

MEDICINE RESEARCH

The vaccine race **9**

INDIA & CHINA LAC

Time for talks **64**

WILDLIFE KANHA

Conservation breakthroughs **90**

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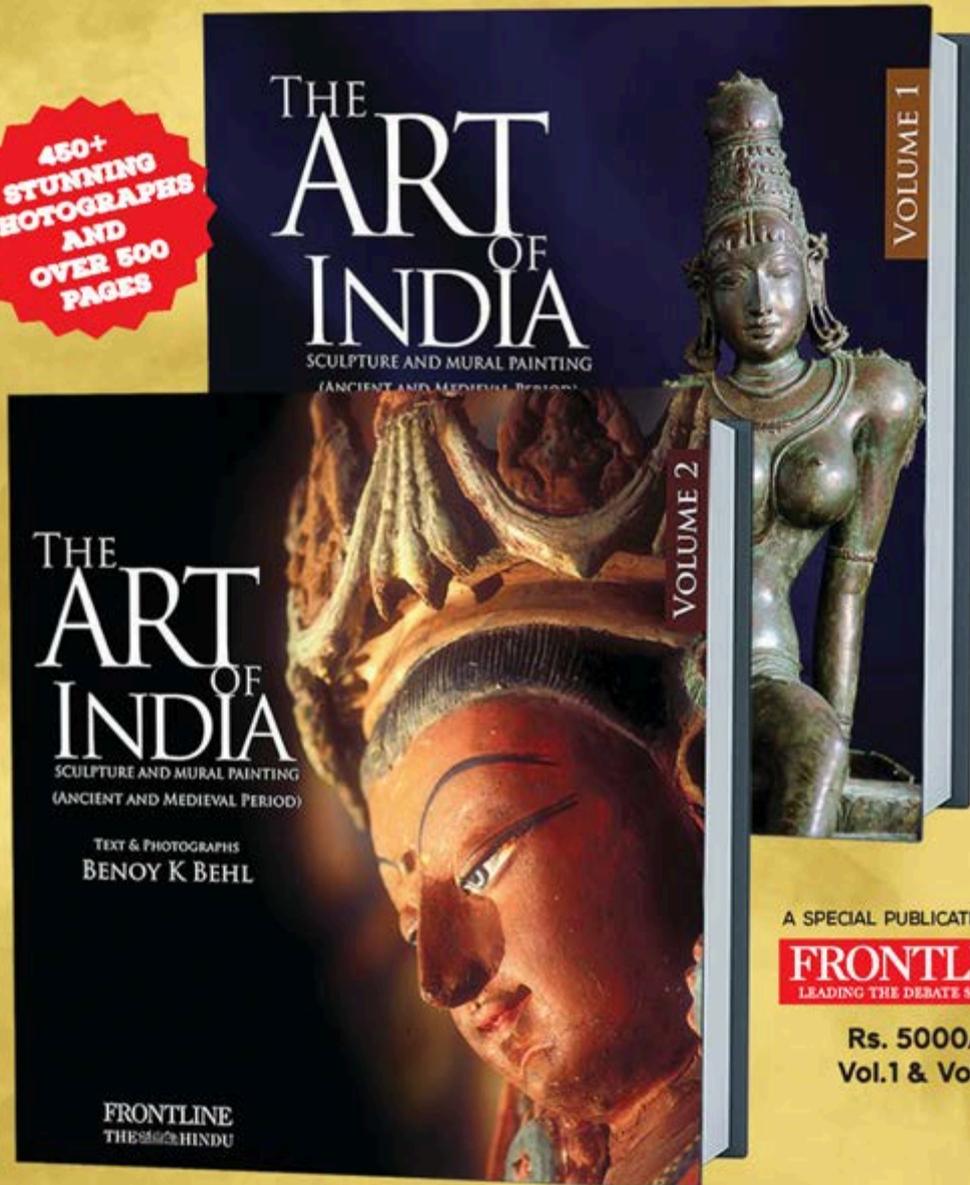


A long way to peak

With the ICMR's sero-surveillance being out of pace with the rapid surge in COVID-19 infections in the country and with the government continuing to deny community transmission, India achieves the dubious distinction of being ranked fourth in the world

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COVER STORY

Chinks in the armour

As bravado, false pride and an apparent refusal to adopt a scientific approach mark the Union government's strategy to fight COVID-19, the pandemic is steadily marching to its peak. **4**



COVER STORY



The vaccine race **9**
 BJP: Offence as defence **14**
 Information void **17**
 Interview:
 Prof. R.B. Bhagat **21**
 FTA and the race to
 the bottom **24**



Public sector in the
 post-COVID strategy **26**
 Targeting mosques
 in Delhi **30**
STATES
 Delhi: Broken system **32**
 Maharashtra:
 On the mend **34**

Tamil Nadu:
 Domino effect **36**
 Police terror **38**
 Karnataka:
 Out of the comfort zone **40**
 Gujarat: Crisis
 and cover-up **42**
 Rajasthan:
 Uneasy comfort **44**
 West Bengal:
 What numbers hide **46**
 Kerala:
 Reckless opposition **48**
 Odisha:
 People-driven plan **50**

On the Cover: A health worker collects a patient's blood sample for the antibody-based rapid test at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital in Chennai

COVER DESIGN: V. SRINIVASAN
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Madhya Pradesh:
 Sops and polls **52**
 Uttar Pradesh:
 Travesty of truth **54**
 Bihar and Jharkhand:
 Capitals a concern **56**
 Haryana: Sharp increase **58**
 Punjab against agri-
 marketing ordinances **60**
 An NGO coalition that did
 Bengaluru proud **62**

INDIA AND CHINA



Time for talks **64**

JAMMU & KASHMIR

Militancy and The
 Resistance Front **69**
 New media policy spells
 more trouble for journalists **72**

LEGISLATION

Electricity (Amendment) Bill
 and power sector "reform" **75**

CONTROVERSY

Why the coal blocks auction
 is a bad idea **79**

WILDLIFE



Kanha and its conservation
 breakthroughs **90**

BOOKS

82

Air Surcharge:
 Colombo - Rs.20.00 and
 Port Blair - Rs.15.00



COVER STORY

CHINKS IN THE ARMOUR

A HEALTH WORKER spraying disinfectant in a COVID-19 test ward at the Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital in Chennai.

B. VELANKANNI RAJ

As bravado, false pride and an apparent **refusal to adopt a scientific approach** mark the Union government's strategy to fight COVID-19, the pandemic is steadily marching to its peak. BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

FOURTEEN MONTHS AFTER HIS INFAMOUS remark about the Prime Minister's "56-inch chest", Union Home Minister Amit Shah displayed the same sense of false pride and bravado when he said on June 28 that the country would win both the war—the confrontation with China on the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—and the fight against COVID-19 under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

While the LAC battle is for strategists and defence

experts to analyse, the second the duo is sure to win, however long it might take. The fight on the COVID-19 front appears—both from news reports and from what is evident on the ground—to be driven mainly by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the national executive by keeping scientific expertise and advice at bay, and the spread of the disease, five months after the country saw its first case, will in all likelihood decline and slowly peter out. That is because, with the current increase in the

publication of sero-survey results by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

Even the protocol to be followed in the sero-surveillance of the 60-odd districts (classified into four categories) that had been identified was published online only on June 20, just about when the last issue of *Frontline* was closing, which itself was about six weeks after the survey data had been gathered and the analysis was on. The protocol does have some information about the sero-survey, though not all that was pointed out in the last issue. Some of it is indeed revealing, which will be discussed here.

As mentioned in the earlier article, this sero-survey was a serial cross-sectional survey conducted with a sample size of 24,000 distributed equally across four strata of districts categorised on the basis of the incidence of reported cases of COVID-19—zero cases, low incidence, medium incidence and high incidence. We had observed earlier that the post-survey press briefing on June 11 by the ICMR's Director General, Balram Bhargava, had not defined the four categories, which, fortunately, have been defined in the published protocol.

The sero-surveyed districts were to be categorised according to the reported COVID-19 cases per million population (zero, low: 0.1-4.7, medium: 4.8-10 and high: >10). As mentioned before, the classification at the time of the survey (mid May) was based on the number of reported cases as on April 25. Fifteen districts from each stratum were to be selected randomly for a total of 60 districts.

In addition—this information had not been given in the briefing—the top 10 cities in the country reporting the highest number of cases were also to be included to be considered as hotspots, which roughly ties up with the 71

number of infections still hugging the exponential line, eventually the virus will not have enough people to infect and the spread will decline and herd immunity will slowly set in—a natural epidemiological scenario. Even then the Modi-Shah regime is bound to claim that as its victory, when in reality it not only did not do the right thing in terms of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as lockdowns but also prevented medical and health experts from doing what they know best.

In the last issue of *Frontline*, evidence for the last clause above was highlighted. The manner in which the government shared with the nation sero-surveillance data, which provide an indication of the disease prevalence in the country, revealed less than it hid. As quoted in the last issue, the Progressive Forum of Medicos and Scientists (PFMS) had roundly criticised the total lack of urgency in the



M. VEDHAN

A SANITATION WORKER sprays bleaching powder in Avadi, Chennai, during the lockdown, on June 30.



ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

HEALTH CARE workers at a school that has been turned into a centre to conduct tests for COVID-19, in New Delhi.

districts that Bhargava showed in the table projected at the briefing. It had been reported in the media that in these 10 hotspot cities, sero-survey had revealed that as much as 30 per cent of the populations could be infected. Of course, the ICMR dismissed this as being speculative, but the correct data are yet to be published or shared. The protocol, however, suggests that the survey sampling of hotspot zones was done on the assumption of a maximum seropositivity of 5 per cent.

With the total number of cases having crossed a milestone mark of 500,000 on June 27 (which stands at 566,840 as of June 30) and with nearly 19,000 confirmed cases being added daily, India now has the dubious distinction of being ranked fourth among the countries of the world even though it had enforced probably the strictest lockdown measures (in four phases) in the world. With cases per million population being in their thousands in all the top-10 COVID-19-hit cities of the country, which include Jodhpur and Indore, the classification might appear highly incongruous. But on April 25, which was just at the end of the second phase of the lockdown, the total number of cases stood around 25,000, about one-twentieth of the current number of confirmed cases. Even then the categorisation would seem already somewhat removed from the ground situation.

However, the more pertinent aspect of the survey as stated in the protocol, which shows the ICMR in a really in bad light, is the following. The published protocol says:

“The WHO [World Health Organisation] suggests three possibilities to conduct the sero-epidemiological investigation: cross-sectional investigation, most apt

after the peak transmission is established; *repeated* cross-sectional investigation in the same geographic area (but not necessarily the same individuals each time) to establish trends *in an evolving pandemic*; and longitudinal cohort study with serial sampling of the same individuals. Establishing cohorts [the last possibility] during a pandemic being resource intensive, and India being [as of April-end] in the early stages of the pandemic, the second option is the most appropriate choice to guide public health response.

“...The initial survey would serve as a baseline to determine the seroprevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the community and in high-burden cities as well, while the *subsequent rounds* would help to monitor the trends of infection in the community. This information will also guide the strategy for making decisions related to lockdown options at a district level. The objectives of this serosurveillance are to estimate and monitor the trend of seroprevalence for SARS-CoV-2 infection in the general population and high-burden cities, determine the socio-demographic risk factors for SARS-CoV-2 infection and delineate the geographical spread of the infection in the general population and hotspot cities” (emphases and parenthetical remarks added).

Well, well. Since the first round has just been completed and the results are yet to be published, is that meant to imply that the country is still in an evolving pandemic with the peaking still months away? It would seem so. Given that, it is not clear when the subsequent rounds of sero-surveillance (in the same identified districts) will be undertaken and their results published or shared with the districts/States, if they will be taken up at all. According to the protocol, the “subsequent rounds... will depend on the results from the first round



K.V.S. GIRI

AT UNDAVALLI VILLAGE near Vijayawada, after coronavirus cases were reported in the vicinity.

and the ensuing epidemic situation in the country... Instead of waiting for the end of the epidemic, repeated serosurveys carried out at regular intervals can be a useful tool to monitor the epidemic precisely.”

And to boot, the survey results are supposed to guide the “strategy for making decisions related to lockdown options at district level”. While the government has just announced the rules for the second un-lockdown phase at the gross national level, save high burden areas and containment zones, which will run through July 1 to July 31, individual districts, cities and States—faced with soaring numbers of cases—are set to reimpose lockdowns, obviously with no guiding strategy from the Union Health Ministry or the ICMR. From the laggardly pace at which these surveys are being done, it would seem that by the time the ICMR gets its act together to conduct the second round, the country may well be nearing the peak, if not the end, of the epidemic. The surveillance, according to the protocol, was to be “directly monitored by the apex scientific working group on epidemiology and surveillance established for COVID-19 by the ICMR”. The working group, as reported in the last issue of *Frontline*, was not even privy to the basic data of the survey. They were shared with the PMO and the top bureaucracy of the government first!

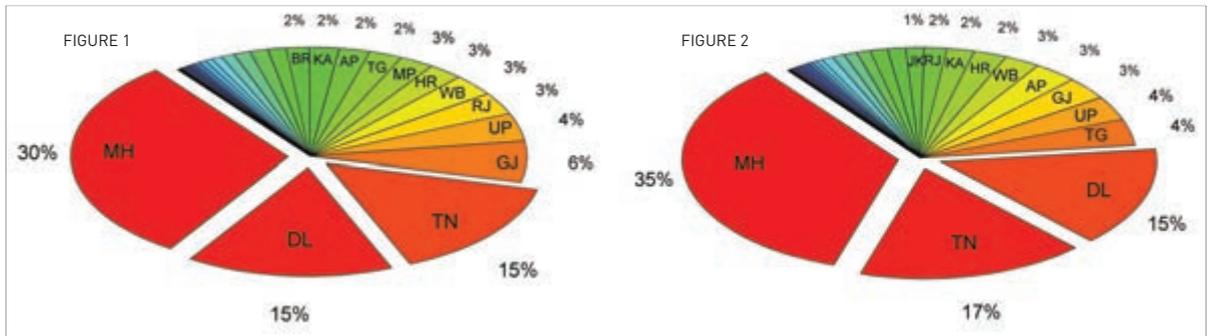
In an earlier *Frontline* article (May 8), it was pointed out, on the basis of the results of a sentinel survey of severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) patients, how community transmission was occurring even as the government was in denial. The ICMR survey had found 40 of the 104 cases surveyed (from 36 districts in 15

States) had no apparent link to an identifiable source of infection. The government still seems to be in denial as is evident from the June 29 WHO situation report, which is based on government submission. According to a recent report in *The Telegraph* (India), the researchers of this survey were not even sure if the research paper would be published at all. Ultimately it did appear (which is what the *Frontline* story was based on), but they were prevented from naming the 36 districts which showed evidence of community transmission. As pointed out in an earlier article (*Frontline*, June 5), despite the published evidence of the ICMR’s own sentinel survey, its revised testing strategy of May 18 ignored that evidence and just slightly revised the earlier strategies as if there was no community transmission.

Now, on June 23, however, over two months after the sentinel survey results were published, in its Testing Strategy v. 6 it has deceptively revised the protocol, which is tantamount to a tacit admission of community transmission. The last para of the main document on the revised strategy now says “testing should be made widely available to all symptomatic individuals in every part of the country... ICMR advises all concerned State governments, public and private institutions to take required steps to scale up testing for COVID-19 by deploying combination of various tests as advised above.”

In the last v.5, testing of symptomatic individuals were restricted to “all symptomatic (with symptoms of influenza-like infection, or ILI) individuals 1. with history of international travel in the last 14 days; 2. who are contacts of laboratory confirmed cases; 3. who are health care workers/front-line workers; 4. who are SARI patients; and, 5. who are within hotspots/containment

Infection spread



STABHRA SINHA, INSTITUTE OF MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES, CHENNAI

AS OF June 26, from among the States, while Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat accounted for nearly two-thirds of confirmed cases, Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Telangana accounted for the same fraction of active cases, pointing to a rapidly changing scenario in Telangana which at one stage was tending to move off the exponential line.

zones; as well as asymptomatic direct and high-risk contacts of a confirmed case to be tested once between day 5 and day 10 of coming into contact”. Now it has advised to include all symptomatic individuals, with no attendant qualification as in v.5. But this revised strategy should have been in place at least two months ago.

COVID-19 testing status in India

State	Tested per million	Positive per million	Test positive %
India	6,086	397	7
Tamil Nadu	14,611	1,083	7
Maharashtra	7,524	1,357	18
A.P.	16,035	250	2
Rajasthan	10,233	221	2
U.P.	3,003	97	3
Karnataka	8,981	199	2
Delhi	24,797	4,133	17
West Bengal	4,809	177	4
Assam	11,136	207	2
Gujarat	5,281	456	9
J & K	26,456	533	2
M.P.	4,140	158	4
Punjab	9,664	174	2
Odisha	5,881	152	3
Haryana	8,702	477	6
Kerala	6,238	118	2
Bihar	1,697	75	4
Chhattisgarh	5,310	93	2
Jharkhand	3,626	62	2
Telangana	2,199	385	18
Goa	40,873	778	2
Tripura	15,454	335	2

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EPIDEMIOLOGY, CHENNAI

As Sanjay Rai, Professor of Community Medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, and president of the Indian Public Health Association, has been quoted as saying: “In community transmission, the focus should turn to mitigation.... While testing, contact tracing, and isolation of patients should continue, the focus should shift to minimise deaths through early case detection, triage, and ensuring that adequate hospital facilities are available to manage the surge in cases.... In Delhi with its surge, a mitigation strategy is already in place.”

As of June 26, among the States, while Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat accounted for nearly two-thirds of the confirmed cases, Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Telangana accounted for the same fraction of active cases, pointing to a rapidly changing situation in Telangana, which at one stage was tending to move off the exponential line (Figures 1 & 2).

TEST POSITIVITY RATE

The test positivity rate (TPR) is the percentage of tests that are returned positive. If, given the scale of the epidemic, the surveillance is efficient enough to detect any resurgence, one will have a low positivity rate. On the other hand, a high positivity rate is indicative of the testing strategy being limited to people with high suspicion of infection. This is likely to miss new chains of transmission in the community. A sero-survey is supposed to guide towards an efficient testing strategy, which unfortunately is out of pace with the rapid surge in infections in different regions of the country. Inefficient testing in many States is very evident.

According to the WHO, the daily positivity rate ought to be below 5 per cent for at least two weeks before relaxing public health measures. TPR is believed to be better than tests per million (TPM) as an indicator of testing adequacy, as testing coverage should be seen relative to the size of the epidemic rather than the size of the population. Table 1 shows TPRs and TPMs for all the States. The table clearly shows which States have failed to get a handle on the size of the epidemic, either by their well-conceived containment strategies or by the fortunate circumstances arising from their geographical, demographic, economic and commercial status. And it is these failed States that are driving the national scene today. □

The vaccine race

The unprecedented pace at which a vaccine is being developed to combat COVID-19 **offers a ray of hope**. How prepared is India in the race to obtain a vaccine? BY **THOMAS ABRAHAM**



REUTERS

BRITAIN'S William, Duke of Cambridge, during a visit to the laboratory where a vaccine against COVID-19 has been produced at the Oxford Vaccine Group's facility at the Churchill Hospital in Oxford on June 24.

ON JANUARY 11, THE GENETIC SEQUENCE OF the virus causing the outbreak of the respiratory disease in Wuhan, China, was posted by a team at Fudan University in Shanghai on GenBank, a global online database maintained by the United States' National Institutes of Health (NIH).

No one knew how far the disease would spread or how serious it would be, but the genomic information was seized upon almost immediately by laboratories across the world for a variety of purposes. Some used it to create tests that would detect the virus in infected people. Others worked on trying to decipher the genetic origins of the virus and understand how it had passed from animal to man. And some seized on the virus' genetic structure as a way to start developing a vaccine.

Among the early vaccine developers was a team at Oxford University led by Sarah Gilbert, a professor of vaccinology, who had recently developed a prototype vaccine against another coronavirus, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). She decided to develop a vaccine for this new coronavirus using the same technique used for the MERS vaccine. Without any inkling of how the coronavirus pandemic would explode, she saw this more as an experiment or, as she described it to *The New York Times*, an interesting laboratory project to demonstrate the versatility of the recombinant viral vector vaccine platform that had been used for the MERS vaccine.

Within three months, a period equivalent to traveling at the speed of light for vaccine development (which is typically measured in years and decades), the Oxford SARS-CoV-2 vaccine was in the first stage of human clinical trials.

And it was not the first: two other vaccine developers: Moderna, a U.S.-based biotechnology company, and CanSino, a Chinese biotech, had begun trials slightly earlier. And by July all these vaccines are expected to be in the third and final stages of clinical trials, opening



TED S. WARREN/AP

DURING the first-stage safety study clinical trial of a potential vaccine for COVID-19 at the Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute in Seattle, U.S. on March 16.

prospects for limited supplies of vaccine for those at the greatest risk from the disease by the last quarter of the year.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Vaccines pass through several stages of development. Once a prototype vaccine is developed in a laboratory, it is first tested on animals, typically mice, ferrets, guinea pigs or hamsters. These laboratory animals are bred with genetic mutations that allow researchers to test the vaccine better. In the case of a vaccine for COVID-19, laboratories have used mice bred to express a receptor known as ACE2 in their cells, as these are the receptors that the SARS-CoV-2 virus uses to enter human cells. If the vaccine has few side effects and creates antibodies in the mice, then its development moves to the NHP, or non-human primate, stage, when the vaccine is tested on monkey species such as macaques.

If the monkeys tolerate the vaccine and are also protected against challenge doses of the virus, the vaccine moves from the lab to human, or clinical, trials. This happens in three stages: phase 1 focuses on testing vaccine safety, and to a lesser extent on the immune response the vaccine produces. Typically, around 50 to 100 healthy adults are vaccinated at this stage, any aches, pains, fevers and other reactions are noted, and blood samples are tested for the presence of antibodies and other proteins indicating an immune response. The vaccine then goes into phase 2 trials, in a slightly larger group representing a wider demography. Different doses of vaccine are also tried to assess adverse reactions as well as immune response. If the vaccine is thought safe and effective enough, it goes into phase 3 trials and is tested on several thousands of people across a variety of age groups.

Besides collecting more data on safety, the aim of phase 3 trials is to see how the vaccine works in the real world: how much protection it provides in a situation when the disease is circulating actively? To do this, some of those in the trial are given a placebo, and the number of those who get the disease among the vaccinated group is compared to those who received a placebo and the effectiveness of the vaccine is calculated. After phase 3 trials, the manufacturer can apply to regulatory authorities to license the vaccine for public use.

The whole process, from laboratory to market, can take five to 10 years. Funding is usually a major constraint, particularly in moving from the laboratory to clinical trials. But the pandemic has released a floodgate of funding for vaccine development, largely from the U.S. The money, along with an eagerness on the part of the regulatory authorities to get a safe and effective vaccine out as quickly as possible, has speeded up the process in a way that would have been unimaginable in normal circumstances.

New vaccine technologies, too, have helped speed up development, particularly the use of generic vaccine platforms that can be repurposed for different vaccines. The Oxford vaccine, for example, is based on the platform of



AFP

AT THE Cells Culture Room laboratory of Sinovac Biotech in Beijing on April 29, where researchers are working on a vaccine for coronavirus.

chimpanzee adenovirus, which has been engineered to express the spike protein of the coronavirus.

The same platform was used for an MERS vaccine, and so researchers were able to replace relatively quickly the genetic code for the MERS spike protein with that of the SARS-CoV-2 virus spike protein on the same chimp adenovirus platform.

Neither the spike protein nor the platform alone can cause disease, so recombinant technology is generally regarded as safer than traditional vaccine techniques which use live weakened viruses.

Moderna, a Boston-based biotechnology company that is trying to carve a niche for itself in the new but rapidly developing field of messenger RNA-based vaccines, saw an opportunity to put its existing vaccine platform to quick use in a COVID-19 vaccine.

Moderna had been working on vaccines for a variety of diseases, which include Zika and H7N9 influenza, using a technique that inserted the genetic sequence of target viruses expressed in messenger RNA form, into human cells so that the cells themselves produce the viral proteins that the immune system would recognise and

produce antibodies against. As Tal Zaks, Moderna's chief medical officer, put it in a recent webinar, this method taught "the body to make a vaccine in its own cells".

The spike proteins of coronaviruses, whether it is SARS, MERS, or SARS-CoV-2, have been the main focus of vaccine developers, as this is the part of the virus that the immune system recognises. So Moderna's team took the sequence of the spike protein, translated it into messenger RNA, the form of RNA that the cells use to create proteins from DNA and RNA. They enclosed this genetic information in a minuscule lipid, or fat, envelope to create a vaccine.

