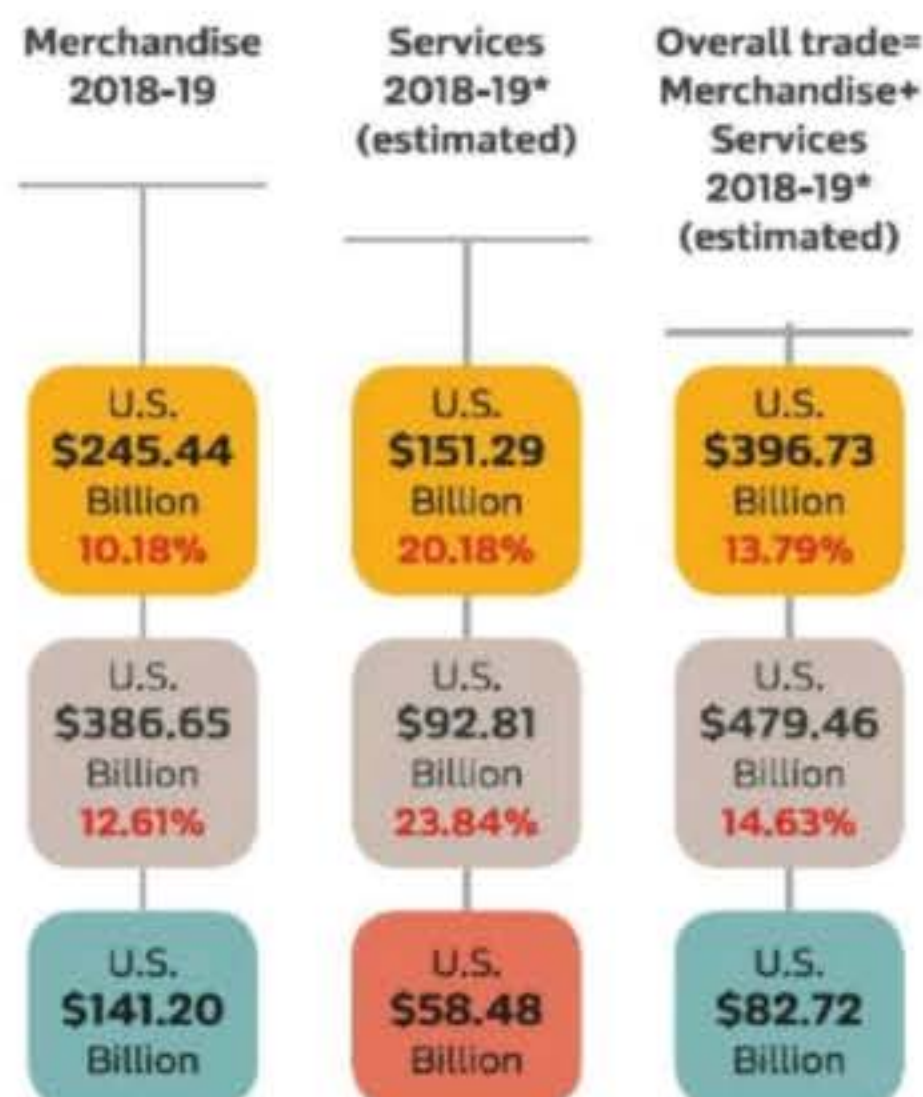
\*provisional

### India's top import source nations (Value in ₹ crore)

Country	Apr-Dec 2017	Apr-Dec 2018*	Growth (%)	Share (%)
China	363,646.70	376,171.08	3.44	13.83
U.S.	125,471.38	183,774.52	46.47	6.76
U.A.E.	108,410.75	153,313.80	41.42	5.64
Saudi Arabia	100,452.29	153,015.30	52.33	5.63
Iraq	75,201.30	119,618.08	59.06	4.40
All Nations	2,214,370.92	2,720,028.71	22.84	100

\*provisional

### Foreign trade (April-December) 2018)



Exports Imports Trade deficit Net of services

\* Services data pertains to April-November 2018-19 as November 2018 is the latest as per RBI's Press Release.

### Top gainers in December imports

(\$ million)

Fertilizers (crude and manufactured)	411.32	740.04	79.92
Newsprint	55.69	87.69	57.46
Project goods	190.33	288.67	51.67
Silver	197.27	293.85	48.96
Machine tools	324.08	406.90	25.56

December 2017 December 2018 Change (%)

### Top losers in December imports

(\$ million)

Pulses	211.30	138.04	-34.67
Pearls, precious & semi-precious stones	3,512.41	2,526.25	-28.08
Gold	3,394.28	2,568.32	-24.33
Sulphur and unroasted iron pyrites	22.33	17.44	-21.90
Vegetable oil	845.70	721.56	-14.68
Transport equipments	2,221.51	1,895.31	-14.68
All commodities	42,030.79	41,005.01	-2.44



## Sedition law



MAHATAMA GANDHI spurned the sedition law unequivocally by calling it the "prince among draconian laws", and Jawaharlal Nehru castigated it in no uncertain terms as "obnoxious and objectionable" (Cover Story, February 15). Yet, the sedition law (124A of the IPC), enacted by our colonial rulers in 1870, still hangs menacingly over us like the sword of Damocles. This shows the patronage it has got from political leaders of different hues over the years.