When this RNA vaccine is injected into a muscle or any other body tissue, it enters the cells, and makes them produce the coronavirus spike protein. These spike proteins are displayed on the surface of the cells, where the immune system detects it, and creates antibodies as well as a cellular immune response.

One of the advantages of RNA and other nucleic-based vaccines is that they are quick to produce as they do not require a virus to be cultured in cells. Tal Zaks claimed in the webinar that it took only two days from the time the genome was published to produce a candidate vaccine.

The speed was partly possible because Moderna, like the Oxford team, had been developing a vaccine for

MERS and was able to switch the MERS spike protein with the SARS-CoV-2 virus protein.

CHINESE EFFORTS

Chinese researchers were, not surprisingly, amongst the first to get off the mark, with early results coming from three vaccine developers. One of them, CanSino, a Tianjin-based company, like the Oxford team, used recombinant viral vector technology to create a vaccine which had its first human trials in mid March as well and is now undergoing phase 2 clinical trials. CanSino has applied to hold phase 3 trials in Canada.

The two other Chinese companies that were quickly off the mark used traditional but tried and tested vaccine making techniques, which involve taking the SARS-CoV-2 virus and inactivating it so that it can no longer replicate and create disease but can still be recognised by the immune system to create antibodies.

SinoVac, a Beijing-based company, rapidly created an inactivated vaccine which, after mouse and macaque monkey trials, has completed phase 1 and phase 2 trials and will begin final phase 3 trials in Brazil, probably in July. Sinopharm, a government entity, also has begun phase 2 trials with an inactivated vaccine.

Other major vaccine developers are trying new DNA and protein-based vaccine platforms, most of which are in the pre-clinical stage of laboratory and animal tests.

INDIAN EFFORTS

Compared to the work that has been done in the U.S., China, Europe and Australia, India has been a laggard in developing a COVID-19 vaccine despite having a globally competitive vaccine manufacturing industry.

In May, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a well-publicised meeting to take stock of vaccine as well as diagnostic development in the country. A government release said Indian vaccine companies, academia and start-ups had “pioneered” work in the field of vaccine development. More than 30 Indian vaccines “are in different stages of corona vaccine development, with a few going on to the trial stages,” it said.

The government has not made the list of these developers public, but major vaccine manufacturers, including the Serum Institute of India, Bharat Biotech and Zydus Cadilla, and a handful of biotech companies such as the Bengaluru-based Mynvax, have started laboratory work which might bear fruit in a year or more.

The big manufacturers have tied up with laboratories abroad for the initial development work. The Serum Institute has an agreement with Astra Zeneca to manufacture 300 million doses of the Oxford vaccine under licence by the end of this year, and a billion doses by the end of 2021, provided the vaccine succeeds in phase 3 clinical trials. This is likely to be the first vaccine available in India, though it is not clear how many doses will be for domestic use, and how many for the rest of the world.

The Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech is working with the Indian Council of Medical research (ICMR) to develop a vaccine, though there are no details of the

technology that will be used or a timeline. More is known about Biotech’s two overseas collaborations. One is with scientists at the University of Wisconsin, who are using an influenza virus platform to develop a nasal vaccine to protect against COVID-19. If the candidate vaccine is successful in the laboratory, Bharat Biotech will produce the vaccine and conduct clinical trials.

Bharat Biotech has also teamed up with a research group at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, which is developing a coronavirus vaccine based on a rabies virus vector. The candidate vaccine is still at the mice trial stage, but if it proceeds further, Bharat Biotech will conduct the human trials as well as manufacture and distribute the vaccine globally in the developing world.

If successful, these vaccines could be available in 2021.

Ahmedabad-based Zydus Cadilla said in February that it was working on two different vaccine platforms: one DNA based and the other using a measles virus to carry the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein. Nothing has been heard from the company about the progress made since the announcement.

Since the Prime Minister’s meeting in May, little is known about the efforts towards developing an indigenous vaccine, or what kind of funding the cash-strapped government has provided to support them.

Vaccine development is expensive. The rapid advances made in other countries are due to the financial muscle of the home governments as well as funding from private organisations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a public private partnership that includes the Gates Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, estimates that for a vaccine that is required urgently, pre-clinical development and phase 1 trials could cost up to \$10 million, and accelerated phase 2/3 trials would cost around \$210 million. This is without taking into account the cost of manufacturing and distributing a successful vaccine.

Without this kind of investment, vaccines cannot be developed at the rapid speed at which this pandemic requires it to be done, which is one reason Indian developers have been left trailing in the global race. Powered largely by a \$10 billion war chest that the Donald Trump administration is investing in vaccine developers and manufacturers in this race, the U.S. aim is to ensure that it gets the first several hundred million doses of vaccine, perhaps towards the end of this year or early next year.

The U.S. government has invested \$1.2 billion in the vaccine that Oxford University is developing, an amount that will pay for the remaining costs of developing the vaccine, manufacturing enough doses for clinical trials in the U.S., as well as at least part of the cost of “at risk manufacturing”, or beginning to manufacture hundreds of thousands of doses of a candidate vaccine before clinical trials are completed, so that if the trials are successful the vaccine will be available immediately to the public.



BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

THE HEADQUARTERS of Moderna Therapeutics, which is developing a vaccine against COVID-19, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.

The risk the manufacturer takes is that if the trials are unsuccessful, the money that has been invested in manufacturing advance doses is lost. In the case of Moderna, the NIH conducted phase 1 and phase 2 clinical trials and have been active in speeding regulatory approval for rapid testing. The U.S. government has been willing to pump in and potentially lose money on vaccines that do not eventually make it past clinical trials. As Anthony Fauci, a senior figure in the NIH put it in a recent webinar, “we may be investing in things that we never use, that to the tune of half a billion dollars right off the bat”.

It is not only the U.S. that has been throwing money and resources at the vaccines. The Chinese efforts have strong government support. CanSino has partnered with the military medical scientists, while other vaccine manufacturers are either government owned or have teamed up with government research and public health agencies.

The United Kingdom government got into the act and encouraged a deal for Oxford University to give the global manufacturing rights for its vaccine to AstraZeneca, a pharmaceutical major headquartered in the U.K.

The government injected £65.5 million into the deal to help manufacturing and developing costs, but also to assure the U.K. of 100 million doses, 30 million of which would be delivered by September if clinical trials were successful and would be reserved for people in the U.K.

The \$1.2 billion that the U.S. government has invested in the Oxford-AstraZeneca deal assures it of 300 million doses if the vaccine proves successful.

The U.S. has invested \$480 million in Moderna, in addition to the support Moderna has received from the NIH.

The pay-off will be rapid access to the Moderna vaccine if it is successful. There is a limit to how far this pandemic can be controlled through lockdowns and physical distancing, the only methods that have been available so far to slow down the spread of the virus.

The economic costs and social disruptions of extended lockdowns cause more harm than the virus itself, which is why major countries in the world are investing so heavily in vaccine development, which is the only way to build immunity at the population level and slowly allow the world to get back to normal life.

The AstraZeneca/Oxford and the Moderna vaccines expect to be going into phase 3 clinical trials in July. A vaccine developed by CanSino could also be testing in phase 3 trials around the same time. If the vaccines are tested in places where the number of cases is rising (Brazil is becoming a favoured location for phase 3 trials for this reason), an indication of how protective a vaccine is could be available in a couple of months. Both the Oxford group and Moderna have talked of possible results by August or September.

But this short space of time is not enough to give a complete profile of the safety and efficacy of a vaccine. As larger numbers of people are vaccinated over a longer period, rarer side effects could emerge. As different age groups, including the very young and the very old, or those with chronic conditions are included in long-term trials, new findings of safety and efficacy could emerge. At the same time though, once one or more vaccines that provide a degree of protection against COVID-19 emerge, pressure will also increase on regulators to allow limited or emergency use for groups of people at the highest risk such as health care workers. On the basis of a risk-benefit analysis, regulatory authorities in different countries could allow limited vaccine use for a variety of high-risk groups. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is *de facto* the most influential regulatory authority in the world, and once the FDA licenses a vaccine for limited or emergency use other countries tend to follow suit.

Of the three or four vaccines that are likely to begin phase 3 trials in July, the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine, the Moderna vaccine, the Sinopharm vaccine and the CanSino vaccine, at least one or two if not all are likely to show some protective effect against COVID infection.

It may not protect perfectly and it may not work in all age groups, but as long as it is judged to be as safe as other vaccines in current use, it is quite possible that those at highest risk of being exposed to COVID-19 such as front-line workers or those at highest risk of death from it, such as elderly people with other health problems, might have early access, at least in some countries, to one of the fastest-ever vaccines the world has developed. □

Thomas Abraham is author of Twentieth Century Plague: The Story of SARS, and Polio: The Odyssey of Eradication. He is adjunct professor at the University of Hong Kong and a former consultant to the World Health Organisation.

Offence as defence

The BJP fulminates against the opposition in a bid to hide the **government's inefficient handling** of the face-off with China and the COVID crisis. BY VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI AND his long-term associate, Home Minister Amit Shah, are past masters at the art of using aggressive political propaganda in the face of personal and organisational adversities. Right from October 2001, when Modi took over as the interim Chief Minister of Gujarat from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) veteran Keshubhai Patel and started dominating the politics of the State first, and the party at the national level later, this duo has time and again employed this stratagem to overcome challenges. The last week of June 2020 saw them do this once again. In a series of synchronised moves, the Modi-Shah team launched a combative campaign, evidently aimed at reclaiming the loss of face that they and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government have suffered in the past couple of months in many areas, including in the face-off with China in the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh and in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The confrontation at the Galwan valley resulted in the death of over 20 Indian soldiers, including a commanding officer of the rank of Colonel, and injuries to scores of others. On the pandemic front, June saw an exponential rise in the number of cases in the country, with the last seven days of the month registering an all-time high average of approximately 20,000 new cases a day.

Public reaction to the casualties suffered at the hands of Chinese soldiers was palpably emotional. Surveys conducted by different agencies, including the IANS-CVoter Snap Poll, showed that a large number of people—in most surveys above 60 per cent—did not believe the Prime Minister's assertions at an all-party video conference held on June 19. Modi then said that India had not lost any territory to China in recent months and that “neither have they intruded into our border, nor has any post been taken over by them” though “20

of our jawans were martyred, but those who dared Bharat Mata, they were taught a lesson”. Over 60 per cent of the respondents in the survey stated that a “befitting reply has not been given to the Chinese”.

On the COVID front too, the Prime Minister was increasingly seen making comparisons with other countries—much like United States President Donald Trump—to show India as better off than them even as large segments of the population started feeling unsafe.

RHETORIC ALL THE WAY

It is in this context that both Modi and Shah made public appearances and engagements and resorted to rhetoric, focussing on both Galwan and COVID. In yet another episode of his periodic “Mann Ki Baat” radio programme, Modi iterated that “India's spirit of universal brotherhood has been noticed by the world, and at the same time it has also noticed India's commitment and might when it comes to safeguarding her sovereignty and territorial integrity”. He said that “those who cast an evil eye on Indian soil in Ladakh have got a befitting response” and went on to add that “India honours the spirit of friendship... (but) she is also capable of giving an appropriate response to any adversary, without shying away”.

On combatting COVID too, the sense of unity people had shown was one of the greatest strengths of India in the fight against COVID, he said.

In an interview to a television news agency, Amit Shah echoed Modi's proclamations. He stated that he wanted to assure the people of the country that “we will win both the battles; the one against COVID and the other related to efforts by the Chinese army to intrude into Ladakh”. He said: “I want to assure the people that under Modi's leadership we will win both the battles.”

Amit Shah sought to explain the position on the face-off with China as follows: “I want to state it on record that whenever I have mentioned Jammu and Kashmir State, it



BJP national president J.P. Nadda.

KAMAL KISHORE/PTI

has included Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin. The borders decided by the Constitution of India and Jammu and Kashmir's Constitution include Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin." However, the Union Home Minister skirted specific questions on the horrific incidents at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

A central theme of the two leaders' interventions in June end was the specific and overt targeting of the opposition parties, especially the Congress, even though the points they made were about universal and national issues, which are generally kept out of petty politicking. Amit Shah sought to highlight the "anti-India propaganda" on social media and accused former Congress president Rahul Gandhi of "making the kind of statements and pushing the kind of political agenda that are being liked in Pakistan and China".

He said: "It is sad that at this time of crisis you are indulging in such propaganda. It should be a matter of concern for the Congress party that your leader's hashtag is being promoted by Pakistan and China."

Modi accused almost the entire political leadership of being responsible for the country's debacle on the defence front until the BJP's ascent to power in 2014. He said that before Independence "our country was ahead of many countries in the world [in defence matters]" as there were "multitude of ordnance factories". Many countries that lagged behind India then, he said, "are ahead of us now". He added: "After Independence, we should have made efforts in the defence sector, taking advantage of our prior experience, but we did not. Now,

in defence and technology, India is taking strides towards self-reliance."

The large organisational machinery of the party and its associates in the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS)-led Sangh Parivar was quick to take the lead from the two topmost functionaries of the BJP and its government. Accordingly, BJP national president J.P. Nadda challenged the Congress, especially Rahul Gandhi, for a debate on the Chinese intrusions since 1962. This was in response to Rahul Gandhi's tweet "rechristening" the Prime Minister as "Surender" Modi, punning on the perception among defence experts and the lay public that India had surrendered territory to China in the current face-off. Nadda's contention was that under Congress regimes from the time of Nehru, India had lost thousands of square kilometres of land to China. "That's exactly why we need a historic debate from 1962 to date to fix responsibility for let-downs on the border," Nadda said.

Soon, the Sangh Parivar's rank and file, especially its cyber warriors, took the propaganda forward. The campaign, to put it mildly, was vicious, with extremely personal attacks on the Nehru family and other Congress leaders.

An Ahmedabad-based former senior leader of the BJP told *Frontline* that this line of aggressive campaigning and targeting was something that Modi and Shah had perfected right from their early partnership in Gujarat politics. "They braved the flak of the 2002 communal riots as well as the criticism that came up even from organisations like the BMS [Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh]



ASHOK BHAIKUMIK/PTI

YOUTH CONGRESS activists during a protest against the killing of 20 Indian Army soldiers in Ladakh's Galwan valley in the face-off with China, in Kolkata on June 18.

for patronising capitalists like Adani and Ambani. It was the same all-out attack that helped the duo sideline other leaders in the Sangh Parivar such as Sanjay Joshi, once rated on a par with or even above Modi in the Sangh Parivar hierarchy, and Pravin Togadiya, the former international president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad [VHP]. Joshi, who was perceived as a bigger threat in terms of individual political ambitions, was apparently honey-trapped, and a shady CD cropped up just before the beginning of a BJP national executive meeting in Mumbai, thus leading to his ouster,” the former leader said.

He added: “There is a saying in the Gujarat BJP that when the chips are down Modi comes back fighting with 20 hands. I am of the view that Modi and Shah realise the relevance and significance of the loss of face on China and COVID, especially the manner in which it has manifested on the ground. Undoubtedly, they would do anything to claw back and make the public mood decisively in their favour.”

However, there are no signs, at least in the early stages of the new campaign, of the public mood turning in favour of the ruling dispensation. In fact, within the larger military fraternity, which includes both serving and retired officers, some of the points in the BJP-Sangh Parivar campaign are being taken down objectively. “When you are asked questions about the current face-off and the casualties, you respond with a counter saying that we have lost thousands of square kilometres since 1962 and that the discussions have to start from there. The very argument shows that you are on the defensive in relation to the current situation,” a former senior Army official told *Frontline*.

SOLDIERS’ DISQUIET

This officer cited a number of points being discussed in informal and closed social media platforms of the Army. Some of them are as follows: “Talks on the situation in the Ladakh Area have made no headway. The Chinese are not budging from their positions even as they speak of disengagement. The Chinese have further fortified their positions in the Galwan valley and the Pangong Tso areas, and satellite imagery shows not only an increase in the number of troops but also concrete structures and heavy weapons at these places. In the talks at both the military and diplomatic levels the Chinese have asserted their claim over the whole of the Galwan valley and are not willing to discuss the issue. In the Pangong Tso area they have not only disregarded their own original claim line but have totally violated the LAC to which they had adhered over the years. They are now dug in well forward of the positions they maintained since 1962 and almost the entire North Bank is with them. The situation in the



RAHUL GANDHI, former Congress president.

Depsang Plains and the Hot Springs-Gogra area remains equally tense with the build up of troops continuing.”

Another point of view highlighted in these groups is that China’s design is to dominate the strategic Darbuk-DBO road leading to the Karakoram Pass. “What is not understood is why now? The DBO road has been under construction for the past 20 years and surely the Chinese must have been aware of the progress.”

Many analysts feel that the Chinese strategy is to cut off northern Ladakh and link the Aksai Chin Highway with the Karakoram Highway in POK with the aim of protecting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). “This makes no sense. Why should the Chinese fight their way across the Karakoram mountains and the world’s

largest glaciers, including the Siachin Glacier into Baltistan, against a professional army, to protect their interests in POK, when they can drive down the Karakoram Highway from Xinjiang through the Kunjerab Pass into Baltistan without firing a shot. Much easier to launch their operations from Xinjiang Province.”

A sort of conclusion articulated in these groups is that “the Chinese will continue to move forward, step at a time till they acquire positions, ‘salami slicing’, as the analysts call it, from where they can expand their borders, when they do desire. If they can do this with minor clashes and skirmishes they will have achieved their purpose.”

Clearly, the perceptions within significant segments of the Army do not resonate with the campaign points that the BJP and the Sangh Parivar are seeking to advance under the leadership of Modi and Amit Shah. Commenting on the whole sequence of events, former Lieutenant General H.S. Panag told *Frontline* that in times like these, the national leadership should focus on specificities of national interest and should not function in such a manner as to create ambiguity in the minds of the public and the international community. “The logical approach to national security must begin with a strategic review to establish what the present and future security challenges, both internal and external, are to evolve a comprehensive national security strategy. The first step towards it is to delink national security from domestic politics. The onus for this is on the government. The government must take the opposition, Parliament, the media and the public into confidence, and apply the security principle of need to know. They must explain the reality on the ground so that the nation can present a united front.”

Obviously, much thought has gone into the former Lieutenant General’s words, but do people obsessed with acquiring and maintaining positions of power really care? □

Information void

The COVID-19 situation seems headed for a climax, but the government is **reticent about sharing information** and statistics regarding the infection and the treatment protocol. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

THE GOVERNMENT AT THE CENTRE HAS consistently sought to give the impression that the COVID-19 situation is under control and that measures to contain the contagion have been adequate. Yet, the number of confirmed cases has been rising steadily across the country, and the pace of testing is hardly commensurate with the magnitude of the spread of the virus. The “unlock phase” was expected to bring substantial answers and explanations from the government and the scientific establishment on where India stood among nations on the various parameters of this health emergency. Yet, the flow of information in the public domain, which was quite excessive in the beginning of the lockdown, reduced to a trickle in May and June, especially in June when cases started to spike seriously.

On June 29, a brief press release from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare made a desperate attempt to present an optimistic picture. It stated that the recovery

rate had gone up to 58.67 per cent, that the number of recoveries had sharply overtaken the number of active cases, and that testing numbers had crossed 2.3 lakh samples a day. The gap between “recovered” and “active” cases had widened to 106,661, as of June 28. A total of 3,21,722 patients had been cured, and there were slightly over two lakh active cases under “active medical supervision”. There were 1,047 designated COVID-19 diagnostic laboratories, and more than 50 per cent of these were government labs. Close to 84 lakh samples had been tested. It provided details of COVID-related health infrastructure such as the list of dedicated hospitals and the number of isolation and intensive care unit (ICU) beds. This information is important and welcome, but there are also many unanswered questions regarding the trajectory of the virus, on which both the government and scientific establishment have been tight-lipped.

The number of press briefings from the government



DR VINOD K. PAUL, Member (Health), NITI Aayog (second from left), Dr Balram Bhargava, Director General, ICMR (third from left) and Lav Agarwal, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare (left), at a press conference on COVID-19 preparedness and action taken, in New Delhi on June 11.

has not been quite commensurate with the steeply rising graph of confirmed cases and infections. The regular briefings that were held at the beginning of the lockdown petered out in late May. In June, the last one was held on June 11, where the results of the first phase of a serological survey, which showed that 0.73 per cent of the general population had been infected, were shared with the media. After that, only press notes were issued, a form of communication that precluded questions from the media. In the 17th meeting of the Group of Ministers on June 17, its members were informed that Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Telangana, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal contributed 85.5 per cent of the active caseload and 87 per cent of the total deaths until then. The affected States and Union Territories had been asked to focus on containment measures and surveillance, use maximum testing capacity, monitor the comorbid and elderly population, predict emerging hotspots, and leverage digital tools, the GoM was told. The press note did not say whether the GoM was briefed on the number of deaths and the incidence of the infection in the population.

More people are being tested, which is a positive thing, though there are wide variations in the numbers among the States. The testing strategy of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) was revised to ramp it up following much media attention on the almost stagnant rates of testing prevalent earlier. But testing levels, which increased mostly in June, still do not match up with those in other countries with comparable populations and confirmed cases. That States and Union Territories have been asked to fully utilise their testing capacity means that the testing capacity of laboratories is still heavily underutilised.

QUESTIONS ON APPROVAL OF DRUGS

There have been serious issues about sharing information in the public domain, in particular about treatment protocol. On June 26, the All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN), a broad coalition of civil society organisations working on drug policy, wrote to the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) regarding the need for transparency in the functioning of a special Subject Expert Committee (SEC) that had been formed to evaluate COVID-19 drugs, health products and their approval process. The AIDAN pointed to serious gaps in information, beginning with the composition of the committee itself, which, it said, was shrouded in secrecy.

The process behind the regulatory and marketing approval of COVID-19 drugs like Remdesivir and the anti-viral Favipiravir by the Central Drugs Control Standard Organisation (CDSCO) was unclear, the AIDAN said, as the SEC report was not in the public domain. On June 22 the DCGI granted formal approval for Favipiravir to Glemnark Pharmaceuticals and for Remdesivir injection to Cipla Ltd and Hetero Drugs. Though the approval for the latter had been given on June 19, it was notified on June 22.

The DCGI notice said: "Considering the emergency



and unmet medical need for COVID-19 disease, CDSCO has approved Restricted Emergency Use of Remdesivir Injectable Formulations for the treatment of patients with severe COVID-19 infection and Favipiravir tablets for mild to moderate COVID-19 infection subject to various conditions and restrictions." The import and marketing of Remdesivir had been approved on June 1 itself, but it turned out that the importer was yet to import the drug after taking an import licence from the CDSCO. On June 20, the CDSCO granted permission to indigenous manufacturers for the manufacture and marketing of injectable formulations of the drug to ensure early access of Remdesivir for treatment of severe COVID-19 cases under the Restricted Emergency Use. Both drugs were to be sold with prescriptions. Remdesivir formulations, in particular, were to be supplied only to hospitals and institutions to ensure proper use. In both cases, informed consent of the patient or his/her representative was mandatory.

The AIDAN letter to the DCGI pointed out that in March 2020 the CDSCO had notified a regulatory pathway for approvals of COVID-19 drugs and vaccines. While approvals were given for the two drugs concerned, there was no official information regarding the basis for the accelerated approval. There was no clarity in the manner in which the regulatory pathway was being implemented. It was unclear whether Gilead, the manufacturer of Remdesivir, had submitted trial data or whether that data were submitted in peer-reviewed journals and whether the SEC had examined independent trials. The approvals to two other companies to manufacture the

THE COMMONWEALTH GAMES Village indoor stadium in New Delhi being converted into a COVID-19 care centre, on June 30.

drug also lack clarity on the extent of data provided by the companies—data on stability, impurity profile, assay (an investigative procedure in laboratory medicine) for the products produced in India.

The AIDAN said that authorisations and experimental data ought to be placed in the public domain for the sake of public safety. In the case of Favipiravir, it said, there was no information about studies and data submitted by the manufacturer for marketing approval. No trial data had been published, and the drug itself was under trial in many countries and its efficacy in treating COVID-19 was not proved.

The AIDAN emphasised the importance of clinical evidence and said health care workers needed information on the possible side effects of drugs, which was all the more reason why trial data should be made public. Authorisations could be granted under emergency conditions such as the one created by the COVID crisis and the waiver of trials and approvals was a possibility. But that made it all the more imperative, the AIDAN said, that the recommendations of the SEC should be made public. In a situation where emergency or experimental treatments are administered to patients, they and their families have a right to know what kind of drugs are being administered. The organisation expressed regret that at a time when greater transparency was needed, the CDSCO had become more opaque.

This lack of transparency had perhaps created a situation that made it possible for Yoga guru Ramdev's Patanjali Ayurveda Limited to claim that it had a cure for COVID-19. On June 23, it launched a "corona cure kit" with two medicines, "Coronil" and Swashri Vati. Ramdev claimed that a controlled clinical study was done, that 100 people were tested and that within three days 65 per cent of people who were found positive tested negative. "Coronil" apparently had a 100 per cent recovery rate. The media were informed that the drug would be available in all Patanjali stores within a week. What he did not say was that the recovery rate in any case was close to 99 per cent or more, considering that recent sero-surveillance data had revealed the infection fatality rate to be 0.08 per cent.

News of this "breakthrough cure" spread like wildfire and was discussed endlessly on electronic and social media. As sections of the media began asking questions about the miracle cure, the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy), the nodal Ministry responsible for granting permission for clinical trials for treatments under the AYUSH stream, issued a press release stating that the claim and the scientific study on which it was based were not known to the Ministry. Patanjali was told to "stop advertising/publicising such claims till the issue was duly examined".

The Uttarakhand government's licensing authority was requested to provide "copies of the licence" and "product approval details" of the Ayurvedic medicines being claimed as COVID cures. A representative of the licensing authority told the news agency ANI that it had

issued Patanjali a licence for only immunity boosters. In addition, the licence officer of the State Ayurveda Department told ANI that a notice would be issued to Patanjali demanding details about the identity of the agency that had authorised it to manufacture a COVID kit.

The Ministry denied knowing anything about the “facts and claims pertaining to a certain scientific study by the Haridwar based Patanjali Ayurveda Limited” and asked Patanjali to furnish the details of the name and composition of the medicines being claimed for COVID treatment, the sites or hospitals where the research study was conducted, protocols, sample size, institutional ethics committee clearance, registration with the Clinical Trials Registry of India (CTRI) and results of the data and studies conducted.

Interestingly, Patanjali had tried to conduct trials in Indore claiming that the District Magistrate had given it permission. When health activists objected saying the Collector did not have the authority to give permission, the Collector himself issued a statement clarifying that he had given no such permission. The company then tied up with the National Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS), a private medical college in Jaipur. But soon enough, the chairman of NIMS dissociated the institute from all such claims of a cure.

He told a section of the media that no clinical trials were held of the kind claimed and that only some symptomatic patients were given medicines sponsored by Patanjali. He also said that permission from the CTRI had been taken for doing tests with Ayurvedic medicines to check their effectiveness as immunity boosters and not for a cure. The Rajasthan Health Department, caught unawares, announced that the drug would not be allowed to be sold in the State.

The issue at hand was that no government, Centre or State, seemed to be in the know of what was happening, even as spurious claims, like the one made by Patanjali, were floating around. With the Prime Minister himself constantly acting as a brand ambassador of Ayurveda, it

was clear that nobody in the scientific establishment dared to say anything to the contrary. The AYUSH Ministry had to speak out as the claim by Patanjali would have definitely caused embarrassment to the government in the global scientific community, more so as India itself was working on finding a vaccine.

VULNERABILITY OF HEALTH WORKERS

There is lack of transparency at other levels, too, especially with respect to information on the vulnerability of health workers and health professionals. On June 28, a consultant anaesthesiologist at the prestigious Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narain Hospital in New Delhi, a COVID hospital now, succumbed to the virus. He was working in the hospital’s ICU. The concerns of health workers do not seem to have been addressed adequately, notwithstanding the use of the fanciful title of “corona warriors” by the government. There is so far no centralised data base on the number of infected health workers or the number of health workers who died treating coronavirus patients. Media queries in this regard were generally ignored.

Private agencies have stepped up to fill the information void. Three Bengaluru-based independent researchers, Savithri Devi, Subha Sri and Shrinidhi Datar, conducted an online survey of around 392 health workers in May to investigate the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE). They interviewed doctors, nurses, community health workers, post-graduate residents and interns in public sector facilities spread across 26 States and 150 districts. The findings revealed that “most components of PPE were either inadequately available or not available at all in most health care settings”.

More than 50 per cent of the respondents surveyed were from badly affected States such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. The researchers found that more than one third of those in the outpatient departments of public hospitals did not have N-95 masks; one in five working in operation theatres and less than one-third in labour rooms had face shields; 27 per cent of the respondents who worked in wards and four out of eight in ICU settings had N-95 masks. One in five working in red zone districts said they did not have N-95 masks. Only a quarter of community health workers doing contact tracing and door-to-door surveillance had masks and less than one third had gloves.

The survey found that 14 per cent of health care workers, including those in red zone districts, purchased their own PPEs and one-third of all respondents reported that they reused PPEs. But 88 per cent did not have adequate knowledge of the PPE recommended for their work settings. The respondents complained of discomfort wearing the PPE in hot conditions, of discrimination in the distribution of PPEs, and so on.

Frontline spoke to Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and other National Health Mission staff in Haryana, who said that there were acute shortages of PPEs and sanitisers. □



MANVENDER VASHIST/PTI

IN THE KAROL BAGH neighbourhood of New Delhi, identified as a COVID-19 containment zone, on June 29.

‘Migrants should not be seen as an input’

Interview with **R.B. Bhagat**, professor, International Institute for Population Studies, Mumbai. BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

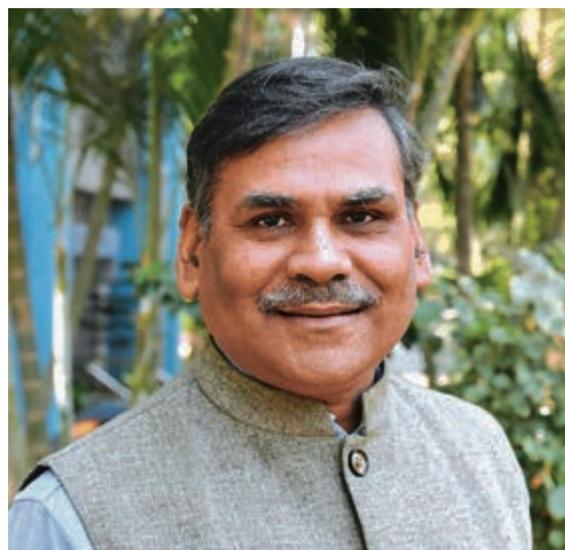
R.B. BHAGAT is professor and head of the Department of Migration and Urban Studies at the International Institute for Population Studies in Mumbai. An adviser on migration policy issues, he has written several papers on urban inclusion and on the concept of rights to the city. “A rights-based approach to city development would usher in a new era of freedom and human development; it must begin in the city and must begin with migrants,” he says. An academic who has his ear to the ground in the melting pot that is Mumbai, Bhagat spoke to *Frontline* on the migration crisis that emerged from the lockdown. Excerpts from the interview:

The exodus of migrant workers from cities and industrial and agricultural zones when the lockdown was announced continues to be a massive humanitarian crisis. You have been quoted as saying that this crisis has brought the migrant issue to the government’s doorstep. Why did it reach this tragic point?

The fundamental problem is that in all our policies and programmes, the word migrant is never used. Except in MGNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act], but even there it is used to say the programme is to reduce rural to urban migration. Whether it is labour legislation, social security policy or unorganised labour programmes, even the Building and Other Construction Workers Act under which we have social welfare boards functioning in different States, nowhere does the word migrant appear.

Our policies and programmes need to explicitly recognise that migrant workers exist in this country. In the name of poverty, we cannot assume to cover the migrant. Poverty is multidimensional.

In spite of the uncertainty all around, the economy must restart. Obviously, labour is needed for this. How do States and cities that rely on migrant labour move forward? After all, there is the very real threat of lockdowns happening again, and that would leave workers stranded once again.



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The next two months will see a lot of instability. Big cities have already begun to feel the shortage of labour in every sphere. We predict that about 20 per cent of the migrant population, such as roadside vendors and daily wage workers, will not come back. The self-employed and those who have contacts in industry and construction will return soon.

Out of Mumbai’s 20 million population, 42 per cent are migrants. We have estimated that about 1.2 million people have gone back. Mumbai will certainly be affected, but in the course of time the city will rejuvenate and innovations and technological advancements will replace the requirement of labour. The question is whether it is good for the country, for reducing poverty and for inclusiveness. The economic loss is temporary, but the loss to the people, I think, is permanent.

You have written extensively on migrants’ rights to the city. In several papers you speak about inclusion and integration being crucial for a city to develop. Could you expand on this?

Urban inclusion for migrant workers is very import-

ant for urban sustainability. Without inclusive urbanisation, I don't think India can progress. Rights to the city means everyone must have rights to urban amenities such as education, health and employment. Rights to the city can also be realised through planned urbanisation of rural areas.

The city should go to the people. Not people coming to the city. Geographical development with sustainable and inclusive urbanisation is the broader theoretical underpinning.

Secondly, who are those who make the city? Why are they excluded? Their wages are minimal, they are deprived and even condemned sometimes for the problems of the city. Inclusion is a right to the city.

Rights to the city means we should not neglect where people live and work. In development policy, the spatial aspect should not be neglected. Social science academics and economists are largely responsible for this happening.

You say the rights-to-the-city approach is a critique of the development process. Could you explain?

In policy debates we condemn urbanisation. We say cities are the problem. Villages are good. But the city shows growth, innovation, creativity, and creates wealth. Why can't this come to the rural areas?

The rights-to-the-city approach will create balanced regional development where urbanisation has a critical role. We need to be able to do both: make cities inclusive and take the benefits of urbanisation to the rural areas. This will be a way of addressing migration.

'AERIAL APPROACH' TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The exodus of migrants will put pressure on the rural economy. MGNREGA is a rural safety net, but will it be adequate?

There will be a lot of pressure on the rural economy. Because there was no employment they came here. The whole strategy of rural development has to change. When they say vocal on local, how does one implement that if a cohesive infrastructure is not in place?

The government says MSMEs [micro, small & medium enterprises] will create jobs. Yet most MSMEs are in urban areas. MSMEs will not go to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where a large chunk of migrants come from, because the infrastructure is not there. It is unlikely that anything can happen now as there has been no long-term rural development. And it is unlikely that MGNREGA can handle the current crisis. It is a bleak situation.

With regard to the rural economy, the few fundamental changes should be for infrastructure development to involve the local agro industry; and the concept of PURA (providing urban amenities to rural areas) envisioned by Abdul Kalam to be kick-started.

Additionally, the government's approach of being a beneficiary to a village or household has to move to the development of village clusters, with one town being the nucleus for all facilities such as markets, education and



RAFIQ MAGBOOL/AP

health. It has to be an aerial approach and not the "adopt a village" plan that politicians seem to do.

We have a rural safety net. What about the concept of an urban safety net? Had there been a mechanism such as this we may not have seen this kind of humanitarian crisis.

In Mumbai there is a concept of labour *nakas*, where workers come to a particular spot in the mornings to pick up daily wage jobs offered by contractors.

An urban MGNREGA format would work well in smaller cities. Of course, big cities require more labour and they pay much more than the Rs.202 a day MGNREGA wage. But workers struggle with housing, poor access to health care and cannot bring their children for education to the city because of the cost. Social support is more important in a big city.

If we want migrants to be respectable citizens of this country, we need to focus on housing. Urban inclusion should mean developing public housing. We have affordable and low-cost housing but not public housing. This is the government's responsibility. The private sector will never cater to these needs.

It does not have to be ownership but certainly the concept of cheaper and short-term rents. Why should those who have built a city live on pavements, under flyovers, in slums?

Urban inclusion is a strong theme in your work. Could you share your observations specifically on Mumbai, which is historically a migrants' city?

MIGRANT workers outside a railway station hoping to return to their home States, in Mumbai on May 27.

A city's development agenda should seek to include and integrate migrants politically, economically, socially, culturally and spatially. We need to raise the question: who owns the city?

The city, in this case Mumbai, needs to be liberated from the State government. The Central and State governments feel they own the city, but the city's people should own the city. In this pandemic crisis have we seen the Mayor or corporators get involved?

We cannot have inclusive cities without decentralisation. Moreover, we need to understand the difference between planning and projects. Mumbai has abundant projects, but we need planning. Projects are related to capital accumulation not for the people. We have marketed the city as a commodity. Unless it is about its people it will not progress. Profit and economic growth can be initiated from the bottom as well.

MIGRANTS AND VOTE BANK

It took a pandemic for the country to understand the value of millions of invisible, marginalised people. Your comments.

Many of these concepts have been around since the 1960s and 1970s. Sadly, political dispensations led to this. Migrants are not a vote bank. These issues are not vote-catching. When identity politics come into the picture then strategies such as addressing migrant issues are

irrelevant. During the pandemic we saw how they became non-citizens in their own country. Did they belong to the State of origin or destination? No one took responsibility. Even in the Rs.20 lakh crore economic package, where did migrants feature?

The Railways could have said it would take the care of the fares, but there was so much contention on what is really such a small amount in the larger scheme of things. This was an example of their insensitivity.

Migrants should not be understood as an input or just labour, they should be understood as human beings and citizens of this country.

How do we prevent another migration crisis?

I will reiterate that the responsibility of migrants is on the government. We have a GST [goods and services tax] Council. Why can't we have an inter-State migrant council? Workers/migrants must be specifically recognised in every policy and decision on labour. In fact, they should be protected under a special programme. The pandemic can spread inequalities as we have seen.

I believe local governance, and not the Central or State governments, should play a larger role. For instance, corporators would know who the migrants in their wards are and related issues.

Unfortunately, municipals corporations are not empowered enough by the Constitution. They [the corporators] could have and still can play a larger role for migrants' welfare. □

FTAs & the race to the bottom

The NDA government may well use the new environment provided by the pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis to accelerate negotiations with the E.U. and arrive at a **free trade deal** as some of India's Asian trade competitors have done. BY **C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR**

THE COMPETITION AMONG ASIAN COUNTRIES to win a slice of the export markets China currently controls is intensifying. In a recent development, Vietnam finally ratified a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union, under which more than 70 per cent of Vietnam's exports to the E.U. and 65 per cent of the E.U.'s exports to Vietnam will be rendered duty free as of August when the agreement takes effect. Of the remaining goods, tariffs on items that would add up to 99 per cent of the two-way trade will be phased out by the E.U. over seven years and by Vietnam over 10 years.

Coming at a time when the moves against China's alleged big power ambitions have triggered the imposition of tariffs and non-tariff barriers across the globe on imports from that country, the E.U.-Vietnam FTA is seen as likely to help Vietnam displace China in some sections of the European market. The only other Asian countries that have similar FTAs with the E.U. are Japan and Singapore. But they do not compete with Vietnam in areas such as apparel, footwear and seafood, which are its leading exports. Although not huge, at \$42 billion in 2019, Vietnam's exports to the E.U. amount to around 15 per cent of its total exports and far exceed its imports from the E.U. (\$15 billion). That benefit will only grow as a result of the FTA, with official Vietnamese estimates projecting that exports will be higher by more than 40 per cent in 2025 compared with a scenario without an agreement.

Moreover, foreign investors in China are looking for an alternative site to locate production capacities, given rising costs in that country and pressure on firms from developed country governments, especially the United States government, to disengage from China. The preferential access that Vietnam's exports would receive in the E.U. and the market-friendly environment created after economic reforms privileged growth above social objectives make that country an increasingly attractive location

for foreign investors competing for international markets. Foreign investment in Vietnam was already at a record high of \$38 billion in 2019. The FTA with the E.U. is expected to further increase foreign investment geared to linking Vietnam to global production chains.

Vietnam has on its part had to accept a range of demands from the E.U. as part of the trade deal. Besides opening up its services sectors, such as banking and shipping, Vietnam has ratified an investment treaty that protects intellectual property rights, geographical indications (champagne and feta cheese, for example) and investor interests and promises equal treatment to E.U. firms in public procurement in Vietnam. Many of these are World Trade Organisation-plus measures that go



HAU DINH/AP

A WORKER at a factory in Nam Dinh province, Vietnam, where sports apparel is manufactured, a file photograph. Apparel, footwear and seafood are Vietnam's leading exports.

beyond even the controversial requirements set by the Uruguay Round agreements.

Given the level of Vietnam's development and the government's economic growth aspirations, officials clearly see these as a small cost to pay compared with the expected gains. But for developing countries as a group, trade is currently a zero-sum game. Coming at a time when world trade has contracted, the projected expansion of Vietnamese exports to the E.U. after the FTA, if it materialises, will adversely affect other countries. This is strengthening the hands of sections within other developing countries, including in Asia, who want their governments to sign similar FTAs and bilateral investment treaties, which would involve making significant concessions in areas that would undermine their own efforts to industrialise without excessive dependence on and subordination to foreign capital.

India is a typical case where such pressures are visible. Exports in four areas are expected to be affected adversely: footwear, garments, marine products and furniture. In the case of marine products and apparel, India and Vietnam currently export goods of similar value (\$1 billion and \$7 billion). India is reported to have exported \$900 million worth of seafood to the E.U. in 2018-19 and is its third largest foreign supplier after the U.S. and Japan. But while imports on imports from Vietnam will fall to zero, those on imports from India will remain at 9 per cent in the case of apparel and in the 4 to 18.5 per cent range in the case of marine products, which would make it extremely difficult for India to compete with Vietnam. Ajay Sahai, from the Federation of Indian Export Organisations, is quoted in *BusinessLine* as saying: "In footwear, where Vietnam exports \$7.5 billion worth of items compared to India's \$1.6 billion, the advantage will be enhanced once E.U. reduced tariffs for Vietnam to zero from 8 per cent. Similarly, in furniture, where India had started making inroads into the E.U. with imports of over \$900 million, Vietnam's share of \$1.5 billion is likely to increase several-fold when the import duty of 6 per cent is eliminated." Exporters argue that the only way this issue can be resolved is by speedily concluding the negotiations on an E.U.-India FTA, which began in 2007, were halted in 2013 and revived only in 2018.

Disagreement between the two sides persists on a host of issues, besides the incorporation of social and environmental clauses in a trade agreement. Important among these are India's reluctance to accept strong investor protection provisions, including clauses for investor-state dispute settlement abroad, which India has sought to drop even from bilateral investment treaties. There are also disagreements, reportedly, on rules that would apply to drug patents, tariffs on second-hand cars, agriculture, services, and the list of sensitive items that would be provided special protection. The majority view is that the E.U.'s template for these FTAs requires concessions from India that are detrimental to India's development.

The avowedly "reformist" Narendra Modi govern-

ment, whose inclinations are to sign bilateral trade and investment treaties, has faced difficulties in pushing this agenda because of criticism from within its own political base, besides from the opposition. Moreover, the evidence is that India has been adversely impacted by the FTAs it has signed with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan and Korea. India's trade deficit with ASEAN rose from \$5 billion in 2010-11 to \$22 billion in 2018-19, that with Japan from \$3.5 billion to \$8 billion, and that with Korea from around \$7 billion to \$12 billion.

RCEP FIASCO

The pressure this put on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government became clear when it withdrew at the last moment from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving 16 Asia-Pacific partners after having more or less committed to joining it. Besides small producers and peasants who would have been adversely affected by the regional liberalisation, business too was opposed to the agreement. Industry leaders in sectors such as iron and steel, dairy, marine products, electronic products, chemicals and pharmaceuticals and textiles expressed concerns that the significant tariff reduction the RCEP implied would lead to a surge in imports into India, with damaging effects on domestic production.

All this, however, was clear well before the government and official negotiators sent out signals that India would finally join the agreement, with a few minor modifications. The only reasonable explanation for that stance is that the government was being led by its unthinking adherence to and fascination with a neoliberal agenda that gives a "liberal" veneer to its deeply conservative social and political positions. This paves the way for continuous trade and foreign investment liberalisation, which is easier done as part of a multilateral agreement rather than as stand-alone national policy because a multi-country arrangement appears to be one in which sacrifices are made in some areas for gains in others. Perhaps, the NDA government hoped that, despite apprehensions at home, it could find a place in the RCEP by persuading its partners to limit the ambition of the agreement. Finally, that strategy did not work.

Some of India's Asian trade competitors signing FTAs with the E.U. provides the NDA government another opportunity to push its trade liberalisation agenda since the intensified competition ramps up business support for an E.U.-India FTA. This occurs at a time when the government, faced with a pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis, has decided to implement a slew of pro-business reforms of labour laws, agricultural trade rules, mining laws and much else. It may well use the new environment to accelerate negotiations with the E.U. and arrive at a free trade deal. But that depends on how it will manoeuvre past its own constituencies that may oppose the deal, especially since enhancing domestic production and making India "self-reliant" seems to be the rhetoric it has recently adopted. □

Time to revitalise the public sector

It is surprising that the government does not envisage a major role for public sector enterprises in its post-COVID-19 strategy for development, and plans to disinvest in them, although PSEs have clearly outperformed the private sector in micro efficiency. BY **DINESH ABROL** AND **THOMAS FRANCO**

THE INDIAN PEOPLE NEED THE PUBLIC sector. The COVID-19 period has proved this beyond doubt. The Narendra Modi government is determined to privatise the public sector¹. The latest decision, announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on May 17, makes it clear that the government will privatise all Central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) in non-strategic sectors. While in the strategic sector there will be only up to a maximum of four PSEs, the private sector also will be allowed entry into it. PSEs in defence will be privatised. Participation of private investment has been allowed in space-related activities, including planetary exploratory missions. Thus, what is strategic is not clear. A policy on the public sector would be announced soon, said the Finance Minister. The danger of privatisation hangs over the head of the entire manufacturing sector and all public services.

The paradox is that the announcement of this mega privatisation drive has been made under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (ABA) package which is supposed to achieve reduction in import dependence and creation of a self-reliant India. The Central government has a budget target of Rs.2.10 lakh crore from disinvestment in the current fiscal, of which Rs.1.20 lakh crore is expected to come from CPSE disinvestment².

STRATEGIC AND NON-STRATEGIC

It is baffling that the resolve to privatise the public sector was announced as part of ABA packages and the Budget Statement of 2020-21. Strategically, PSEs were to make India self-reliant, technologically as well as in product markets, and promote import substitution. Strategic sector means arms and ammunition and allied items of defence equipment, defence aircraft and warships, atomic energy (except in areas relating to the operation of nuclear power and applications of radiation and radio isotopes in agriculture, medicine and non-strategic industries) and railway transport. All other CPSEs will be considered non-strategic. Some CPSEs being arbitrarily classified non-strategic and others being classified strategic goes against the logic of the ABA. The entire public



V. GANESAN

THE ALL-WOMEN team engaged in manufacturing the side wall of a coach at the Integral Coach Factory in Chennai.

sector being subjected to destructive competition from foreign investors poses a major threat to the country's economic sovereignty, technological autonomy, national security and political stability.

The ABA foreign direct investment reforms are focussed on allowing 100 per cent FDI in telecom, automobiles, chemicals, textiles, airlines, plantation, mining, petroleum and natural gas, defence manufacturing, broadcasting, civil aviation, agriculture and animal husbandry, railway infrastructure, industrial parks, cash and carry wholesale, e-commerce, and pharmaceuticals; 74 per cent FDI in private sector banking; and 49 per cent FDI in insurance. They invite FDI even in retail trade.

This time privatisation will engulf a large number of technology- and talent-intensive sectors such as the Indian Railways, Air India, oil and gas companies such as Bharat Petroleum, Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), and North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO). Under the hammer of privatisation are CPSEs engaged in cap-

ital-intensive manufacturing of electrical and non-electrical machinery; the production of metals, chemicals and fertilizers, ships and aircraft, rail engines and heavy machinery; and public services covering power, coal, oil, gas, railways, aviation, telecom, defence, electronics and pharmaceuticals. These enterprises have contributed to import substitution and absorption of foreign technology and promoted export of manufactured goods and engineering and design services.

The policy of total privatisation of PSEs, ignoring their current and future roles in indigenous technology development, public health, environmental protection and social welfare and without any certainty about the proceeds the Central government will be able to collect in a turbulent economic environment, is dangerous. It does not make sense to privatise all PSEs: with the neoliberal cadre of bureaucrats and hired foreign consultants advising the government on what is strategic, it will be nothing but hara-kiri.

The mystery is that all this is happening even when the financial performance of PSEs in manufacturing and non-financial services is proving superior to private sector firms in terms of taxes and profits, that is, return on capital³. When the public sector is outperforming the private sector in terms of "micro efficiency", and has a larger surplus to invest in technical progress and manufacturing, it is a paradox that the state is unable to envisage a major role for PSEs in India's post-COVID strategy for the development of manufacturing and public services. Figure 1 provides a comparison with the private sector on the parameter of return on capital, an indicator utilised for the assessment of "micro efficiency" of enterprises. See also Table 1 for details of the continuous improvement in the performance of CPSEs in respect of all the key parameters.