In 1973, the Indira Gandhi-led government added vicious fangs to the law, making sedition a cognisable offence. Section 124A of the IPC needs to be repealed lock, stock and barrel to ensure the free speech and freedom of expression guaranteed by the Constitution.

**AYYASSERI RAVEENDRANATH**  
ARANMULA, KERALA

## Rafale

THE undeniable transgressions by the Modi government in the Rafale deal, exposed with evidence by N. Ram, the legitimate doubts of common people raised at multiple forums and the specialist views of an ex-professional of HAL have rendered the rejoinders of the NDA government infructuous and too clever by half ("L'affaire Rafale", February 15). The government talks a lot, does little, spends a lot on publicity and evades pointed questions about its wrong-doings.

The reduction in the number of aircraft purchased at a higher cost and the preference for a private Indian partner to the neglect of HAL strongly raise the spectre

of suspicion. The Modi government has refused to institute a Joint Parliamentary Committee to probe the deal. It made tall promises but has performed poorly and, in spite of its propaganda, will be shown the door by the people.

**B. RAJASEKARAN**  
BENGALURU

## Precarious coalition

KARNATAKA Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy was upset over the heckling by Congress MLAs over his poor performance, and when he decided to step down, it shook the Congress high command and the State Congress chief quickly reined in the party's legislators to save the coalition from falling apart ("High drama again", February 15). This is not the first time that Kumaraswamy is facing the heat from his coalition partner. Legislators close to Siddaramaiah have been criticising his governance at every opportune moment. It is time the Congress mended its house. Otherwise, the coalition government may not last long.

**K.R. SRINIVASAN**  
SECUNDERABAD, TELANGANA

## Sabarimala

THE Jagannath temple in Puri, Odisha, does not allow non-Hindus inside the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine (Cover Story, February 1). Even Indira Gandhi was not allowed entry in 1984 since she had married a non-Hindu. However, responding to a PIL on the issue, the Supreme Court has asked the temple authorities and the State government to consider allowing people of different faiths entry into the temple. There are a number of temples and mosques across the country that do not allow women entry for various reasons.

**ASHOK K. NIHALANI**  
PUNE, MAHARASHTRA

## Indian Science Congress

THE laboured efforts of some of our "scientists" will only reinforce the long-held view in some circles that India is a land of snake charmers and rope-trick magicians ("Science circus", February 1). This will undermine the fact that India has the talent to produce Nobel-winning laureates or people capable of heading large multinational conglomerates. If India is

to progress and be a part of the modern world, we must accord the highest priority to science and technology. A country's economic potential, its defence capability and global standing depend on the scientific and technological prowess that its people as a nation achieve. Successive Indian governments have laid great emphasis on science and technology, and it was towards this end that Nehru built many of our modern scientific institutions. He was convinced that India needed a "scientific temper" to deliver the aspirational needs of our citizens. But we should not get distracted with myths and scientifically unsustainable claims.

**H.N. RAMAKRISHNA**  
BENGALURU

## Brazil

IT is no surprise that Jair Bolsonaro won the election as right-wing politics is on the rise across the globe ("On the rampage", February 1). But countries ruled by right-wing parties have become self-centred and inward looking. Bolsonaro's victory particularly is a cause for concern as his extremist policies on the Amazon forests could prove detrimental to the world. Bolsonaro might pull Brazil out of several key organisations like BRICS, the UNHRC and even the Paris pact just as Trump has done.

**VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH**  
THANJAVUR, TAMIL NADU

## CORRECTIONS

In the obituary of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya ("Man of courage & conviction") in the issue dated February 1, 2019, the following are the corrections:

- Sabyasachi Bhattacharya carried out his research on the post-Mutiny British financial system in India under the guidance of the renowned historian Amales Tripathi and not as stated in the sentence on page 110, first column, second paragraph.
- He was the sole author of the path-breaking book entitled "The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947" and not a co-editor as stated on page 111, second column, first paragraph.
- The sentence on page 111, third column, first paragraph should read as follows: "Sabyasachi Bhattacharya joined the Centre for Historical Studies in JNU as an Associate Professor in 1971 on his return from Oxford. He taught at JNU until 2003, when he retired."

## ANNOUNCEMENT

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



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