In the 1990s, the focus was mostly on greenfield privatisation. The economic reforms initiated in that period included measures favouring significant private sector entry, creation of independent regulatory authorities, disaggregation of supporting government infrastructure from state-owned enterprises with which the private sector would be competing (for example, the separation of the government-owned airline from government-owned airports) and liberalisation of pricing regimes. Performance contracts—memoranda of understanding (MoUs)—sought marketisation and improvement of performance through the signing of an agreement between a PSE and its administrative ministry in order to facilitate autonomy in exchange for greater accountability in the administration of public

Central public sector enterprises (CPSE) at a glance

Parameter	2018-19	2017-18	Per cent
	(in Lakh Crores)		
Total paid up capital	2.75	2.53	8.55%
Total fin. Inv.	16.4	14.31	14.65%
Capital employed	26.33	23.57	11.71%
Total gross TO	25.43	21.54	18%
Total income	24.4	20.32	20.12%
Net profit	1.74	1.55	178 nos. Of CPSE
Net loss	0.31	0.32	70 nos. Of CPSE
Overall net profit	1.42L	1.23	15.52%
Reserves	9.93	9.26	7.17%
Net worth	12.08	11.15	8.36%
Dividend	0.71	0.76	128 nos. Of CPSE
Cont. to exchequer	3.68	3.52	4.67%
Foreign exchange	6.64	5.22	27% @ 144 nos. Of CPSE
CSR	0.38	0.34	150 nos. Of CPSE
Salary & wages	1.52	1.53	SLIGHTLY DECREASED
Total market cap	13.71	15.2	DECREASED
Market cap as % of BSE	9.08	10.69	DECREASED
Total CPSE	335		NUMBER OF CPSE
Maharatna	10		
Navratna	14		
Miniratna-I	73		
Miniratna-II	12		

Source: Public Sector Survey for 2018-19 at DPE website

sector enterprises⁴. In no case was disinvestment more than 20 per cent of the total equity.

In some areas, privatisation also got withdrawn or stopped before completion. In 2005, the government scaled back its privatisation programme, scrapping plans to sell strategic stakes in 13 state-owned companies, including the major power equipment manufacturer Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, the mining firm National Aluminum Company, and PSEs dealing with construction, shipping and fertilizer manufacturing. In some cases, certain projects were withdrawn because of economic issues such as high transaction costs or the lack of

interest by private entities. A significant role was played in this by coalition governments backed by communist parties, trade unions, and local communities.

REDUCTION IN GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT

However, the government reduced the level of support to PSEs. It did not prioritise the contribution of the public sector to self-reliance, that is, encouragement to the units to contribute to import substitution and indigenous technology development in a big way⁵. A conventional pro-market reform belief is that PSEs reduce economic growth because they are inefficient at the micro level or they absorb scarce resources that can be used more efficiently by private enterprises. This understanding is flawed because technical progress plays a central role in economic growth.

Privatisation has helped large corporates. By handing over Indian Petrochemicals to Reliance, Ambani was made a monopoly in petrochemicals. The Tatas recovered their total investment cost in Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited by selling a few properties in Mumbai alone, and now Tata Telecommunication is defunct. Is this efficiency? In Gujarat, Adani, Ambani and the Tatas are subsidised: in most of their projects the government provided viability gap fund (VGF) free. It is hard to miss the changes taking place in China's energy landscape. In 2019, China produced 40 per cent of all the wind turbines in the world. It made three-quarters of the world's solar panels. Nearly half of the electric vehicles on the planet today, and half the hydrogen-fuelled vehicles, are owned by the Chinese.

The conditions for higher potential profitability to transform into sustainable and rapid economic growth include sufficient demand, commitment to technical progress, and environmental protection. COVID-19 has taught policy-makers to value public health and labour welfare. There is evidence to show that public sector enterprises create economy-wide positive externalities that promote economic growth and sustainable development. Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), in which the government invested just Rs.105 crore, invested Rs.21,40,106 crore last year alone in government projects. LIC is the only company in the world that gives 95 per cent of its profits to policy holders as dividend. Still, the government wants to list and privatise it, which amounts to a crime. Public sector enterprises are the institutional basis of the Kaldor-Verdoorn effect and its link with productivity growth.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Cluster development is a priority area for industrial policy. The public sector has acted and still can act as a facilitator of technology diffusion. The breadth and depth of the contribution of PSEs to the development and diffusion of technology and industry in Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kochi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune and many other cities are incomparable. In the neoliberal paradigm, the government is typically portrayed as having a rather limited role. The government is often restricted to the tasks, competences, and qualifications of a regulator,

an administrator and a fund-raiser to facilitate industrial clusters. Creating public infrastructure is a one-sided strategy meant to reduce the cost burden of the private investor. This strategy cannot lead to innovative clusters. Industry corridors, special economic zones (SEZs), district industry centres (DICs), software parks, biotech parks, incubation centres and many more such schemes are examples of government investment for the private sector but they are failing to get the private sector to make in India.

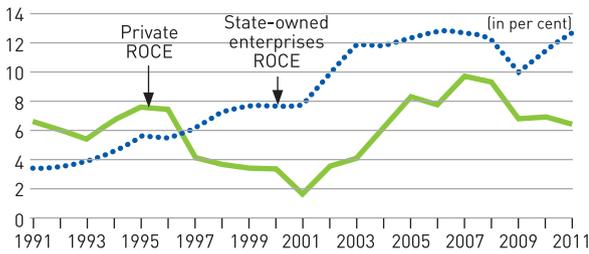
The government does not want to strengthen the existing public sector drug units. It has started the process of privatising four out of five units. The proposed production-linked incentive scheme meant to reduce import dependence on China does not even aim to promote indigenous technology under development in the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) system of laboratories for deployment in domestic manufacture of import-dependent bulk drugs/drug intermediates/key starting materials. During the COVID-19 period, another major scheme announced by the Department of Pharmaceuticals, to set up bulk drug parks in the name of strengthening domestic production of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), is again about only providing common facilities and financial assistance.

The puzzling part is that a similar approach was tried in Baddi in Himachal Pradesh and Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh but did not lead to technologically and structurally competitive API production. It is a matter of serious concern that the NITI Aayog has ignored the recommendations of the feasibility study report of the Pharmaceutical Export Promotion Council of India (Pharmaexcil) on the development of competitive API production. The Baddi Bulk Drug Park in Himachal Pradesh, announced by Anurag Thakur, Union Minister of State for Finance, is not suitable for API production from the basic stage and was not recommended by the Pharmaexcil report.

The short-sighted approach to decisions in respect of the future role of the public sector is evident from this announcement. Bulk drug parks have a strategic role in the revival of technologically self-reliant manufacturing. The decision to privatise public sector drug units casts a serious doubt on the political commitment of the Central government. The revival of Kerala State Drugs and Pharmaceutical Limited (KSDP) and the contribution it has made to the tackling of COVID-19 in Kerala indicate the potential of the public sector when the political leadership is committed and willing to do the needful in respect of policy-making and enterprise building.

It is the strategy of keeping the government out of business after 1991 that prevented the country from indigenously developing the capability to invest in production, innovation and diffusion of indigenous technology. The government needs to learn from the failures of the "Make in India" programme. FDI and domestic private investment have not flowed into manufacturing. The bulk of the collaboration agreements signed by the public sector have been for technical collaboration. More than four-fifths of the agreements related to the manufactur-

Manufacturing firms return on capital employed



ing sector. A sizeable amount was purchased by the public sector through lump sum payments. The perpetual outflow on account of royalty payments was low. Complementarity between R&D and technology import, higher average propensity to adapt key technologies, and emergence as a supplier of technology to other firms are the indicators of technology competence developed through investment in technology absorption and assimilation. There are also many examples of horizontal transfer of technology from the PSEs. The CPSEs active in heavy engineering sectors, petroleum, oil exploration, telecom, and chemicals and pharmaceuticals have made significant contributions to the development of the country's industrial base. But they have not been given due credit for the helping hand they extended⁶. The public sector can be the deliverer in manufacturing: its surpluses and capacities alone can help India become self-reliant.

Telecom, electricity, railways, oil and gas, space technology, pharmaceuticals, new technologies, insurance, banking and so on are most crucial for a self-reliant India⁶. These can be made a success only by the public sector. In Atmanirbhar, 80 per cent of the package announced is for the banking sector, the public sector banks. But the government wants to reduce their number from the present 12 (it was 20 before March 20) to four and privatise the rest, which will destroy the economy. It is time for a relook and for concentrating on reconstructing the economy to benefit the majority of people through public enterprises and services instead of playing benefactor to a few corporates. □

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Footnotes

1. The Finance Ministry informed Parliament on July 22, 2019 that in 2018-19, the proceeds from disinvestment were Rs. 84,972 crore. Strategic disinvestment has been guided by the basic economic principle that the government should not be in the business to engage itself in manufacturing/producing goods and services in sectors where competitive markets have come of age, and economic potential of such entities may be better discovered in the hands of the strategic investors owing to various factors, e.g. infusion of capital, technology upgradation, and efficient management practices.

The Finance Ministry added that the government

would also be able to monetise its investment in CPSEs. Among the units that will go under the hammer include: Project & Development India Ltd, Hindustan Prefab Limited (HPL), Engineering Project (India) Ltd, Bridge and Roof Co. India Ltd., Pawan Hans Ltd., Hindustan Newsprint Ltd (subsidiary), Scooters India Limited, Bharat Pumps & Compressors Ltd, Hindustan Fluorocarbon Ltd. (HFL) (sub.), Central Electronics Ltd, Bharat Earth Movers Ltd. (BEML), Ferro Scrap Nigam Ltd. (sub.), Cement Corporation of India Ltd (CCI), Nagamar Steel Plant of NMDC and Alloy Steel Plant, Durgapur of SAIL. In disposing of five entities — HPCL, REC, NPCC, HSCC and DCIL — in last two years, the government did not make profitability a criterion.

2. Disinvestment of government stakes in companies has become a major source of non-tax revenue in recent years, with collections of Rs 1 lakh crore in FY18, Rs.85,000 crore in FY19 and Rs.50,300 crore in FY20. With market conditions not being conducive, the Centre might nearly halve the disinvestment revenue target of Rs 2.1 lakh crore for FY21. Among the strategic deals, the Centre is banking on the sale of its entire 53.3 per cent stake in oil retailer-cum-marketer BPCL to raise Rs.70,000-80,000 crore. The Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) has recently extended the deadline for expression of interest in the stake from potential buyers until July 31.

3. See Sushil Khanna (2015), *The Transformation of India's Public Sector*, January 31, 2015, Vol. 1, No. 5, *Economic & Political Weekly* for how in manufacturing CPSEs are able to provide better return on capital employed than either private sector as a whole or any segment of private sector, like business group-controlled firms, independent private Indian firms or foreign-owned private firms (Sushil Khanna, 2015). In services, public sector enterprises were largely profitable, providing a lower return than private investment in most of the period with performance improving in 2000-2005, but plunging into losses after 2009.

4. Between 1990-1993, approximately 120 PSEs signed or were identified to sign MoUs.

5. For instance, until 1991, PSEs enjoyed a 10 per cent price preference over their private competitors in government procurement. This was phased out in the period 1992 to 1995. The share of budgetary support in the plan investment of PSEs has also come down from 23.5 per cent in 1991-1992 to 18.6 per cent in 1992-1993. Nonetheless, despite the adoption of parallelisation reforms, the government still does not follow a hard budget policy. Loss-making PSEs are still subsidised and they rely heavily on borrowing from state-owned banks. For instance, despite reforms in the banking sector, the State Bank of India was recently forced to bail out a textile mill and a manufacturer of railway carriages.

6. Indian policy-makers need to treat the examples of horizontal transfer of technology from BHEL, BEL, IDPL, HAL, HMT, IPCL, ONGC, DOT and many other such public enterprises as an important parameter for the assessment of the contribution of CPSEs.

Targeting mosques

Attacks on mosques, which began during the violence in North East Delhi in late February, **have continued** even during the lockdown. BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

A LITTLE OVER 18 YEARS AGO, HUNDREDS OF Islamic monuments and Muslim places of worship were targeted in Gujarat as part of the organised violence in February-March 2002. While much of the Indian media confined itself to reports of the destruction of the nearly 300-year-old shrine of Vali Gujrati, *The Guardian* did not hold its punches as it reported: “Two hundred and thirty unique Islamic monuments, including an exquisite 400-year-old mosque, were destroyed or vandalised during the recent anti-Muslim riots in the Indian State of Gujarat, according to a local survey. Experts say the damage is so extensive that it rivals the better publicised destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan or the wrecking of Tibet’s monasteries by the Red Guards. Several monuments have been reduced to rubble in the course of the riot, in which 2,000 people, mainly Muslims, have died. In other disturbances, Hindu gangs have smashed delicate mosque screens, thrown bricks at Persian inscriptions, and set fire to old Korans.”

In 2020, the Gujarat model is sought to be replicated in India’s capital. The attacks on the Muslim places of worship have not stopped during the lockdown. A mosque in Dwarka was repeatedly attacked. Another in Bijaswan met the same fate. A little earlier, a mosque in Alipur had been attacked. These assaults came on the heels of the February violence in North East Delhi in which 19 mosques and dargahs were either burned down or defiled. Twenty-four such attacks have taken place on Delhi’s Muslim houses of worship this year, spreading fear among the minority community. Some of them are too afraid to even register a formal complaint with the police, preferring to settle for negotiations under duress with the vandals.

Take, for instance, the Dwarka mosque, located near Shahjahanabad Apartments in Sector 11, which has been repeatedly targeted. When miscreants attacked the mosque in February, the police defused the situation and brought about an amicable solution with local Hindu residents expressing regret. In fact, many members of the majority community went out of their way to instil confidence among Muslims by leaving messages of communal amity at the mosque’s gateway. The mosque authorities installed a CCTV (closed-circuit television) in

the front portion of the building to prevent further violence. Prayer services continued.

A repeat attack took place on June 14, with Hindutva vigilante groups allegedly throwing stones at the mosque in the wee hours. No one was injured as the only person present on the premises was the imam, who immediately alerted local residents. A police complaint was filed when it was discovered that this time the attackers did not use the front portion of the mosque where the CCTV was installed, and instead threw stones from across the road running parallel to the mosque, causing minor damage to the building.

The media in Delhi underplayed the attack, just as local media had downplayed attacks on mosques in Gujarat in 2002. A few days later, the Jama Masjid Bijaswan in South West Delhi was targeted. This mosque had been attacked in 2018, too, and an attempt was made to put curbs on



SANDEEP SAXENA

PEOPLE ARRIVING for Friday prayers under police vigil at a mosque in North East Delhi on February 28.

prayers. Back then, the Delhi Minorities Commission had intervened. Its Chairman, Dr Zafarul Islam Khan, said: "It is an old issue. Back in 2018 we sent a notice. Then under local and police pressure peace was arrived at, but it was detrimental to the community." In October 2018, the commission took *suo motu* cognisance of the incident. The minorities panel wrote to the Deputy Commissioner of Police, South West Delhi, urging him to take corrective measures. "Some miscreants are creating trouble at the time of namaz, specially during the noon prayers on Friday. They have forcibly removed the loudspeaker of the mosque and are preventing outsiders from praying in the mosque," it wrote.

A few days later, the police informed the commission that the issue had been amicably resolved. The imam, Maulvi Lal Muhammad, had informed the police that no one was being prevented from offering prayers now.

The truce ended in the last week of June 2020, when some hooligans objected to *azaan* (prayer call) on the loudspeaker and to the number of worshippers at the mosque. They again insisted on not allowing any "outsiders" to pray there. Local Muslims initially resisted, pointing out that there were not many mosques in the region and any trader or student passing through the area on a Friday was likely to stop over for prayers. Later, however, they buckled to pressure yet again. When Jamaat-e-Islami Hind functionaries tried to tap avenues for judicial recourse, local residents failed to come forward. Nobody was willing to put things on record out of fear. "They said, we have to live here only. And they met most of the demands of the miscreants," rued Salim Engineer, vice president of the Jamaat.

Zafarul Islam Khan said: "It is a common problem that local Muslims fall to local and police pressure and do not pursue the cases. Compromise under police pressure is common." He was speaking from experience, having witnessed numerous complaints about local strongmen, often in collusion with local policemen, objecting to *azaan* on loudspeaker during the lockdown.

On April 3, about 200 people reportedly ransacked the premises of a mosque in Delhi's Alipur area. Zafarul Islam Khan wrote to the Police Commissioner stating that the panel had received a report, and a video, of an attack on the mosque in Mukhmelpur village under the Alipur police station in North West Delhi around 8 p.m. There were two or three people inside the mosque, while the assailants numbered around 200. The notice said the mob ransacked the mosque and partially burnt and demolished parts of it, including the roof. Zafarul Islam Khan said it was unbelievable that this could happen in the national capital. "The issue cannot be patched up artificially by arranging a compromise where a religious place has been ransacked and partially burnt and demolished. If no proper legal action is taken, this lawlessness will become common."

Around the same time, many mosques came under pressure to shun the use of loudspeakers for *azaan*. While some were told that *azaan* was not necessary

during the lockdown (mosques were closed during the first three phases of the lockdown), others were told to discard them for good. Even local policemen in some cases apparently took a role in thwarting the use of loudspeakers. The minorities panel intervened and insisted that the *azaan* was necessary to alert people about prayer timings during the lockdown. Yet again, police officers and station house officers had to intervene to safeguard the minority community's right to worship.

Salim Engineer said the way ahead was to build bonds with other communities. "These instances have gained frequency in recent times. At one place, there is objection to *azaan*, at another to people spilling out of the masjid. At another still, to some other issue, like the media came up with the story of children hiding in a madrasa. The reality is, in parts of Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Haryana such instances are occurring with increasing frequency. The police seldom find a lasting solution. The only solution is to speak to reasonable people from other communities and build a social bond against such miscreants to isolate them," he said.

Nineteen mosques came under attack during the violence in North East Delhi in late February. Not only did the rampaging mobs vandalise the mosques, they set them on fire with cylinder blasts. Entire shelves of the Quran were reduced to ashes. Prayer mats were smoked, and Islamic calligraphy on the walls was wilfully and brazenly defiled. In four places, saffron flags were hoisted atop the mosques' minarets. Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind leaders were able to get the flags removed only about a week later, and prayers began to be resumed in mosques. During that tense week, as Muslims waited for prayer services to resume, there were mobs shouting provocative slogans. Even when the prayer services resumed, mosques in some areas, notably in Ashok Nagar, Shiv Vihar and Mustafabad, were found to have been impacted too badly to resume even token daily prayers. In Farooqia Masjid, where prayers were offered on the rooftop on the first Friday after the attack, Delhi Police did not allow the prayers to continue as the site was under investigation.

Fortunately, prayer services have now been restored. Mohammed Rashid, whose house, located adjacent to the mosque's rear wall, was burnt down, said: "Now normal prayers have resumed. I also go there. Things are also gradually coming back to normal in other mosques that had been impacted by the violence in February."

However, attacks on mosques have not entirely died down, just shifted location. There is a perception that the attacks have gained in frequency since the Babri Masjid-Ramjambhoomi verdict was pronounced by the Supreme Court. Hooligans apparently taunt the community with provocative slogans such as "Babri Masjid yaad karo" (Remember Babri Masjid).

Zafarul Islam Khan said he did not see a link with the verdict. But he said: "There is an atmosphere of fear. The compromise arrived at is done under pressure from local bigwigs and policemen. It does not last as it does not justice." □

Broken system

Lack of any effort to trace or isolate contacts of COVID-19 patients sees the number of cases in Delhi rise exponentially. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

“HORRENDOUS, HORRIFIC AND PATHETIC!” is how the Supreme Court described the COVID-19 situation in Delhi on June 12. Since then the capital has surpassed the total number of cases in not only Mumbai but also Wuhan, the epicentre of the global pandemic in China. By June 25, Delhi reported 70,390 infections and 2,365 deaths. But the spread of the virus in Delhi was not accidental as exemplified through various case studies of patients.

Sarika (name changed) works in the emergency department of a premier Central government hospital in the capital. A month ago, she tested positive for coronavirus. She called up all the ambulance numbers she had, but none agreed to come. Ultimately, a friend of hers wore an old raincoat, double hand gloves, a helmet and drove her to the hospital. Despite being a front-line worker in the same hospital and having a COVID positive report with her, the hospital did not admit her. After several hours, during which her temperature was taken and blood pressure measured with the same unsanitised equipment that was used on other incoming non-COVID patients as well, it was midnight when an ambulance finally arrived to take her to another wing of the hospital, two kilometers away. There were six more patients in that ambulance, one of whom was constantly vomiting.

Once at the isolation facility, Sarika thought her ordeal was over. But within a couple of days, she was asked to vacate the bed. As she was not tested before discharge, she could not return to her housing quarter that she shared with others and where she did not have a separate washroom. The hospital did not seem to care about that. They simply wanted her out. A friend was kind enough to let her isolate herself in his house. The day after she tested negative for the virus, the hospital asked her to rejoin work. Mentally traumatised from the disease as well as the ordeal, the prospect of treating other patients with COVID was unbearable for her and she proceeded to go on leave.

Sarika’s direct contacts during this period were neither tested for the virus nor asked to go into isolation. They did both on their own accord. “If front-line health workers, for whom the Prime Minister and the country clapped and cheered, are treated this way by the hospitals



VIJAY VERMA/PTI

PEOPLE wait for their turn to give samples for COVID-19 test at a school in New Delhi on June 25.

they work in, what chance do we, ordinary citizens, have if we get the virus?" Sarika's friend asked *Frontline*.

A reporter with a digital news outlet nearly cried on air while reporting on the state of affairs outside LNJP (Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan) Hospital, which is a dedicated facility for the treatment of COVID-19 under the Delhi government. Ambulances with more than a few patients were streaming in every 10 minutes and a relative he spoke to said he did not have any idea about his father's status or whereabouts after he was admitted six days ago.

The spurt in Delhi could be directly attributed to the complete lack of any effort to trace or isolate contacts of COVID-19 patients. Without a proactive strategy to chase the virus, Delhi could not hope to shed its virus load.

PIL PETITION

A public interest litigation (PIL) petition was filed in the Delhi High Court requesting proper testing of both symptomatic and asymptomatic persons in private and government hospitals and laboratories. On June 24, a division bench of the High Court comprising Justices Hima Kohli and Subramonium Prasad said the "Delhi government has not conducted more than 50 per cent of the tests and failed to keep to the target". The Delhi government responded by saying that it had a target of 22,000 rapid antigen tests a day.

Under severe flak for a dramatic rise in numbers, which was worsened by its reduced testing policy, the Delhi government announced an ambitious plan of screening every household for COVID-19 within 10 days. From June 26 to July 6, it would complete a door-to-door screening campaign. There are 33,40,538 households in Delhi, as per Census 2011, with five members in each house on an average.

EIGHT-POINT RESPONSE PLAN

This was part of the Delhi government's eight-point Revised Delhi COVID Response Plan released on June 24. According to it, all houses within a containment zone would be screened by June 30. Beginning June 27, a sero-survey of 20,000 people across districts would be conducted and its results published on July 10. All symptomatic and asymptomatic high-risk contacts would be tested between the fifth and tenth day of contact. Teams

Under flak for a dramatic rise in numbers, the government announced an ambitious plan of screening every household for COVID-19 within 10 days.

in containment zones would undertake active case search and vigorous contact tracing of COVID-19 persons in order to analyse the reasons for clustering.

According to the plan, by June 26, the containment zones would be redefined in line with the guidelines of the National Centre for Disease Control. There are 263 such zones in Delhi. The plan also said that highly suspected cases that tested negative on rapid antigen test could be examined again using the RT-PCR (*Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction*) test.

POLITICAL TUSSELE

Meanwhile, the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party government and Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal got into yet another tussle over the nuances of the anti-COVID policy. On June 19, Bajjal ordered a compulsory five-day institutional quarantine for every COVID-19 patient. Only after that would a person be sent to either home isolation, a quarantine centre or a hospital as the symptoms warranted, said the order issued by the Lieutenant Governor.

But Kejriwal and his team were up in arms against the order. "Delhi's home isolation plan has been working very well. I have personally spoken to many patients on phone who underwent home isolation. I wud urge Centre and LG not to tinker wid it and restore it back," tweeted Kejriwal.

The order was revoked a day after the controversy broke. After meeting senior Ministers of the Delhi government, Bajjal tweeted, "Regarding institutional isolation, only those COVID positive cases which do not require hospitalisation on clinical assessment & do not have adequate facilities for home isolation would be required to undergo institutional isolation."

Ever since the beginning of the pandemic, the Delhi government has claimed that it has sufficient number of beds and proper treatment facilities for thousands of Delhiites. But when on June 17 Delhi's Health Minister Satyendar Jain tested positive for the coronavirus, he was not kept in one of the acclaimed public hospitals. Instead, he was admitted to a private hospital in Saket where, after undergoing plasma therapy, his condition improved and he was shifted out of the ICU. Initially, he was admitted to Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital (RGSSH), a dedicated COVID-19 facility, but was shifted out as it did not have permission to conduct plasma therapy. After his recovery, one can only hope that the Delhi government would understand the many weak links in its strategy to fight COVID-19 and improve upon them.

Moreover, a day before Jain showed symptoms of COVID-19, he had attended the high-profile meeting of the who's who of Delhi's political circle, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, Bajjal, Kejriwal, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, and officers of the State Disaster Management Authority. According to the guidelines for precautionary measures, all of them should have gone into self-isolation, but it is unclear whether the guidelines were followed. □

On the mend

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation begins **aggressive testing** after achieving some success in containing the spread of the virus in densely populated localities. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

EVER SINCE THE FIRST COVID-19 CASE IN Mumbai was detected on March 11, more than 100 days ago, there are signs that the city may no longer be the coronavirus capital of the country. Delhi is fast catching up as the number of positive cases in the National Capital Region continue to rise.

With a spike in the number of cases in Delhi, it was inevitable that comparisons would be drawn between the two cities. As of June 24, Delhi had over 70,000 positive cases as opposed to Mumbai's 69,528. With testing ramped up in both metropolitan cities, the number of cases has been oscillating back and forth. But while Delhi had a test positivity rate of 16.7 per cent, Mumbai's was higher at 23.2 per cent. Essentially this means that the rate of viral transmission is higher in Mumbai. The pos-

sible reasons for this are that the population density of Mumbai is higher than Delhi's; the virus has been entrenched in the city for a longer period; and Mumbai has more number of densely populated slums. As on June 24, Mumbai recorded 3,964 deaths and Delhi 2,365.

Following the encouraging results achieved in Dharavi and Worli village after they were sealed to contain the spread of the virus, the Mumbai civic administration has adopted a more aggressive tactic of "chasing the virus" to break the chain of transmission. Areas with many positive cases are sealed or isolated, after which cases are tested, treated and quarantined, if needed. Dharavi and Worli were among the first areas to be sealed to contain the spread. The uncompromising protocols adopted in

these localities helped bring down the number of cases.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is cagey about declaring the status of the virus in the city. Categories such as peaked and plateaued have been applied and later disproved. So, the administration now prefers to say that things are stable enough for parts of the city to be partially opened for Maharashtra's Mission Begin Again programme. As of June 24, 765 areas and 6,116 buildings were sealed in the city.

The coronavirus infection seems to have moved northwards of the city towards the suburbs of Andheri, Malad, Mulund, Dahisar, Borivali and Kandivali, which have seen a spike in cases. In order to combat this, the BMC has initiated a rapid action plan called Mission Zero. The civic body has organised 50 ambulance clinics with a team of doctors to carry out door-to-door screening especially in densely populated areas such as slums. The health staff will check for fever, co-morbidities and collect swabs. This initiative is expected to help in quicker detection of COVID and subsequent adoption of protocols. The medical teams aim to screen at least 10,000 houses in every municipal ward. Mission Zero also envisages that slum toilets be cleaned and sanitised at least five times a day.

One criticism of the city's handling of the COVID situation was the distribution of beds for patients. In the first week of June, the Municipal Commissioner I.S. Chahal, in a note to his colleagues, said: "We have started decentralised COVID bed allotment at all 24 Ward War Rooms of MCGM from 8th June onwards. This process starts at 8 a.m. sharp & finishes by 12

noon. We have named it as *CHASE THE PATIENT POLICY* conceived by Hon'ble CM, for BMC." Under the new policy all labs had been directed to "share reports only & only with BMC at 7 a.m. daily". The earlier practice had been the normally acceptable one of informing the patients directly, but the BMC decided to change this.

As per the new rule, the BMC would inform the person who tests positive. Chahal wrote: "No direct message now goes to patient from lab, unlike earlier & then our medical teams visit the patient at his residence, examines him & allots the bed/hospital before leaving patient's premises.... The patient is properly counselled while we break the news of COVID positivity to him."

The reason for formulating the new procedure was to reduce the stress for families who mostly had to go from hospital to hospital to seek allocation of bed for the patient. Chahal felt that the centralised system would guarantee beds to patients in need of treatment, prevent bed allocation to those whose symptoms could be handled with home quarantine and take the load off the central control room that works 24x7. The control room number, 1916, used to be flooded with calls seeking beds and, not knowing the severity of the case, the operators were bound to direct the patients or their families to various hospitals.

Under the new system only those who require COVID care support would be sent to hospitals. The initial doubts that the system was violating patient privacy were soon dispelled when it was realised that more beds were being freed up and those with relatively mild symptoms were not subjected to potential hospital-related infections. The new system has freed up more than 6,000 beds in the city.

In order to speed up testing, the State government ordered one lakh rapid antigen test kits from the South Korean company, SD Biosensor, which have been approved by the Indian Council of Medical Research. This antibody kit is used on a suspected patient's nasal swab to detect the presence of viral proteins that are an indicator of a positive case. The results are obtained within 30 minutes. Although less sensitive than the RT-PCR tests (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction, which is the gold standard for testing), these have the advantage of speed and are expected to scale up Mumbai's testing from 4,500 tests a day to 6,000. Delhi, by comparison, is testing upwards of 15,000 people a day.

Mumbai's doubling rate is now 36 days; the BMC wants to increase this to 50 days. The doubling rate indicates the spread of the virus in terms of days. A higher doubling rate means less spread. At the beginning of June, it was 24.5 days. Dharavi's is 42 days. The national average is 16 days.

On June 24, Mumbai's recovery rate stood at 53 per cent; about 2,434 patients had recovered and had been discharged. The death rate has by and large been steady or has risen on a low curve. So, while new cases are being detected, the positive indicators bolster Chahal's optimism that "Team BMC is fully geared up to effectively confront Covid-19". □



KURAR VILLAGE at Malad during the lockdown on June 22.

Domino effect

With a large number of people leaving for their home towns from Chennai, which accounts for the largest percentage of COVID in Tamil Nadu, the infection seems to have **spread far and wide**.

BY R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN

AN EXODUS OF PEOPLE FROM CHENNAI AND its neighbouring districts to their home towns from early June seems to have carried COVID-19 infection across the State to different parts of Tamil Nadu. Rumours of yet another lockdown, lack of jobs, delay in reopening of schools and the need to pay rents forced many people to leave the city. Those who left were not tested for COVID-19 either in Chennai or in the districts they went to. Besides, the district administrations were unequal to the task of handling the large volumes of people coming into the districts. In effect, the reasons that led to the Koyambedu cluster and resulted in the COVID-19 numbers spreading from the State's largest vegetable and fruit market in Chennai played out again. This time, the spread happened across the State.

It appears that over a lakh people left the Chennai metropolitan area soon after the announcement on June 15 of a 12-day lockdown from June 19. As June ended, five districts witnessed sudden spikes in COVID cases, while in other districts the case numbers were growing exponentially.

That the exodus from Chennai contributed to this increase can be borne out by the following facts: The COVID positive percentage in Chennai in the first week of May was around 5 per cent (May 1, for instance, saw 176 positives from 3,309 samples). However, in the days before the Chennai lockdown, every fourth sample turned out to be positive (for instance, on June 18, as many as 5,539 samples were tested, of which 1,373 were positive, or 24.79 per cent), according to official statistics. Hence, it was possible that many who had been afflicted, left Chennai.

This is also supported by the numbers from the districts. For instance, in Madurai district, until May 31, the total number of cases was 269. In the next three weeks (June 21), the district added 436 cases, taking the total number to 705. In the next three days (June 24), the figure jumped to 1,073, and by June 27, those who tested positive for the infection numbered 1,703.

Although Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami had announced that there was no plan for a lockdown in



B. VELANKANNI RAJ

AT THE sample testing centre in Kilpauk Medical College Hospital in Chennai on June 23.

Chennai or any other district in mid June, the State did a U-turn and declared the 12-day lockdown in Chennai. A few days later, a couple of more districts too were put on a seven-day lockdown. As part of this harsh, haphazard and unplanned lockdown, the government severely restricted the movement of the people, and even milk shops were shut on Sundays.

As on June 26, the total number of infections in Chennai was 49,690, up from the cumulative 46,734 the day before. It crossed the 50,000 mark on June 27 after an additional 1,939 cases were added to the city's tally that day. June 27 also marked yet another grim milestone for Tamil Nadu: it crossed the 1,000 mark in deaths. Sixty-eight deaths were recorded that day, taking the total number of deaths to 1,025.

Chengalpattu, abutting Chennai, had the second highest number of cases (4,911), while Tiruvallur, another district next to Chennai, was third in the list (3,420).

THE FEAR FACTOR

Such was the fear of people coming from Chennai to villages in almost all districts that some village administrations hired town criers to inform residents that they should report anyone who had come from Chennai to the authorities. Videos of two such "proclamations"—one in Bargur in Krishnagiri district and another in Kanyakumari district—went viral on social media.

Two other events added to the sense of fear: the death from COVID of K. Anbazhagan, MLA and a district secretary of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in Chennai and the death of the owner of the famous brand of halwa, Iruttukkada Halwa, by suicide in Tirunelveli after he came to know that he had contracted COVID. The suicide also underlined the lack of adequate psychiatric care for individuals affected by COVID. These were two persons who had access to the best of medical care, but even that did not help.

It also did not help that the Chief Minister, who said in April that the "coronavirus will go away" over the next few days, changed his perception about the virus and said in a meeting that only God could tell when the virus would go away. In another public statement, he tried to, incredulously, pin the blame on the spread of the virus on the main opposition party, the DMK. The Chief Minister said it was the DMK that had spread the virus during its outreach programme, Ondrinaivom Vaa.

Officials in the State said they were not worried about the trajectory of infections as long as the deaths could be kept down. As of June 26, the total number of cases in the State was 74,622, and the number of deaths 957. The State government pointed to the low death rate (1.28 per cent) and the high recovery rate (55.42 per cent, 41,357 patients as on June 26).

But what was giving the authorities sleepless nights was that the number of deaths had increased since early June; about a third of all deaths was from June 19 to 27 (400).

The public health expert who recommended Lock-



A STREET VENDOR wearing protective equipment gear selling face masks and PPE kits in Madurai on June 18.

down 6 for Chennai, P. Kuganatham, told *Frontline* that the lockdown had helped identify the gap in field-level responses, close the gaps and step up the health infrastructure as was needed in the middle of a pandemic. He said that "death has decreased in the past two weeks" and hoped that the government's responses would yield the desired results.

But many critics pointed out that the entire COVID response was led by three groups—ruling party politicians, media and bureaucrats. Strong public health input was missing, these critics pointed out, adding that ever since the retirement of Dr. K. Kolaswasamy as Director of Public Health in April, the department appeared to be happy to stay away from the limelight.

Officials claimed that the next set of responses would yield results. Plans are afoot to make sure that one government staffer reaches every home to check if any member of the household has a problem. On the basis of the understanding that infection control in Chennai is central to controlling the spread to other places in the State, the government, apart from not allowing free movement of people beyond the Chennai Police area, has also curtailed inter-district movement. Many districts were on a seven-day lockdown until June 30. It is not clear how such haphazard lockdowns could help control the spread of the virus.

While the State government looks to the Bharatiya Janata Party government in Delhi and the Indian Council of Medical Research for support and guidance, it is also not wasting time in castigating people for not following the mandated rules during COVID times. Spokespersons for the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) have repeatedly blamed people for violating lockdown norms.

People, in turn, have asked questions of the government over its handling of the crisis. Even as this bizarre blame game continues, one thing is clear: the flattening of the curve is a long way away. □

Police terror

The death of a father-son duo, following their detention over alleged violation of lockdown restrictions, in Thoothukudi district smacks of **police high-handedness**. BY **ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

THE DEATH OF A FATHER AND SON DUO, traders in Sathankulam in Thoothukudi district, in judicial custody has left the Tamil Nadu government in a quandary.

The Sathankulam police arrested timber trader P. Jayaraj (60) and his son J. Bennix (31) on the night of June 19 from their mobile phone shop for allegedly violating lockdown restrictions and registered cases under Sections 188, 269, 294(b), 353 and 506(ii) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Relatives of the dead men alleged that both had been beaten brutally at the police station. The bleeding duo was then taken to the Sathankulam Magistrate, who remanded them to judicial custody. Both were lodged at the Kovilpatti Sub Jail on June 20.

At about 7:30 p.m. on June 22, Bennix reportedly developed chest pain. He died two hours after being admitted to Kovilpatti Government Hospital. Jayaraj too felt uneasy and breathless in the early hours of June 23 and died subsequently at the Kovilpatti hospital. The death of the father and son shocked the people of Sathankulam. The next day all of Thoothukudi district remained shut and traders across the State downed shutters in protest against what they called “police brutality”.

Relatives and friends of the duo alleged that the police

had assaulted Jayaraj with a baton and Bennix tried to intervene on seeing that. Subsequently both were beaten up brutally with batons, they said. “They employed third-degree methods. Jayaraj was kicked in his chest while a baton was inserted into his anus, which made him bleed from the rectum,” said a family friend of Bennix.

Jayaraj’s daughter Percy demanded that the police personnel responsible for the death of her father and brother should be punished according to law. “Are they licensed to kill?” she asked. After initial reluctance to accept the bodies, the family accepted them after post-mortem on June 25 at the Palayamkottai Government Medical College Hospital.

Arun Balagopalan, Thoothukudi Superintendent of Police, said Bennix, who had heart ailments, developed breathing problems in the jail and got admitted to Kovilpatti Government Hospital, where he died. He said Jayaraj was running high fever when he was arrested and was admitted to the isolation ward of the hospital where he died later.

Sub Inspectors Balakrishnan and Pauldurai, who allegedly arrested and assaulted the victims, have been placed under suspension and other personnel in Sathankulam police station have been transferred en masse.

The family members, however, urged that the two officers must be charged with murder.

In fact, in April 2013 a person called Vaiyapuri near Thirukurungudi had approached the High Court against Balakrishnan, who was then working at the Thirukurungudi police station, and two other policemen for assaulting him brutally in March 2013 for not carrying on him the documents for his two-wheeler. The victim, then 26, suffered injuries and was admitted to hospital for treatment. But the case, according to a source, was withdrawn.

LEGAL PROCEDURES NOT FOLLOWED

The deaths have thrown open questions about legal procedures relating to remand and custodial torture. Though the law is clear on such issues, law-enforcers often violate them, said a senior lawyer at the Madras High Court. It is yet to be ascertained whether the Sathankulam Judicial Magistrate, while remanding the victims to judicial custody, had asked them personally of their physical condition or whether the mandated remand procedures such as a medical examination under the Criminal Procedure Code had been followed.

Another question the legal fraternity asks is whether the authorities at Kovilpatti Sub Jail carried out the medical examination of the duo while accepting their remand in custody. A reasonable explanation is also yet to be sought on why the police took nearly seven hours from the time of the arrest to produce the accused before the magistrate. And there is no proper explanation from the police on why they were taken to the Kovilpatti Sub Jail, some 80 kilometres from Sathankulam, instead of the nearby Srivaikundam prison. “Many violations of law have taken place in the brutal murders of the father and son,” said a senior advocate at the Madras High Court.

Henry Tiphagne, executive director of the Madurai-based rights organisation People’s Watch, while condemning the custodial torture and death at Sathankulam, wondered whether the magistrate had pursued the remand procedures diligently.

All the charges, except under Section 506 (ii) of the

IPC, which were registered against the victims, he said, were punishable with the less than two years’ imprisonment. “Therefore there was no reason for the police to have produced the accused for remand and for the magistrate to remand them. These are contrary to the guidelines issued by the Supreme Court in *Amesh Kumar vs State of Bihar 2015*. The magistrate, our inquiry revealed, did not see them while they were kept in the van. Without applying his mind, he remanded them to custody. He should have seen the accused, which would have given the victims an opportunity to show their injury marks and narrate their ordeal. Even the mandated medical examination of the accused prior to remand was not undertaken,” he said.

The first information report (FIR) filed against the father and the son was bizarre. It said the duo “rolled on the ground and got injured” when the police asked them to close their mobile phone shop. The complaint preferred by head constable S. Murugan stated that he and constable Muthuraj, while checking for COVID-19 lockdown enforcement, saw the shop of the accused open beyond the permitted time. On asking them about this, he said, they resorted to abuse and “rolled on the ground, in which they sustained injuries”. “They threatened to kill us,” he claimed. They were then brought to the police station.

As the issue took a serious turn, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on June 25, on appeals from Jayaraj’s wife Selvarani and a lawyer A.P. Surya Prakasam, *suo motu* took up the case and issued a string of instructions to the government and the State Director General of Police (DGP) on how to pursue the case further and asked them to file a status report on the incident. The State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) also took up the case and directed the DGP of its investigation wing to inquire into the incident and file a detailed report within eight weeks. The Commission has also sought CCTV footage from the police station.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam leader M.K. Stalin asked Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami, who holds the Home portfolio, to take responsibility for the deaths. In a statement, he said the deaths of the father and son raised a lot of questions and demanded that those who were responsible for the deaths should be punished. Thoothukudi Member of Parliament Kanimozhi urged District Collector Sandeep Nanduri to take severe action against those who were responsible for the deaths. “Their families should be given adequate compensation,” she said. Tamil Nadu Congress Committee president K.S. Alagiri demanded an inquiry into the deaths by the Central Bureau of Investigation, while the Communist Party of India (Marxist) demanded severe punishment for the culprits.

The Chief Minister awarded a compensation of Rs.20 lakh to the victims’ family and said that further action would be taken based on the instructions given by the High Court, which is monitoring the case directly, and other agencies. He also advised the Tamil Nadu police to treat the public “softly and affectionately” while pursuing law and order related work. □



MOBILE shop owners paying tributes to the father and son who died in custody, in Salem on June 24. (Right) CPI(M) cadres protesting against the custodial deaths.



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Out of the comfort zone

The number of COVID cases in Bengaluru has been increasing at a rapid pace, giving rise to doubts about **community transmission**.

BY VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED

THE SURGE IN COVID-19 CASES IN Karnataka, Bengaluru in particular, is becoming a matter of serious concern in the State. Health Minister B.S. Sriramulu has stated that Bengaluru could be locked down again if the number of cases continue to rise rapidly as over the past fortnight. The total number of COVID cases in Karnataka stood at 7,000 as of June 13, of which 690 were in Bengaluru. The number rose to 10,118 cases by the evening of June 24, with Bengaluru alone recording 1,678 cases. As many as 6,151 patients in the State have been discharged so far and 5,39,247 samples have been tested. There have been 164 deaths.

Dr K. Sudhakar, Minister for Medical Education, who had been actively involved in strategising preventive measures in Bengaluru, has also been quarantined at home after his family members contracted the virus.

The spike in the number of cases came at a time when the State government was basking in the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's appreciation of it in tackling the pandemic. In a letter on June 18, the Ministry said two practices that Karnataka followed were "worth replicating" by other States: first, "the technology backed system involving multi-sectoral government teams for contact tracing of COVID-19 positive cases"; and second, Karnataka's "physical/phone based house-



KALASIPALAYAM Main Road after the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike sealed it off following the rapid spread of COVID in the city, on June 23.

hold survey covering 1.5 crore households across the State to detect vulnerable populations...”.

Going by the numbers, one can still say that Karnataka and Bengaluru are faring relatively better than many other States and metropolises. It is 12th in the country in the number of State-wise cases, and Bengaluru's tally is better when compared with that of metros like Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai. However, the sudden rise in the number of cases in Bengaluru where the contacts of patients cannot be traced is worrisome. Bengaluru is also seeing a higher death rate; 68 of the 78 COVID deaths in the city took place in June. Of the 796 fresh cases in Bengaluru, it is unclear how 522 of them contracted the virus. This would imply that Bengaluru has entered the community transmission stage where potentially anyone could be a carrier of the virus.

B.H. Anil Kumar, Commissioner of Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), admitted that the recent spurt in the number of cases had “caused a little bit of concern” as “it has not been possible to trace how the ILI [Influenza like Illness] and SARI [Severe Acute Respiratory Infection] patients have contracted the disease and this could be the case of community transmission”.

Even members of the COVID-19 task force in the State, such as Dr C. N. Manjunath, director, Sri Jayadeva Institute of Cardiovascular Sciences and Research, have begun to acknowledge community transmission as a fact in Bengaluru. But Dr Manjunath adds that this is “not a massive case of community transmission but it is certainly growing”. According to him, the initial cases were international returnees; then there was a sudden surge in cases because of people coming from other States, particularly Maharashtra. “Now, the number of people coming from other States has come down and despite that, we are seeing a surge in cases.”

One of the reasons for this surge in Bengaluru could be the widespread violation of home quarantine norms since the lockdown in March. Of the 1.31 lakh violations of home quarantine rules in the State, 58,832 were reported from Bengaluru.

With the increase in the number of cases, disturbing stories have been emerging from government hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. In a video that went viral on social media, patients at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Chest Diseases are seen complaining of the lack of food and drinking water in the wards. “While we may beat corona, we will die of hunger here,” a patient can be heard saying. Even more troubling are reports that the designated hospitals are running out of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds. Dedicated public hospitals in Bengaluru such as Victoria Hospital and Bowring Hospital have run

out of ICU beds for COVID patients. The authorities have responded to the rise in cases in two ways. First, the BBMP has sealed five wards in the city along with two large markets that have perhaps emerged as clusters where physical distancing is hard to maintain. This is in addition to the 298 containment zones; unlike earlier when whole areas were sealed off, now only the house or the apartment of the identified COVID-19 patient is sealed off.

Secondly, the State Health and Family Welfare Department has invoked relevant sections of the National Disaster Management Act to ensure that private hospitals reserve 50 per cent of their beds for COVID-19 patients. According to the Suvarna Arogya Suraksha Trust, the nodal government agency tasked with the job of assessing bed capacity, 418 private hospitals, which have a total of 63,900 beds, including 4,467 ICU beds, and 1,264 ventilators, have been empanelled. Treatment charges at private hospitals have been capped at Rs.25,000 a day for an isolation ICU with a ventilator.

The Health and Family Welfare department intends to start dedicated fever clinics that would inform it about ILI and SARI cases. For this purpose, all community health centres and 50 per cent of the Primary Health Centres and Urban Health Centres in the State have been designated as fever clinics. Karnataka has also started wide-scale random testing of vulnerable populations and established COVID Care Centres for treatment of asymptomatic cases.

While ruling party politicians, senior bureaucrats and health officials have blamed Unlock 1.0 for the spurt in cases in Bengaluru, it was always clear that the lockdown was only a temporary measure to provide time for the Central and State governments to devise a strategy to deal with the surge in cases once the lockdown was lifted. Ideally, the government should have used that time to strengthen the public health infrastructure, but this has not been done in Karnataka.

Dr. Taha Mateen, the managing trustee of HBS Hospital in Bengaluru, said, “The approach of the government has been terrible. There are ten ventilators in Bowring (and Lady Curzon Hospital). How come more ventilators have not been procured? I have ten ventilators in my small hospital here and the leading treatment centre for COVID patients in the city does not have any more than that.”

There is a valid fear that if the situation is not controlled in Bengaluru at this point, it could go the way of other cities such as Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi and Ahmedabad, which are struggling to contain the spread of the virus. □



HEALTH workers collecting swab from a policeman at KR Market in Bengaluru on June 23.

V. SREENIVASA MURTHY

Crisis & cover-up

Gujarat's case fatality rate, **the highest in the country**, is proof of its inept handling of the COVID-19 crisis. But the BJP government is apparently not releasing accurate data and may be manipulating the death rate. BY **ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

GUJARAT SHOWS NO RESPITE IN COVID-19 infections, with Ahmedabad, its largest city, remaining the epicentre in the State. Worse, following the relaxation of the lockdown norms, especially with the opening of inter-district movement, the infection has been spreading rapidly to other districts too. For instance, Narmada, Kheda, Panchmahal and Patan districts, which had reported COVID cases in single digits in early June, are now seeing a steady rise in numbers.

Figures by the State Ministry for Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) show that since June 20 Ahmedabad has seen a dip in its share of the total number of cases in the State, from 64 per cent to 48 per cent.

Gujarat is still in the fourth position, after Delhi, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, in the number of COVID

cases. This is attributed to the State government's incompetency in handling the pandemic. In spite of help from the Centre and a rebuke from the High Court, the administration has been unable to streamline its health care system, which is in a shambles.

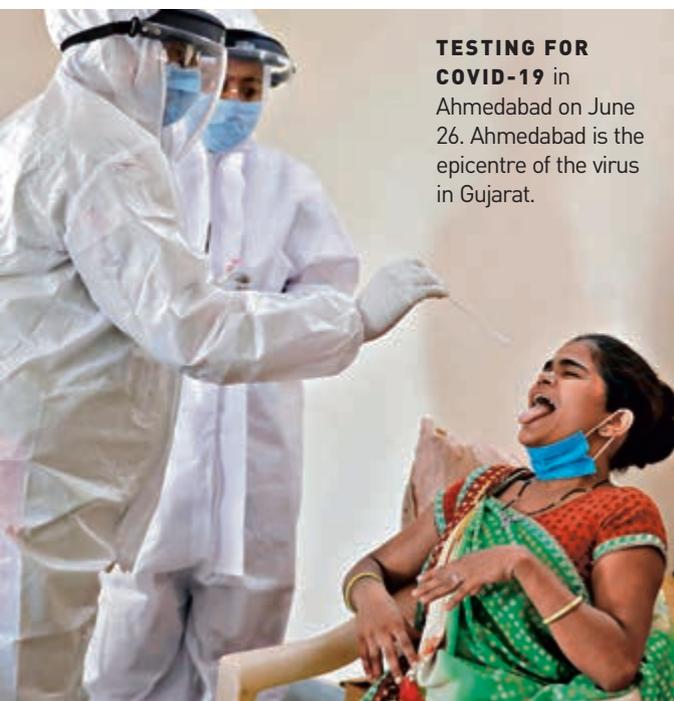
CASE FATALITY RATE

On June 25, Gujarat's COVID death toll reached 1,753 and the total number of cases crossed 27,000. According to the MHoFW, the daily average number of positive cases has been 483, which is 20 per cent higher than the average in May. What is more worrisome is Gujarat's case fatality rate (CFR), which is the highest in the country, even among States that have registered more than 10,000 cases. The CFR is the proportion of people who die from a specific disease among all those diagnosed over a certain period of time. On June 25, Gujarat's CFR was 6.25 per cent even as Maharashtra, which fared high in the list in fatalities and number of cases, reported a CFR of 3.73 per cent.

The State's inept handling of COVID-19 has been an embarrassment to the Bharatiya Janata Party's top leaders whose home turf is Gujarat. Sources in Ahmedabad say that in an attempt to cover up, the State government has not been releasing accurate data. It is believed that the testing numbers have come down and the cause of fatalities is not being documented. "I know of a case where they [a government hospital] deliberately did not put down the cause of death as COVID-19. They are doing this all over so as to manipulate the COVID death rate," said a resident doctor at a public hospital on condition of anonymity.

A government directive to private laboratories to reduce testing rates from Rs.4,000 to Rs.2,500 is seen as giving some relief to citizens. This move is also expected to provide more accurate data.

The State government recently issued a statement saying the situation was looking up as the case doubling rate had gone up to an average of 31 days *vis-a-vis* the national average of 19 days. Significantly, the death toll,



TESTING FOR COVID-19 in Ahmedabad on June 26. Ahmedabad is the epicentre of the virus in Gujarat.

AMIT DAVE/REUTERS



DIAMOND WORKERS waiting to enter a manufacturing unit in Surat after the authorities eased restrictions on May 22. But the number of cases too are rising.

PTI

combined with the high positivity rate (8.01 cases per 100 tested, as per State government figures), has thwarted the government's efforts in improving its image.

Gujarat is among the three States a high-powered Central government team visited to probe the high positivity rates. Health officials say poor contact tracing in the densely populated localities of Ahmedabad is one of the main causes for the rapid spread.

As of June 25, Ahmedabad accounted for 1,390 deaths of the total COVID casualty count in the State and 3,399 active positive cases. Surat came second with 142 deaths and 1,152 positive cases, followed by Vadodra with 48 deaths and 620 cases; Gandhinagar with 27 deaths and 157 cases; and Rajkot with five deaths and 98 cases.

SPIKE IN SURAT

The southern Gujarat city of Surat is proof of virus seeping through Ahmedabad. Following Unlock.1, Surat's wholesale markets and diamond units began operations. However, this led to the city seeing workers too return, leading to a significant rise in the number of COVID cases in the last week of June.

By June 25, approximately 300 diamond workers had tested positive for COVID-19. The Surat Diamond Association said even though intense sanitisation processes had been followed, the spread was inevitable. However, the industry had to restart as orders had been pending from pre-lockdown days, said the association spokesperson.

"There is a huge anti-Ahmedabad sentiment currently," said Vijay Shah, a car dealer in Rajkot. "Buses, trucks and cars coming from that city are being stopped and not allowed into our district. In fact, in our residen-

tial area, if we know anyone who has come from Ahmedabad, that house is reported to the authorities immediately."

SEVERAL SOCIAL REASONS

Ahmedabad was declared a hotspot from the early days of the lockdown. In spite of efforts to seal off containment zones, which were mainly in the walled city, the virus seems to have spread to Ahmedabad West, where the residences of the well-heeled and the elite of the city are situated. Recently, about a dozen buildings there were sealed off because of active cases.

While the scientific reasons behind Ahmedabad being a hotspot are yet to be known, several social reasons have been given for the city's high numbers, from the density of the wards affected, the Namaste Trump event in February that led to the congregation of a large number of people, to the high rate of international travel. The stigma attached to COVID-19, which leads to late testing and treatment, is also being put down as one of the reasons for the high numbers in the city. Adding to the problem is the theory that Gujaratis could suffer from a high percentage of comorbidities as 80 per cent of the deaths have been of patients with comorbid conditions.

LABOUR SHORTAGE

Yet another fallout of the pandemic is that the State's vast industrial and agricultural zones are facing a drastic labour shortage because of the migrant exodus. Rights activists say it is unlikely that people will return until quarantine rules are relaxed. Until then, other than big industry, most factories would be operating at just 40 per cent capacity, which is a hard blow to the highly industrialised State. □

Uneasy comfort

Rajasthan has managed to keep its COVID fatalities low, but there are continuing concerns about a possible **spike in rural areas**, where returning migrants face a crisis of income and livelihood.

BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

WHEN REPORTS APPEARED IN EARLY MARCH about COVID-19 infections in some districts in Rajasthan, there was justifiable concern that there could be an explosion of cases in the State in the following weeks. Now it is ranked sixth among the States with the largest number of confirmed cases, after Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. However, the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 has been under 500, with a far better recovery rate than some of the other States in northern and north-western India. Testing rates are also good in comparison with those in neighbouring States.

The districts that carry the heaviest burden of cases are Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Pali and Udaipur, accounting for almost 60 per cent of the infection load. Interestingly, the industrial hub of Bhilwara, which had reported an infection cluster as early as March, seemed to have controlled the initial spurt with strict containment and isolation methods. Unfortunately, the containment experiment was successful in only one district. Within weeks, the infection spread to all the districts in the State. Jaipur and Jodhpur in particular have been consistently showing an increase in the number of infections.

Between June 18 and June 25, the number of infections grew by an average of 2 per cent every day, as it did in Gujarat, though this was lower than Delhi's 6 per cent and Uttar Pradesh's 3 per cent. Rajasthan's testing figures averaged close to 10,000 per million of the population, compared with Gujarat's 5,006, Uttar Pradesh's 2,682, and Madhya Pradesh's 3,830. Of around 16,000-plus infections, almost 4,408 infections have been attributed to migrants who returned from other States.

CAUTIOUS APPROACH

As of June 26, a total of 379 people had died in the State from COVID infections. But the mortality rate, at 2.33 per cent, was lower compared with 4.28 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, 3.36 per cent in Delhi, 5.99 in Gujarat, and 3.05 per cent in Uttar Pradesh. While no single factor can be pinpointed to explain the low mortality figures,

the State government has been cautious about "re-opening" places where people gather in large numbers. It has not, for instance, opened up places of worship, as some States have done.

The government issued strict guidelines for a "cautious resumption of normalcy" by adopting "adequate precautionary and safety measures at workplaces, public places and public transport and on the premise of responsible self-regulation by the public at large". It maintains that there has been no community spread—which is not entirely true—but it has ordered that strict protocols will continue to be observed in containment zones and on their perimeters, without any relaxations. Except those providing essential goods and services, people were not allowed to move around in these areas. Movement of individuals for non-essential activities was prohibited from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. all over the State, with exemptions for government officials and doctors on duty, IT and ITES workers on night shifts, pharmacy owners, factories with night shifts, factories with production of a continuous nature, and construction activities. Metro services, international travel, educational institutions, shopping malls, hotels, restaurants and even religious places were to remain closed. Violations of public safety measures, such as not wearing a mask, spitting in public, not maintaining physical distancing, consumption of alcohol or tobacco in public, were punishable with a fine. Shopkeepers were not allowed to serve customers not wearing a mask. All government offices were to operate with full strength while the "work from home" option was given to the private sector. The Common Safety Prescriptions are to be enforced by the District Magistrate under the Rajasthan Epidemic Diseases Ordinance 2020 and the Disaster Management Act 2005. Violators could invite penal action, including fines.

On June 10, the State government issued an order observing that there was an "unprecedented surge in COVID-19 positive cases since the phased opening of the lock down from June 1". The order noted that "persons had travelled outside the State under the prevailing sys-



MONEY SHARMA/AFP

INSIDE a factory in which cardboard beds are made for COVID-19 patients at Bhiwadi in Rajasthan, on June 25.

tem of free movement and before their reports could be received, they tested positive, posing a threat...” No one would be allowed to travel out of the State or enter it without a pass duly issued by designated government officials. The exempted categories included those who need to attend cases of “death” and health emergencies such as hospitalisation or “accidents in the immediate family”. Barring these categories, every other individual desirous of moving out or moving in needs a “no objection certificate” from a designated government authority.

In less than a week, on June 16, the conditions for inter-State travel were rescinded as it became clear they were impractical. Admitting that people had been hugely inconvenienced, the government said that an NoC or a pass would no longer be required because infections had stabilised and recovery rates had improved. However, screening at the checkpoints was a must for everyone.

On June 18, a fresh order under the Rajasthan Epidemics Diseases Ordinance 2020 was issued instructing heads of offices in government and private sectors and malls and shopkeepers to display “safety from Corona” messages at the entry and exit points of their institutions. Educational institutions and places of worship were to remain closed until further orders. There were reports suggesting that some relaxations could be expected in educational institutions and places of worship after July 1.

“VIRTUAL CAMPAIGN FOR RURAL AREAS”

The State government launched a “virtual” 10-day awareness campaign from June 21 to June 30 and claimed it was the only State to have done so. Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, while launching the campaign, referred to the “high rates of recovery” and “low death rate” in the State. The virtual campaign aimed to contact 11, 500 gram panchayats with safety messages about how to prevent getting infected with the underlying motto that “self-help” was the best help.

The general opinion in the State was that this campaign should have been undertaken in the early stages of

the spread of the virus. Almost every district had reported infections. With migrants starting to return after the lockdown was announced, there were concerns that the infection would spread to rural areas. The government campaign consistently stressed that people should isolate themselves if they developed mild or moderate symptoms of infection and get tested at a government facility if the symptoms persisted. Yet such facilities were not always available, as most district hospitals had only rudimentary facilities.

LOCUST MENACE

The locust menace added to the difficult situation. According to Sanjay Madho, joint secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha’s (AIKS) State unit, the State government was paying scant attention to problems faced by farmers following the large-scale devastation of crops caused by an invasion of locusts. It began in the third week of May, when crops were still being harvested, he said. “The rabi and the kharif crops have suffered huge damage, increasing the economic burden on farmers who had anyway resorted to distress selling during the lockdown. They need to be compensated for this,” he said. The State government was yet to do a survey to assess the damage.

Sanjay Madho said that the return of migrants presented fresh challenges. He blamed the Centre’s “complete lack of planning” before declaring the lockdown. Rajasthan was among the six States that had received the maximum number of migrants back. Around 18 lakh migrants had returned from other States, almost three times the number of those who left it. The majority of the returnees were in need of income support and work.

The recent hikes in petrol and diesel prices put immense pressure on the farming community. The State government on its part had issued electricity bills running into thousands of rupees to city-based consumers. “With no source of income, how are people expected to pay this? We have demanded that the government should waive electricity bills for at least six months for both domestic as well as agricultural consumption,” he told *Frontline*.

He added that the Central government should enhance the amount earmarked for farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi to Rs.18,000 a year from the present Rs.6,000. The AIKS has demanded that at least for six months families that do not pay Income Tax should be given Rs.7,500 a month as financial support. It has also demanded that there should be an unemployment allowance of Rs.5,000 and that all registered workers in the labour department should be given Rs.5,000 a month to tide over the income and livelihood losses during the lockdown.

Another AIKS demand is for the increase of man-days under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) to 200 days and a daily wage of at least Rs.600. The State government, too, has appealed to the Centre to increase the number of man-days under the scheme. □

What the numbers hide

The number of active cases **drop in the State**, but doctors warn that there is danger ahead. The ruling Trinamool, meanwhile, faces outrage over cyclone relief distribution. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

WEST BENGAL'S TRINAMOOL CONGRESS government has been trying to project a positive picture of the COVID-19 situation in the State by highlighting the recent drop in the number of active cases, the relatively high discharge rate, and the increase in the number of tests being conducted. However, several doctors and experts say that the situation may actually turn grimmer owing to a number of factors in the post-lockdown scenario.

On June 22, State Home Secretary Alapan Bando-padhyay announced that the total number of active cases had been “showing a downward trend recently”. The number of active cases on that day was 5,111 out of a total of 14,358 cases. As of June 25, the number of active cases was 4,824 out of a total of 15,648. On an average, well over 400 new cases have been coming up every day in the State, with 475 cases on June 25, the highest daily spike so far. The total number of deaths was 621 on June 25, with around 74.26 per cent of the cases having co-morbidities. The State government also repeatedly emphasises that the discharge rate in West Bengal, standing at 65.12 per cent on June 25, is well above the national average of over 56 per cent. The State has also stepped up testing of samples. In the first week of May, the rate of testing per million of the population was just 364; on June 25 it stood at 4,881, and the total number of samples tested was 4,39,258, with well over 9,000 samples on an average being tested per day.

However, many doctors and experts feel that it would not be wise for the State government to congratulate itself so soon. The well-known physician Fuad Halim pointed out that the government's own bulletin revealed that there was mass discharge only from a few districts, so no pattern had so far emerged to throw light on how things really stood. He argued that taking solace in the increase in the rate of recovery was pointless.

According to him, there should be greater focus in conducting tests in the containment areas. “The number



RAJEEV BHATT

A RICKSHAW puller waiting for passengers in Kolkata on June 17. Daily wage earners are the worst hit as the city struggles to recover from the pandemic.

of tests that are being done in the containment areas is something that the government is not revealing, and that is a matter of concern,” he told *Frontline*. “Ultimately the recovery rate should go up to a minimum 92 per cent, so harping on the fact that we have now a recovery rate of over 60 per cent does little to boost confidence... We are not doing all that needs to be done and, on top of that if we get complacent, then we are looking at a virtual time bomb.”

Many other doctors also felt the country had lost the advantage that the lockdown should have provided against the spread of COVID-19. According to Dr Halim, this was because the government was also locked down. “The problem was that the 15 lakh people who had landed from abroad from January onwards were not traced properly; and there was no adequate testing done in the

initial stage of the lockdown. And when we were unlocked, there should have been a massive level of testing from the start... since we do not know where COVID is, the virus is having a free run," he said.

LESS FOOD, LESS IMMUNITY

According to several reports, the food intake in rural India has been declining, which is a cause for concern, particularly in the middle of a pandemic. Post-lockdown, acute shortage of income, especially among lakhs of returnee migrants, has resulted in people eating less food. In Bengal, already more than 11 lakh migrants have returned. According to some calculations, the State has between 30 to 40 lakh migrant workers. Dr Halim said: "There has been weight loss, reduction in nutritional intake, and these two are important indicators when assessing herd immunity. Ultimately, development of immunity is related to the food we eat. If the food intake in the past three months has gone down, then we can safely assume that the number of people with reduced immunity has gone up. In this scenario the mortality rate will increase. If the Government of India is looking at herd immunity, then it should release massive amounts of foodgrain."

The migrants of Bengal received another blow when the Centre left out West Bengal from the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhijan, a scheme designed to provide income opportunities to migrants who have returned home following the lockdown. The Centre identified 116 districts in six States—Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan—and selected for the scheme districts with over 25,000 returnee migrants. Subrata Mukherjee, State Panchayat and Rural Development Minister, pointed out that there were several districts in Bengal that met this criterion. With the State elections scheduled to take place in 10 months' time, in which the main contestants are the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Trinamool, the Centre's move is being seen as a politically motivated one. The BJP has claimed that the State government failed to provide the list of prospective beneficiaries under the scheme to the Centre.

With the relaxation of the lockdown and the State government's claims of the situation improving, people are increasingly lax in adhering to safety norms. There is a tendency to ignore social distancing rules and to do away with masks. An eminent Kolkata-based doctor, Tamal Laha, said that such complacency was dangerous. "However high may be the recovery rate, it would be dangerous to think that the virus is going away, because the rate of incidence is getting higher. People should be aware of the fact that corona is still there, it is still rising, and it can still kill, and also keep in mind that our country is still trying to increase its resources in order to deal with the situation," he told *Frontline*.

For all its apparent optimism, the State government also seems acutely aware of the gravity of the situation. It called for an all-party meeting on June 24 to discuss the COVID scenario and other pressing issues. On the same day, the influential Trinamool legislator from Falta,

South 24 Paraganas, Tamonash Ghosh, died of COVID-19. The three-time MLA, who was also the party treasurer, was only 60.

PROTEST OVER AMPHAN RELIEF

The spread of the coronavirus is not the only crisis the State government is facing. The coastal parts of Bengal are still reeling under the devastation caused by the supercyclone Amphan, which ravaged the State on May 20. Agitations over irregularities in the distribution of relief are rocking the cyclone-affected regions. While local Trinamool leaders and panchayat representatives are facing the brunt of the people's anger, the district administration is not being spared.

The main allegation against the ruling party is that the money given by the government for repairing damaged houses is being misappropriated by local leaders and their family members. At Raidighi in South 24 Paraganas, local residents forced a Trinamool panchayat leader to do squats holding his ears as a punishment for



CHIEF MINISTER Mamata Banerjee at an all-party meeting at the State Secretariat on June 24.

his alleged corruption. On June 23, mobs attacked the office of the Block Development Officer at Deganga in North 24 Paraganas.

The Trinamool was forced to take disciplinary action against erring members of the party as the protests began to spread. The party expelled Manoj Singh, pradhan of the Garalgacha gram panchayat in Hooghly district. In a list of 166 people he had submitted for cyclone relief, his own phone number was given against more than 100 names. Manoj Singh claimed that he was being victimised by his enemies in the party.

Irregularities in relief distribution was a major topic of discussion in the June 24 all-party meeting convened by the government. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said: "In some places some people have been deprived of relief. The administration has been asked to make the list of beneficiaries public... There is no scope of party politics in the distribution of relief." □

Reckless opposition

The Kerala government's demand for pre-flight tests for Keralites wanting to return from abroad to stop the "super spread" of COVID becomes a **convenient handle** for the opposition to mount political pressure. BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR

THE QUICK AND SAFE RETURN OF EXPATRIATES from COVID-affected countries, especially those in the Gulf region, has been a sensitive subject in Kerala ever since the pandemic began to sway the world.

With the local body elections likely to take place in October and the opposition using the issue to turn the opinion of expatriates and their families back home against the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, there are increasing instances of politics trying to triumph over prudence in the State, which has been doing very well in controlling the spread of the virus so far.

One such instance is related to the government's persistent demand—despite it being a politically inconvenient one—that Keralites stranded in other countries and wanting to return by chartered flights should be made to undergo COVID-19 tests in those countries, and that those testing positive should be brought back in separate flights.

This demand was made to the Centre on the basis of the fact that 90 per cent of the cases reported in Kerala were from among those who had come from abroad or from other States; of these, 69 per cent of the cases were those who had returned from abroad. A large section of the people who have been brought back on a priority basis were pregnant women, children, the aged and people suffering from other serious diseases.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said: "I have talked repeatedly about Keralites who contracted COVID-19 in other countries and died there. None of them died because their travel to Kerala was delayed. They all got whatever treatment was available in those countries. But if we do not do the screening before people start their journey, the disease may spread from passengers who are COVID positive to others during the flight, thus endangering their lives, too. Right now, death rates through primary contacts is high. Another danger is a 'super spread' situation, where the disease spreads from one person to a lot many others. It is because of all this that the State decided that pre-flight screening was essential."

Yet, on June 24, as pressure from the opposition and

expatriate organisations mounted, and a Malayalam newspaper popular among non-resident Keralites set apart its front page for pictures of Keralites who had died abroad of COVID-19, the State Cabinet decided not to insist on COVID-negative certificates from expatriate travellers. Instead, the government said, the passengers should wear N95 mask, face shield and gloves or other personal protective equipment and carry sanitisers.

The Chief Minister was scathing in his criticism of the newspaper for its display of obituary pictures with the legend, "How many more should die for the government to bring back its expatriates?" He said: "When the government took the stand that screening should be made mandatory for air travellers, some people had launched misleading campaigns. There were attempts to incite expatriates and to create anger against the government. The government had made it clear from the beginning that all Keralites interested in coming back would be welcomed and that all arrangements would be made for them. The government has not backed out from that stand at any stage or blocked any flight or prevented anybody from coming here."

But the opposition and leaders of expatriate organisations maintained that pre-flight tests were an impractical and inhuman suggestion, and given the situation of Keralites in many countries, where obtaining COVID negative certificates was a difficult and costly task, it would only push them towards wretchedness, if not death. (According to the newspaper's report on the same day, there were 296 COVID-related deaths of Keralites in the Gulf region until June 22. In contrast, the number of deaths in Kerala was 22.) Given its political compulsion to checkmate the initiatives of the government to contain the spread, which was bringing it praise from all over the world, the opposition tried to ignore the grim situation developing in the State and the need for extreme caution and restrictions to prevent an increase in COVID cases.

Although the number of cases in Kerala were fewer compared with many other States, the State recorded its highest one-day figure of 152 cases on June 24. In fact, for



MUSLIM YOUTH

League workers staging a protest near the Chief Minister's residence in Thiruvananthapuram on June 18 against the government's decision to allow only non-resident Keralites with COVID-free medical certificates to board flights bound for Kerala.

six consecutive days from June 19, Kerala reported more than 110 cases on each day. Over 1.5 lakh persons were still under observation as on June 25. Although the caseload is increasing, cases are still reported only in small clusters. The Chief Minister said there was still no evidence of a community spread in Kerala, even though “we cannot say that the threat of such a spread has gone away. We need to continue our vigil”. As on June 24, Kerala had 3,451 confirmed cases and 1,620 (47 per cent of the total) active cases and reported 22 deaths (0.64 per cent of the total). It had a recovery rate of 52.36 per cent (1,807 cases). The increasing number of cases in which the source of infection was unknown was becoming a cause for worry. Seventy-three such cases, with six deaths, were reported in the State until June 23. Health authorities are giving priority to identifying the source quickly as it is the key to controlling the spread. In many of these cases, the list of primary and secondary contacts numbered between 200 and 300 or more. Some positive cases turned up with implausible travel or contact history, and finding all the links was becoming a herculean task.

Panchayat and corporation wards were regularly declared as containment zones, with rigorous curbs in place. There were growing instances of contact tracing, sample collection and test results getting delayed, this despite district administrations taking a cautious approach to the outbreak. The authorities continue to maintain that there is evidence only of “home clusters”.

Clearly uncomfortable with the increasing caseload, the government has now started urging people to give importance to the use of masks, washing hands with soaps, rubbing sanitisers on hands and observing physical distancing norms inside homes, too.

Only 55,905 of the 4,56,431 expatriates who had registered with NORKA-ROOTS, the State government agency responsible for their welfare, have come back to the State as on June 21.

The Chief Minister said that though the government was of the view that pre-flight screening should be conducted on all those returning to the State, Indian embassies in many countries had informed the Centre of the practical difficulty in ensuring this.

The government has, therefore, said that from June 25, all chartered, private and Vande Bharat flights arriving in Kerala can operate only under a new set of conditions. The government said that those coming from countries that have test facilities should “make sincere efforts to get tested” and travel with the test certificate obtained within 72 hours before departure. All passengers will be required to register on the COVID-19 Jagratha website before their journey. Returnees from the six Gulf countries will necessarily have to wear protective gear and carry sanitisers for frequent disinfection during their journey. Those who show signs of the disease upon arrival will be asked to go to hospitals for further tests. All returnees, including asymptomatic persons, who do not have proof of having undergone the necessary tests, will be subjected to rapid antibody (IgG, IgM) test upon their arrival at any airport in the State. All those found positive for IgM antibodies will have to undergo mandatory confirmatory tests such as RT-PCR, Gene X-press test or TruNat test.

The returnees, irrespective of the test results, will have to undergo the mandatory quarantine of 14 days, and give an undertaking that they will adhere to all health and quarantine conditions specified by the government. The Chief Minister said that those found violating these conditions would invite penal action under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the Epidemic Diseases (Amendment) Ordinance, 2020, and other relevant Acts and Rules.

There was a heavy rush of passengers into Kerala on June 24. A total of 72 flights landed with 14,058 passengers in the four airports of the State on that day. □

People-driven plan

The government continues to maintain a **high level of surveillance** with people's involvement to stop community transmission of COVID-19 while making efforts to reboot the rural economy. BY **PRAFULLA DAS**

MORE THAN THREE AND A HALF MONTHS into its fight against COVID-19, the Odisha government's public awareness campaign slogan asks: "Are you going out of home to invite corona?" This sums up the State's continuous efforts to communicate with the public to avoid community transmission of the virus.

This also demonstrates how the people of the State, having experienced many natural disasters in the past, have come together to handle another crisis with ease. The people stood behind Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik when he appealed to them in March to face the challenge posed by the pandemic by adhering to various restrictions.

Backed by different government departments that are working as a team, the people have faced the health crisis with the kind of resilience they showed during cyclones and floods in the past two decades.

The Chief Minister has been holding high-level meetings through videoconferencing to review the situation and sending video messages from time to time urging people to obey the restrictions. The communities have responded positively, thereby making Odisha stand out as a model for other States in fighting the pandemic with its people-centric approach.

The people's trust in Naveen Patnaik's leadership in dealing with the pandemic was evident when the admin-

istration successfully organised the annual rath yatra in Puri on June 23 within hours of the Supreme Court's order to conduct the festival under various restrictions. The samples of 1,143 servitors and other people were tested immediately to ensure that no one with COVID-19 infection took part in the yatra rituals.

As people across the State stayed at home except for those involved in essential activities and watched the live telecast of the event, residents of Puri, too, did not go to the venue which normally attracts lakhs of devotees every year on the day of the festival. The rath yatra was not held anywhere else in the State as per the apex court's order.

People's cooperation helped the State cope with Cyclone Amphan in May even as it was dealing with COVID-19. Many quarantine shelters were converted into cyclone shelters and 1,855 pregnant women, whose estimated date of delivery was nearing, were shifted to nearby hospitals before the storm hit the coastal belt.

Front line workers are still engaged in the battle to contain the spread of the virus as the number of people testing positive has been growing by the day. By the last week of June, the State had more than 6,500 cases, of whom about 4,500 had recovered. It also recorded 25 deaths, seven of them owing to comorbidities.

More than eight lakh migrant Odias had returned to the State since the nationwide lockdown was enforced in March. About seven lakh of them completed their institutional quarantine at temporary quarantine centres (TMCs) by June end.

Although the arrival of migrant workers from other States had dwindled and the number of vacant beds in

the TMCs set up in 6,798 gram panchayats was increasing fast or leading to closure of the TMCs in many areas, the authorities are not taking any chances.

Not ruling out the possibility of an increase in the number of cases in July, the administration has changed its approach in dealing with the situation. It has set up COVID Care Homes (CCHs) in all gram panchayats. Each CCH can accommodate 10 to 12 persons with symptoms of cold, cough and fever.

Those who test positive at the CCH are shifted to COVID Care Centres at the block level or to the exclusive COVID hospital at the district level as required. A State-wide drive has been under way since June 16 under which ASHA (accredited social health activists) and ANM (auxiliary nurse midwife) workers visit every home to find out if any member of a family had symptoms. This exercise will continue until July 31.

In order to further decentralise its COVID-19 management, the government has set up ward-level committees in urban and rural areas to monitor the situation and extend help to anyone testing positive.

As the Health Department and other wings of the administration are engaged in preventing community transmission, people are extending their full cooperation to the authorities in checking the spread of the virus.

Apart from sarpanchs and ward members, who have been actively engaged in ensuring institutional quarantine of migrants returning to their native places, lakhs of members of women's self-help groups are making people obey physical distancing norms to prevent the spread of the disease in the rural interiors.

In fact, the situation has changed with the return of lakhs of migrant workers over a period of two months. Most of the returnees are unlikely to return to other States for work in the near future. Many of them have taken up cultivation, some of them have been given work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, but the majority of them are sitting idle. Experts feel that the State should do skill mapping of returnee migrants and create labour-intensive industries to convert the crisis into an opportunity to revive the State's economy.

As the health care machinery continues to maintain a high level of surveillance despite many doctors and paramedical staff contracting the virus, the district administrations are busy facing the twin challenges—dealing with COVID-19 cases and rebooting the rural economy through job creation under various schemes. The local authorities are enforcing lockdown and managing containment zones in many places by involving the local people.

Odisha was the first State in the country to declare COVID-19 a State disaster. The administration's predictive ability acquired through the lessons learned from previous calamitous situations has come in handy to deal with the current crisis. The Chief Minister commended the people for their whole-hearted cooperation in containing the spread of the disease by maintaining physical distancing and adhering to COVID-19 protocol. □

FIRE SERVICE

personnel spraying water on devotees to keep them cool during the rath yatra in Puri on June 23.



Sops and polls

The BJP government in Madhya Pradesh has been handing out sops amid the COVID crisis but faces criticism that ruling party leaders are contributing to the **spread of the contagion** through political activities aimed at winning impending byelections. BY ANANDO BHAKTO

AS THE GRAPH OF POSITIVE COVID CASES RISES steeply in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress alleges that the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government is banking heavily on the distribution of economic sops in order to avoid being criticised for a shabby handling of the pandemic. As of June 25, the total number of cases stood at 12,448; the number of casualties reported was 534.

On June 22, the State government announced that electricity bills ranging between Rs.100 and Rs.400 would be rounded off to Rs.100 and households that ran up bills above the Rs.400 mark would have to pay only half of that amount. The Chief Minister said in a video-conference: "This decision will save the consumers of the State Rs.183 crore. The State government will pay this amount to the electricity department." The move is being seen as a populist measure adopted with an eye on impending byelections in 24 Assembly constituencies.

The relief offered in electricity charges indeed seems to be part of a pattern. Earlier, the government credited Rs.451 crore into the accounts of more than 1,78,000 beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Rural. Similarly, more than Rs.82 crore was transferred to the accounts of over 8,000 beneficiaries under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban. Chouhan reintroduced the Sambhal Yojana for unorganised workers, which had been scrapped by the previous Kamal Nath government, and transferred Rs.41 crore to the beneficiaries.

Chouhan has come under sharp attack from the Congress for focussing on the byelections; newspapers have been regularly splashing pictures of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders flouting social distancing norms in their party membership drives. In the review meeting, Chouhan said categorically that the government would come down heavily on hospitals if they were found to be neglecting COVID-19 patients. "We have to save the lives of each and every corona patient," he said.

Chouhan and his Cabinet colleagues are citing Mad-

hya Pradesh's low COVID growth rate to underscore the point that their response to the pandemic has been timely and adequate. In a much-publicised review meeting held on June 23, Chouhan said that in the week preceding June 22, the COVID-19 growth rate stood at 1.43 per cent, which was the lowest in the country. As per data released by the Madhya Pradesh government, the growth rate is 2.1 per cent in Gujarat, Rajasthan 2.31 per cent in Rajasthan, 2.96 per cent in Maharashtra, 3.23 per cent in West Bengal, 3.82 per cent in Uttar Pradesh, and 4.21 per cent in Tamil Nadu. The national average is 3.63 per cent.

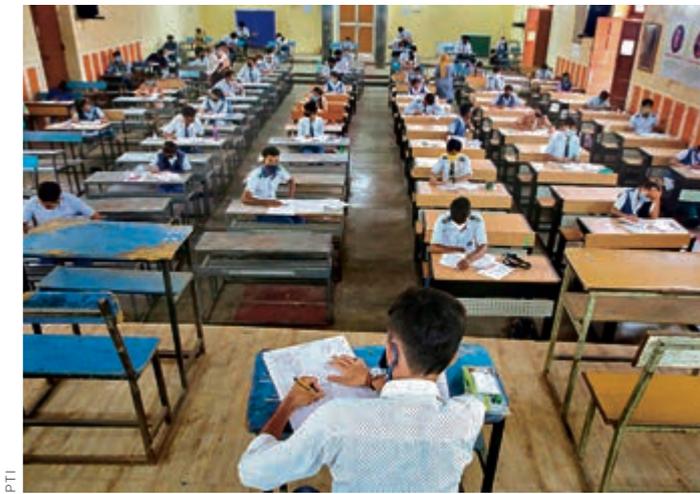
The government's claims, however, seem to be based on cherry-picked data. Experts have pointed out earlier that the virus had been spreading across the vast geo-

graphical span of the State rather swiftly, at one point infecting people in all 52 districts. In the second half of May, for instance, positive cases and the growth rate of deaths showed an upward trend. In the three weeks from May 6 to May 27, 12 districts registered more than 5 per cent growth rate of positive cases. There was a fatality rate of more than 5 per cent, as per data compiled on May 27. Even though Chouhan lauded the State's testing capacity—currently, 6,000 samples are being tested across 24 laboratories every day—a look at the data shows that testing has been erratic. Throughout May, the number of tests conducted showed no uniformity. As many as 2,461 tests were conducted on May 1. They rose to 5,648 on May 16 but declined to 3,595 on May 27.

Congress spokesperson Abbas Hafeez Khan alleges that BJP leaders have a hand in spreading the virus. "The BJP leaders have only one priority at the moment: to win the byelections. To achieve that end they are making all-out efforts to show the Congress in a bad light. Every second day they are organising large membership drives and claiming that Congress workers are joining them. In reality, these are random people from the hinterland, not our members. But thanks to BJP leaders aggressively moving people to and from hinterland to the State's red zones such as Bhopal and Indore, the virus is spreading in the villages at an alarming pace," he told *Frontline* over the phone from Bhopal.

Between May 21 and mid June, the contagion spread from 186 villages to 462 villages. Bhopal, along with Bhind and Morena, have continued to report high number of positive cases. On June 23, Bhind reported 22 positive cases, taking its tally to 173. Morena reported a total of 42 cases on June 22 and June 23.

The BJP regime in the State also faced criticism after



AT THE 12th standard examination conducted by the State Board of Secondary Education in Bhopal on June 10.

one of its legislators who had come to the Assembly to cast his vote for the Rajya Sabha election on June 19, tested positive. He is the second lawmaker in the State to be infected with COVID-19. Earlier, a Congress MLA from the Malwa-Nimar region tested positive. He had turned up in the Assembly sporting a personal protective equipment (PPE) on the day of the Rajya Sabha election. The names of the legislators have not been disclosed to the media.

The government is set to roll out its ambitious "Kill corona campaign" from July 1. A team of 14,000 men and women will survey 100 homes daily over the next 15 days. The objective is to make a door-to-door survey of two crore families.

RELIEF FOR STUDENTS

Meanwhile, in a major relief to 17.77 lakh students of graduate and post-graduate courses in the current academic session, the State government on June 22 announced that the first and second year students of graduation courses along with students in the second semester of post-graduation courses, would be promoted without being evaluated through examinations. The decision was applicable to students in higher and technical education institutes in the State.

A government official told the media: "It was decided that students of undergraduate first and second years and those in the second semester of post-graduate courses will be admitted to the next class or semester on the basis of marks of their previous year or semester or through internal assessment, without any exam." The government decided that the results final year of graduation students and of fourth semester post-graduation students would be compiled on the basis of highest marks obtained by them in previous years or semesters. A student in the final year or semester, who wishes to improve her or his marks, will be given the opportunity to take an offline examination at a later date. □



HEALTH department employees collect swab samples in a park in Bhopal on June 24.

Travesty of truth

Uttar Pradesh **scales new peaks** in June in the number of COVID-19 cases, but leaders, including the Prime Minister, tom-tom the State's "success story". BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**

ON JUNE 26, PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi credited the Yogi Adityanath-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Uttar Pradesh with saving the lives of approximately 85,000 people through its special initiatives to contain the spread of COVID-19. Modi based his claim on a comparison of demographics of four European nations—the United Kingdom (U.K.), France, Italy and Spain—and Uttar Pradesh. The total population of these European nations is about 24 crores, which is also the population of the State. Citing these numbers, Modi argued that cumulatively the four European nations had accounted for nearly 1.30 lakh COVID-19-related deaths while such deaths in the Indian State numbered only about 600. He went on to add that the Uttar Pradesh government had foreseen the situation and made quarantine and isolation facilities and that it was this that had resulted in the smaller number of fatalities. Making a direct political pitch on the basis of this contention, Modi claimed that the situation would have been different under previous governments as they would have only dished out excuses. He made comments while inaugurating, through a videoconference, the "Atma Nirbhar Uttar Pradesh Rojgar Yojna" (Uttar Pradesh self-reliant employment project), publicised by the State government as an initiative to promote local entrepreneurship.

Undoubtedly, the Prime Minister's statistical comparison and related claims added up to an impressive presentation. It was widely circulated by the publicity apparatus of the Uttar Pradesh government and the propaganda wings of the BJP and other organisations in the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS)-led Sangh Parivar. Yet, the traction that the campaign received, even in the assessments of some sections of the Sangh Parivar, was limited. "Notwithstanding its strengths in terms of the comparative figures, the campaign based on this could not be termed a runaway hit," remarked a senior RSS activist based in Lucknow. Mahendra Singh, a social activist belonging to Kanpur, the biggest city in

Uttar Pradesh, told *Frontline* that the reason why the comparative advantage highlighted by the Prime Minister had not brought solace to the people at large was that the problems the pandemic caused were oppressive but those who suffered them on a day-to-day basis did not find adequate creative interventions from the State government. "On the contrary, the Yogi Adityanath government is seen to be constantly trying to cover up its mistakes and deficiencies in COVID-19 relief activities," Mahendra Singh added.

In this background, he made a specific reference to the accidental discovery of COVID-19 infection in as many as 57 minor girls in a government-run children's

home in Kanpur. The revelation happened over four days in the third week of June. The medical perils of the discovery were complicated further by the fact that five of these girls were pregnant. Initial reports had it that one of these sexually exploited girls was HIV positive and another was infected with hepatitis C. A female staffer of the home was also found to be COVID-19 positive. While all of them were admitted to hospital, the remaining 114 girls and 37 employees were quarantined in a separate building. Residents of the shelter home, all between 10 and 18 years of age, hailed from different districts, including Agra, Etah, Kannauj, Firozabad and Kanpur. The disclosure of these cases with the added angle of sexual exploitation and pregnancy became a sensation across the State with political and social organisations taking it up in a big way. Taking *suo motu* cognisance of media reports, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) issued notices to the State's Chief Secretary and Director General of Police (DGP). It called for a detailed report and asked the officials to address the health status of all the girls, including their medical treatment and counselling. The NHRC added that the Uttar Pradesh government was expected to order an inquiry into the matter by an independent agency. It also called for a report regarding registration of a first information report (FIR) in the matter and the status of the investigation.

However, what happened following these interventions was mind-boggling. Instead of engaging creatively with the alarming outbreak of COVID-19 and rampant sexual exploitation in the children's home, the govern-

ment turned vindictive against sections of the media and social media for reporting these. An FIR was lodged against unidentified people for allegedly circulating false information about the shelter home. The FIR contended that false news about the home was circulated on different platforms, including news channels and social media. The primary thrust of the FIR was on reports suggesting that one of the pregnant girls was HIV positive and another had hepatitis C. It also stated that some media and social media interventions had revealed the identities of the residents concerned.

Referring to these events, Mahendra Singh pointed out that while legal measures needed to be taken against those who revealed the names of the victims, the overall approach of the government was to punish anyone who had made bold to talk about the revelation. "The hasty filing of an FIR and the consequent targeting of media organisations and personnel had all the trappings of a cover-up operation. In fact, such instances of obfuscation in terms of testing and revealing COVID-19 positive cases abound across the State. Similarly, the larger infrastructural and administrative deficiencies and social maladies like child sexual exploitation and caste-based discrimination are all sought to be covered up. This context has also contributed to the lukewarm response to the Prime Minister's comparative claims on Uttar Pradesh and the four countries in Europe," he said. Mahendra Singh added that despite such efforts to under-report COVID-19 cases and related issues and actively dissuade the media and the people from discussing them, June 2020 had recorded the highest number of cases. In the process, he said, June had also turned out to be the worst month for Uttar Pradesh since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Uttar Pradesh has for several weeks ranked fifth among the States in the number of COVID-19 cases, with the mortality rate rising steadily. Of the 15 districts in the country with the highest death rates, four are in the State: Jhansi, Meerut, Etah and Agra.

The data for these districts, as pointed out by Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi, are disconcerting. One out of every 10 patients has died in Jhansi, while in Meerut it is one death per 11 patients. In Etah and Agra, one out of every 14 patients has died. Besides, the situation in the State capital, Lucknow, is turning from bad to worse.

The steady rise of cases in the city has led to 100 areas being included on the containment zone list.

More worryingly, health and administrative officials point out that security personnel constitute a large part of new cases. The number of COVID-19 positive cases among the police and other security personnel was around 200 in Lucknow alone in the beginning of the last week of June. At least four policemen have died in the State since the beginning of the pandemic.

Clearly, the situation on the ground is unnerving even to security personnel, not to speak of common people, even as leaders, including the Prime Minister, keep highlighting the "success story" of Uttar Pradesh. □



PATIENTS with COVID-19 symptoms waiting for tests in the isolation ward of Hallet Hospital in Kanpur on June 19.

Capitals a concern

Bihar is still grappling with an increasing number of coronavirus cases, but the public discourse has veered away from the disease to politics as the Assembly election nears. Jharkhand, however, has made **dramatic progress** in tackling the pandemic. BY PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI

WHETHER IT WAS UNION HOME MINISTER Amit Shah addressing a virtual rally in Bihar on June 7 extolling Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Atmanirbhar Bharat programme or the Prime Minister himself congratulating the people of Bihar on June 20 on the valour of the Bihar Regiment for its valiant fight with Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley, Ladakh, the public discourse in Bihar is no longer about the coronavirus; it is politics as usual. This, despite the fact that the pandemic continues to rage in the State. Irrespective of the fact that the Modi-Shah speeches were touted as the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) routine "*jansamvaad*" programmes, the message was clear. The election bugle had been sounded. The BJP programme was quickly followed by virtual meetings addressed by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the main opposition party in the State, too hit the road to connect with people. The Assembly election is scheduled for October-November.

Jharkhand, Bihar's younger sibling, on the other hand, has achieved the distinction of successfully containing the spread of the pandemic. According to the figures the Jharkhand government Health Department

released, while the doubling rate on June 3 was 9.48 days, on June 21 it was 24.22 days. The growth rate for the disease has also slowed down: While the weekly growth rate in early June was 7.58 per cent, on June 21 it was down to only 2.9 per cent. The number of positive cases per thousand was 31 in early June and fell to 25 on June 23. The percentage of positive cases has also gone down: from 3.11 per cent in the period from June 3 to 10, it went down to 2.7 per cent between June 10 and 17 and to 2.5 per cent between June 17 and 22.

According to officials of the State Health Department, the State recorded a recovery rate of 71 per cent, against the national average of 53 per cent. As of June 25, the State had a total of 2,219 cases of infection, of which 1,575 had recovered. Significantly enough, 1,841 of the infected persons were migrant workers who had returned from other parts of India. The number of deaths too has been low in the State, only 13, and these were patients who had co-morbidities, said State officials.

"This has been possible because anticipating a spike in the number of cases with the return of migrants, we had made arrangements for their screening, quarantining, testing and treatment. Fortunately, people in villages



ARUN SHARMA/PTI



PTI

HOME MINISTER Amit Shah addressing a rally via videoconferencing from the BJP headquarters on June 7. (Right) Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar with National Democratic Alliance candidates for the Legislative Council elections after they filed their nomination papers, at the Bihar Vidhan Sabha in Patna on June 25.



PTI

TESTING being done in Ranchi on May 16. Jharkhand has so far tested 1,28,214 samples.

too have become so aware that they ensured quarantining and isolation of those who returned from outside, which helped in containing the spread,” said a senior official. The State has so far tested 1,28,214 samples.

According to senior government officials, there are four districts in the State that have become completely coronavirus free: Deoghar, Godda, Dumka and Sahibganj. The State capital, Ranchi, continues to have a large number of cases, making it a cause of concern for officials. Bihar, which also saw a spike in the number of cases with the return of migrants, has a total of 8,381 cases, and the number of deaths was 60 as of June 25. But the number of those who have recovered is 6,113, making it one of those States that have a high recovery rate of 72 per cent. Like Ranchi, Patna, Bihar’s capital, continues to be problematic, with 506 cases, but here too 287 patients have recovered. While the Bihar government has been patting itself on the back for the low number of cases and fatalities because of its timely detection and treatment, opposition parties say this is because no testing is being done. “We have failed completely on testing. If you don’t count, then obviously, the number of cases will be low,” said Akhilesh Prasad Singh, Rajya Sabha member of the Congress.

In Bihar, however, the coronavirus is not as much of a concern as getting the caste equations right for the Assembly election, and this was visible in the parties’ choices of candidates for the State Legislative Council election to be held on July 6 for nine seats. The choices caused a lot of buzz in political circles. The RJD’s choice of Sunil Singh, Ram Bali Chandravanshi and Farukh Shaikh as its nominees set tongues wagging. According to political observers, the choice of Sunil Singh, a Rajput, was a definite giveaway that the RJD was trying to woo forward caste votes. If the RJD gets even a fraction of the forward caste votes, it becomes a winning proposition for the party when combined with its substantial Muslim-Yadav vote bank.

“It is no secret that people in Bihar are not so happy with Nitish Kumar, and they are looking for alternatives. If the RJD is seen to be accommodating the upper castes too, why not?” said Raj Kumar, a BJP sympathiser.

The Janata Dal (United) too has chosen its nominees for the Legislative Council with the caste equation of the

State in mind. Its candidates are Gulam Gaus, Kumud Verma and Bhisim Sahnii. The Congress party has fielded Samir Kumar Singh as its candidate. The dramatic manner in which Samir Singh’s candidature was decided is symptomatic of the confusion in the Congress party, not only in Bihar but everywhere else too. The party had just one seat to contest for the council election and had initially decided on Tariq Anwar, a five-time MP from Katihar. Working president Sonia Gandhi had approved his name. But, he was replaced at the eleventh hour because it was discovered his name was not on the voter’s list in Bihar, the primary criterion to be satisfied to contest council elections.

The political meter in Bihar started ticking ever since Amit Shah’s June 7 virtual rally. Modi addressed the people of Bihar on June 20 while launching the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan, an employment scheme for migrants returning to the State from other parts of India. Before starting his speech, the Prime Minister paid glowing tributes to the soldiers of the Bihar Regiment who laid down their lives fighting the Chinese in the Galwan Valley. Taking the Bihar Regiment to be synonymous with Biharis, Modi said that this was a victory for Biharis and every Bihari was proud of it.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar held his own virtual meeting with his party workers on June 10 and is to continue his virtual meetings in the days to come to exhort them to spread the message of his government’s good performance. The RJD, however, has decided to stick to its people-connect programmes. RJD workers, led by Rabri Devi and Tejashwi Yadav, have been organising protests and marches to draw attention to the failures of the Nitish Kumar government. Social distancing and other precautions go for a toss during these programmes, but nobody seems to be bothered.

Meanwhile, typical election-time confabulations have started in the opposition camp where reports of differences over the leadership issue have started doing the rounds. While the RJD is firm on projecting Tejashwi Yadav as its chief ministerial face, its allies such as like the Rashtriya Lok Samta Party led by Upendra Kushwaha and the Hindustani Awam Morcha led by Jitan Ram Manjhi are not agreeable to the proposal. Even the Congress party said that the issue should not become the talking point at this stage. “The leadership issue can be discussed later,” said Akhilesh Prasad Singh, adding that there was no problem about it though. But there is a feeling among RJD allies that if Tejaswi Yadav is declared the leader of the alliance, the election would become a Nitish versus Tejashwi contest and the alliance would lose out. “Our main focus is to defeat the Nitish Kumar government, and we stand united on this. One round of talks has already been held in Delhi where all parties attended,” said Akhilesh Prasad Singh.

Amidst all this animated election talk, the coronavirus has been relegated to the background. “Now new cases are coming slowly. The growth rate has fallen. God has been kind to Bihar, otherwise we would have paid a heavy price,” said Raj Kumar. □

Sharp increase

In Haryana, the **number of active cases** has shown a sharp rise in recent weeks, approximating the trend in neighbouring Delhi.

BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

HARYANA WAS ONCE WAY BELOW ON THE list of States with the highest number of COVID-19 infections but has now moved up the ranks to ninth place. In the one-week period of June 21-26, the average growth rate of cases was 4 per cent, higher than that of Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh but lower than neighbouring Delhi. Even though Haryana has reported a low mortality rate (1.59 per cent; 198 deaths as of June 26) compared with other States, the number of confirmed cases per million of the population was higher than the national average.

In fact, the daily spike in the number of cases in June has been sharp, with the trend approximating and imitating the growth of cases in Delhi. The percentage of active cases (the rate of infections) was almost double that of Rajasthan and more than that of Delhi, which is worrying. The districts of Gurugram and Faridabad, both industrial hubs and employment centres for blue-collar and white-collar workers alike, accounted for 62.69 per cent of the cases in the State in the fourth week of June. That is, of the total of 12,884 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Haryana, 8,078 were reported from these two districts, with Gurugram accounting for 38.27 per cent of the total caseload and Faridabad for 24.32 per cent. In third place was Sonipat with 8.49 per cent, and Rohtak, the political capital of the State, accounted for only 3.9 per cent of the overall caseload. On an average, the State has conducted 8,262 tests in one million of the population, which is much lower than Delhi (22,106 tests per million) or Rajasthan (9,799 tests per million). Its recovery rate at 59.22 per cent is lower than that of Delhi and nearly 20 percentage points lower than the recovery rate of Rajasthan.

A recent survey done by the State unit of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in the industrial areas in Gurugram, Faridabad and Panipat found that workers

A LABOURER works on the Shankar Chowk elevated U-turn flyover in Gurugram on June 13. Labour shortages in construction and other labour-intensive forms of production persist in the State.

who had left the State following the lockdown had not returned. A large number of them from States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh had stayed in their home States, while some workers from neighboring Rajasthan had returned. Construction activity had come to a standstill as the bulk of the workforce in construction was from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Most of the smaller industrial units had not reopened, while the workforce participation in the larger units was anywhere between 25 per cent and 50 per cent only.

LABOUR SHORTAGE

The shortage of demand was one reason for the units not reopening. Production too was broadly in the range of 25 to 50 per cent. Workers were being paid only for the days they worked without any provision for leave. In the auto-



DR VEENA SINGH, Director of Health Services, Haryana, addresses a press conference at PWD Rest House in Gurugram on June 19.

mobile sector, which was already in a state of slowdown much before the lockdown, only spare parts were being manufactured. Given the shortage of labour and in order to entice the migrant workforce back, the government declared that it would bear up to Rs.1,500 of the travel expenses of migrant workers if they returned to the State. Despite the offer, workers had not turned up and so the labour shortages in construction and other labour-intensive forms of production persist.

While on the one hand industry was facing labour shortages, white-collar workers, including those at the lower managerial levels, were being retrenched. The loss of jobs in the information technology and IT-enabled services sector was huge. Jai Bhagwan, general secretary of the State unit of the CITU, said that many of those who had been laid off were youngsters who had literally been left "high and dry". "Their employers have been forcing them to resign. They do not know what to do and where to apply. The Labour Department is nowhere on the

scene," he said. On June 16, Deputy Commissioner Shyam Lal Poonia of Sonipat district, who is also the district head of the Disaster Management Authority, warned individuals not to spread fake news relating to COVID-19 on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. According to him, such news and YouTube videos posted by individuals had the potential to spread panic and cause mental stress. He also stated that the usage of such media was "journalistic activity" and, therefore, needed to be cleared by the government's Information Department. Poonia made a reference to the Supreme Court's advice to the media about accurate reporting.

The court made these observations in April in response to an appeal from the Central government to restrain the media. The Deputy Commissioner warned that anybody spreading fake news relating to the epidemic and thereby causing panic among people would face charges under the relevant provisions of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1957; the Disaster Management Act and Rules, 2005; and the Indian Penal Code. People found guilty could be imprisoned for one year and have to pay a fine under the provisions of the Disaster Management Act. "He's very strict about all this, but when we requested him to allow us to distribute rations among workers who had been left to fend for themselves, he did not give us passes to move around," said Jai Bhagwan.

He said that the administration in various districts had allowed quasi-religious organisations and outfits affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh to do relief work but had not allowed the Left parties and their mass organisations to do the same. "Despite having worked in the unorganised sector in the State for so many years, we were given only 20 passes in all. We were not able to help our members and other workers because of this," he told *Frontline*.

On May 14, the Union Finance Minister announced that all migrants who did not possess ration cards would get five kilograms of grain a person and one kilogram of gram, or channa, a family for a period of two months. Apparently, in Haryana not a single migrant family had received this benefit. The District Commissioner in one particular district told a delegation of women activists of the All India Democratic Women's Association that he had not received any "written orders" and, therefore, could not give the go-ahead for distributing the rations. He said, however, that he could help with organising cooked food for them. Much of the State has been in an "unlock" mode since the first week of June as religious places and shopping malls outside containment zones have been opened to the public though with standard operating procedures and guidelines in place to prevent the spread of the virus. In the worst affected districts, Gurugram for instance, the lockdown in containment zones was extended until June 30. Concerned about the rising number of cases in Kaithal, Deputy Commissioner Sujana Singh imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure in the district on June 17 and it was to remain in force until June 30. □

Ordinances ‘anti-farmer’

Three ordinances passed recently by the Central government in connection with the marketing of agricultural produce have been opposed by all political parties except the BJP. BY ZIYA US SALAM



WHEN THE LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS began to be eased in Punjab in early June, the Central government promulgated three ordinances which could change the way the State stores and markets its agricultural produce in the years to come. The ordinances are aimed at ushering in agricultural reforms for raising farmers’ income and giving them the freedom to sell their produce beyond the *mandis*.

The President promulgated the Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance 2020, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Ordinance Act 2020. According to an official release, the Central government had been making comprehensive interventions to impart efficiency to agricultural marketing, with the aim of raising the incomes of the farmers. It stated: “Recognising the bottlenecks preventing the holistic development of marketing of the agriculture produce, the government drafted the Model Agriculture Produce and Livestock Marketing (APLM) Act 2017, and also the Model Agriculture Produce &

PLOUGHING IN PROGRESS at a village near Amritsar on June 9.

Livestock Contract Farming Act of 2018 for adoption by the States.”

However, all the major political parties of Punjab, except the Bharatiya Janata Party, have either opposed the ordinances or sought clarifications and safeguards. The Punjab government even felt the ordinances went against the spirit of cooperative federalism and urged the Centre to rethink the issue. It rejected outright the slogan of “One India, One Agriculture Market”, emphasising that each State, as indeed each crop, had its own unique characteristics and nuances which could not be homogenised.

FARMERS PROTEST

Even as the government was considering leading an all-party delegation to the Prime Minister, farmers took to the streets, alleging that the ordinances were a ruse to destroy the long-suffering farmer.

Under the aegis of the Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh

Samiti, hundreds of farmers organised protests in various districts of Punjab and submitted memorandums to the District Magistrates in Hoshiarpur, Fazilka, Tarn Taran, Moga, Jalandhar and Amritsar, seeking revocation of the ordinances. Expressing apprehension about the timing of the ordinances, veteran Bhartiya Kisan Union leader Ajmer Singh Lakhowal wondered why the government was in a hurry to pass the ordinances, bypassing Parliament.

“If Modi claims it is about One Nation, One Agriculture then they could have waited for the Parliament session, held discussions with all political parties before arriving at a decision. As it turned out, they did not discuss it with the State government. Forget taking the Chief Minister into confidence, they did not consult kisan leaders either, nor did they speak to various panchas (panchayat leaders). But who will suffer? Not the Central government but the average farmer who sweats it out in the fields every day to feed the nation.”

Lakhowal added, “The ordinances will kill the farmers. Once the private companies are able to dig in their feet, they will control the market, they will control the prices. They will even buy the mandi. What is preventing them?”

However, the ordinance on price assurance specifies that mandis will not be touched.

“They are lying. The government will waive off all taxes for them, i.e. the corporate houses. I know it as I have been the president of the Punjab Mandi Board until a few years ago. The effects will not be seen this year. It will take two-three years. Our agriculture will slip into the hands of corporate houses. Instead of working for the poor farmer, the Centre seems to be working for Adani-Ambani. The poor farmer will become a labourer on his own fields once these corporate houses come into the scene. A man who until now owned a small patch of land but managed to sustain himself with that will be reduced to the status of a landless labourer,” said Lakhowal.

Chief Minister Amarinder Singh wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to review the ordinances in the spirit of “cooperative federalism”. Pointing out that Punjab had been at the forefront of ensuring food security for the nation even at the time of the pandemic, Amarinder Singh pointed out that agriculture was a State Subject under the Constitution and it features at Entry 14 in the State List. “On the other hand, trade and commerce feature at Entry 33 of the Concurrent List which enables both the Union and State governments to legislate on the subject provided the State legislation is not repugnant to the Union’s legislation.”

Praising the State’s track record, including ushering in the Green Revolution, Amarinder Singh reiterated,



AKHILESH KUMAR

CHIEF MINISTER
Amarinder Singh.



RAVESH SHARMA

AJMER SINGH
Lakhowal, Bharatiya
Kisan Union leader.

“The Agriculture Produce Marketing System in Punjab has stood the test of time and served the State as well as the country over the past 60 years. It had in fact been an important contributor to the success of the Green Revolution and helped in ensuring food security on the one hand and securing livelihood of millions of farmers and farm workers on the other.”

Arguing that the State had a well-organised system of mandis and godowns, he alleged that the changes sought to be ushered in through the ordinances had led to fears that the government was moving towards withdrawal of the assured procurement of foodgrains produced by the local farmers.

The well-established system of minimum support price (MSP) will be adversely affected, he claimed.

Amarinder Singh won support across the political spectrum at an all-party meeting convened on June 24, with even the leading opposition party, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), coming on board. “For SAD, no ministry, alliance or government is beyond the welfare of the *annadata*, the farmers,” said SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal.

Punjab Congress Committee president Sunil Jakhar was more forthright in seeking immediate revocation of the “three anti-farmer ordinances” and said it would place the farmers’ fate at the mercy of the corporates.

“The BJP’s real intent is to eventually do away with the MSP regime, which they consider a burden on the Indian economy, and the actual purpose behind these ordinances is to prepare smooth ground towards that end so that government steps out and the corporates step in,” he told the all-party meeting.

The Aam Aadmi Party’s Punjab unit president, Bhagwant Mann, claimed that not only farmers but arhtiyas [commission agents] and small traders would be impacted adversely by the ordinances. The BJP, though, claimed that the new rules were pro-farmer, and the ordinances were passed only to help ameliorate the lot of the farmers during the lockdown.

Shortly afterwards, Amarinder Singh stated, “The major political parties barring the BJP have resolved to appeal to the Prime Minister to immediately withdraw the recently passed ordinances. An all-party delegation is likely to convey their strong reservations on the subject to the Centre.”

The BKU’s Ajmer Singh Lakhowal said: “They are doing the right thing. What else can the State government do at such a time? The State government was not taken into confidence but it knows this corporatisation of agriculture will ruin the farmers, and ultimately snatch the food away from the poor.” □

Rising to the occasion

As many as 20 NGOs and a wide group of volunteers under the umbrella of Mercy Mission have undertaken a **significant share** of relief work in Bengaluru during the lockdown. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

THE NATIONWIDE LOCKDOWN THAT BEGAN on March 25 not only decimated the livelihoods of millions in one fell swoop, but also pointed to the severe gap between the state's intentions and efforts, and the reality on the ground with regard to relief work. A variety of non-state actors all over the country undertook to fill this gap by mobilising manpower and resources to reach out to migrant workers throughout the lockdown.

In Bengaluru, Mohammed Ummer, the CEO of the non-profit organisation Project Smile, met Dr Taha Mateen, the managing trustee of HBS Hospital, a day before the Janata Curfew of March 22 and discussed the possibility of building a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) active in the city as concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic grew. Explaining the formation of the coalition that quickly brought together several NGOs under the umbrella of "Mercy Mission", Dr Mateen said: "The Delhi riots made us realise that we [Muslims] had to have a disaster management team. We had no idea about the possible severity of the lockdown at that time."

Speaking to *Frontline*, Ummer explained that this was a novel initiative as "such a large-scale collaboration on a neutral platform had not happened before in Bengaluru".

As soon as the lockdown began on March 25, the coalition, which comprised 20 NGOs, organised its activities under broad departmental heads based on the kind of relief required. In retrospect, it is staggering to see the amount of work they undertook in the next few weeks during the strictest phase of the lockdown.

Until May 31, the Mercy Mission had distributed over 73,000 dry ration kits worth Rs.7.5 crore across 300 localities in Bengaluru and elsewhere in Karnataka. At a time when state actors such as the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) and the Labour Department were struggling to run food kitchens as

demanding by civil society activists, Mercy Mission set up 33 food kitchens at different locations within the city and prepared an estimated 11.8 lakh meals. The volunteers of the coalition facilitated the distribution of 12.3 lakh food packets by governmental and non-governmental agencies. On any given day, as many as 500 volunteers were out on the streets of Bengaluru.

The Mercy Mission also set up a helpline where volunteers handled thousands of phone calls and noted down requests and requirements. Medicines worth Rs.3.94 lakh were distributed free of cost; at a time when there was a severe shortage of blood in blood banks, volunteers donated blood.

When the Shramik Special trains began operations on May 3, the Mercy Mission took charge of the welfare of the migrant workers at railway stations and "mustering centres" (spaces where the workers gathered before they boarded the Shramik Specials). Until May 31, more than 1,75,000 migrant workers who left on the 107 trains were provided with food packets as well as kits containing essentials such as slippers, diapers and sanitary napkins.

TRANSPORTING COVID-19 DECEASED

Among the notable operations of the Mercy Mission is their transporting the COVID-19 deceased in Bengaluru. Volunteers of the coalition, dressed in full personal protective equipment (PPE), transferred the bodies of the dead from hospitals to crematoriums and cemeteries.

In undertaking all these activities, this NGO coalition received generous funding from private companies such as Wipro, and also raised a significant amount of funds through the networks of its member NGOs.

According to Vijay Grover, an independent journalist who has been involved with relief work through the lockdown: "The scale of work that the Mercy Mission did matched the efforts of the Labour Department and other government agencies in mitigating widespread hunger."



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

MERCY MISSION volunteers distributing food packets to migrant workers travelling by Shramik Special trains.

A Labour Department official who was supervising the distribution of rations during the lockdown said: “The Mission did a tremendous job in distributing food.” Among others who appreciated the work of the coalition was Deputy Chief Minister C.N. Ashwath Narayan.

A senior railway official who was supervising the Shramik Specials said: “They even did the jobs of porters, carrying the luggage of elderly travellers. Amidst all the bad publicity that Muslims were victims of, they emerged as the true corona warriors in Bengaluru.”

The “bad publicity” that the railway official referred to was the vilification of the Muslim community in the aftermath of the Tablighi Jamaat markaz in Nizamuddin which emerged as a COVID-19 hotspot in March, and the subsequent communalisation of the pandemic. Tanveer Ahmed, a coordinator at Mercy Mission, said: “The communalisation of the pandemic was frustrating. We have beaten this false narrative through the medium of love and this was a big motivation for me to help. I did not come across any of the so-called ‘nationalists’ while we were out there on the streets.”

In Mercy Mission’s activities, one can also see that a sense of social activism has pervaded the Muslim community, buoyed perhaps by the notion of “constitutional nationalism” that has struck deep roots among the Muslim youths in the wake of the widespread anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Acts (CAA) protests that began in December last year.

While the core leadership of Mercy Mission is drawn from established NGOs who have been working in charitable activities for several years, the wider circle of volunteers was drawn from the corps of educated Muslim

youths, who had been active in the anti-CAA protests.

As concerns about the pandemic began to spread even as the anti-CAA protests were continuing in full swing, many of these protest networks quickly reoriented themselves towards relief activities. Vinay Sreenivasa, a lawyer working with the Alternative Law Forum, said: “Muslims were determined to work possibly due to the anti-CAA networks that they had built and the propaganda about the community.”

As M.A. Shariff, trustee of the Lifeline Foundation and one of the key members of Mercy Mission, noted: “The period from December 2019 to March 2020 was extremely harsh on Indian Muslims as they faced major debacles like the passage of the CAA, the Delhi riots and the hateful propaganda that followed the Tablighi Jamaat incident. However, the response by them has been extremely heartening as they have chosen to rise to the occasion negating these setbacks and lead the nation’s fight against the pandemic from the forefront.”

Sanya Khan, a volunteer of Mercy Mission, arranged diesel for the generators at Tripura Vasani, a convention hall that served as a mustering centre. Without the diesel-fuelled generators, migrant workers at these centres could not even recharge their mobile phones. In a conversation with *Frontline*, she hoped that the mission’s work would change the perception of Muslims.

“Often I would hear from these workers who were mainly from north Indian states: ‘*Madamji, aap hamare liye itna kar rahe hain, par aapke bare mein kya kya bolte hain*’ (Madam, you are doing so much for us, but all kinds of things are said about you [Muslims]).” □



TAUSEEF MUSTAFA/AFP

INDIA AND CHINA

TIME FOR TALKS

Tensions raised by the bloody June 15 clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers in the Galwan Valley remain, but both sides have apparently **decided to choose dialogue** rather than aggressive rhetoric as the way forward. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

THE Line of Actual Control (LAC), the *de facto* border between India and China, has remained calm since the bloody clash on June 15 in the contested Galwan Valley which claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers and injured 70. Ten Indian soldiers were taken prisoner and released within days. The Indian Army was threatening a decisive response but cooler heads seem to have prevailed, at least for the time being. The Chinese side has been trying to downplay the skirmish, the most serious in the last 45 years, and emphas-

ising the need for the dialogue process to continue.

Satellite imagery taken in the days following the clash showed that both the Indian Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were reinforcing their positions across the border. The Indian government has let it be known that the military commanders stationed along the LAC have been given a "free hand" to respond to any further Chinese "aggression". Satellite pictures that have been released purport to show some PLA structures in

the Galwan valley near the area where the clash took place.

The three major friction points are in Galwan, Hot Springs and the Fingers area near the Pangong Tso lake. The PLA had occupied territory up to Finger 4 in the Pangong Tso area in early May and wants the Indian Army to confine its patrolling up to Finger 2. The area had witnessed clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers in the third week of May. As of now, the Chinese side is showing no intention to restore the situation that existed on the eastern

INDIAN SOLDIERS at the foothills of a mountain range near Leh, Ladakh, on June 25.

Ladakh border until the end of April.

India has placed 300,000 troops along the LAC on "the highest alert". The Indian Navy has been placed on alert for possible encounters with Chinese naval vessels. There is even talk by retired diplomats and army officials about India considering the eventuality of a blockade of the Straits of Malacca in tandem with the United States, Japan and Australia, its military partners in the Quad, if the situation escalates further. Much of China's imports and exports pass through the choke point of the Straits of Malacca. A former Indian Army chief, General V.P. Malik, said that the Indian Army was capable of fighting a "two front" war.

But the last thing the Narendra Modi government, like the international community, wants is an unwinnable war in the times of a pandemic. But whipping up nationalistic feelings and jingoism helps divert people's attention from the government's mismanagement of the pandemic and the economy.

The Chinese side insists that the Galwan Valley has been part of China since the time of the Qing dynasty. The Indian side has strongly differed, stating that its troops regularly went on patrol duty to the area. There is a picture of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi addressing troops in the Galwan Valley soon after the Bangladesh war. Both sides have varying perceptions about where exactly the LAC runs through in the remote mountainous terrain. No maps of the Himalayan border have

been exchanged so far.

Anyway, Prime Minister Modi has chosen not to escalate the conflict: he has said that the Chinese side has not made any territorial gains after the clashes. "No one has intruded into our territory," Modi told the all-party meeting which he convened after the June 15 incident. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) issued a statement saying that Modi at the outset of the meeting had clarified that "neither is anyone inside our territory nor is any of our post captured". Two days earlier, the Indian External Affairs Ministry had accused the Chinese side of crossing the LAC and building illegal structures in the Galwan Valley.

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a statement on June 22 cautioning the government that the Prime Minister "must always be mindful of the implications of his words and declarations on our nation's security as also strategic and territorial interests". He said the Prime Minister "cannot allow them to use his words as a vindication of their position and must ensure that all organs of the government must work together to tackle this crisis and prevent it from escalating further".

The Chinese media were generally appreciative of Modi's statement and said it would help defuse the tense situation. According to the Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman, Wu Qian, Indian soldiers were responsible for the June 15 incident; he claimed that it had taken place on the Chinese side of the LAC. "The incident took place solely due to India breaking the consensus [between the two sides]," the spokesman said. The two sides had started military-level talks on June 6 to try and resolve the differences that had suddenly cropped up. Both sides claim that the agreements reached during the June 6 corps commanders' talks were disregarded and that led to the clash of June 15. Talks between senior military officers were resumed on June 22. According to Indian officials, they remain deadlocked as the Chinese side has not shown any inclination to vacate recently occupied areas.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijiang asserted that the confrontation in the Galwan Valley had taken place on the Chinese side of the LAC. The Chinese side had initially refused to go into the details of the June 15 clash but is now increasingly becoming vocal. “The reckless actions by the Indian military seriously violated agreements signed between the two countries and seriously violated the basic principles of international relations. They were evil in nature and the consequences were severe,” the Foreign Ministry spokesman asserted. Zhao said the Chinese side had to be more forthcoming to counteract what he described as the “large amount of fake news” being circulated by the Indian media and diplomats.

Beijing finally reacted to the assertion by Indian officials that there were more casualties on its side in the Galwan clash. Former Indian Army chief Gen. V.K. Singh, who is now a Minister of State in the Central government, claimed that at least 40 PLA soldiers had been killed. China’s Defence Ministry spokesman said

the reports about the number of deaths on the Chinese side were “fake news”. He said some Chinese soldiers received only “light injuries” in the June 15 confrontation. Chinese officials have maintained that they had initially preferred not to comment on the issue as they did not want to inflame domestic sentiments.

After the June 23 military commanders’ meeting on the Chinese side of the LAC at the Moldo border crossing point, the two sides agreed to continue with “a mutual consensus to disengage” and had detailed discussions on “all the friction areas” like the Galwan Valley, Hot Springs and Pangong Tso areas. Local commanders from both sides will now meet regularly to “cool down the situation”. The idea is to create a *de facto* buffer zone between the two armies along the friction areas.

The Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman expressed the hope that the Indian side can now at least meet the Chinese side “half way” to work together in easing the tensions and to “maintain peace and tranquility in



NYT



EXTERNAL AFFAIRS Minister S. Jaishankar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during a meeting in New York on September 25, 2019.

the border region”. India’s External Affairs Ministry spokesman cautiously responded by saying “that both sides remain deployed in large numbers in the region, while military and diplomatic contacts are continuing”.

Wang Dehua, a specialist in South Asian studies in Shanghai University, told *South China Morning Post* that the military-level talks to de-escalate the situation along the LAC were an encouraging sign. He said that many more rounds of talks had taken place compared with the talks held after the Doklam stand-off started in 2017. “At that time, I was concerned that a fight would break

IN AN IMAGE provided by Maxar Technologies, a Chinese army base in the Galwan Valley near the unofficial border with India in May 2020.

out, but it did not. We have learned since then and discussions are the best way forward,” he said.

The border tensions were barely mentioned at the virtual trilateral Russia, India, China (RIC) group meeting hosted by Moscow on June 23. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, chairing the meeting, said India and China did not require any outside help to resolve their outstanding issues. Russia does not want the two RIC partner countries to drift apart. India and China, along with Russia, are members of the

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Russia is also the biggest arms supplier to both China and India. Moscow has a stake in cooling down the tensions between the two Asian neighbours. Russia believes that good relations between New Delhi and Beijing are essential for the rise of a multipolar world.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, in his speech, emphasised India’s commitment to international law, multilateralism and the

legitimate interests of partners. It was meant to be a none-too-subtle message to China. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi preferred to focus on the importance of the three countries unitedly facing up to the challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic than comment on the Ladakh clash. This was the first time the Indian and the Chinese Foreign Ministers were meeting after the June 15 incident. According to the Indian Ambassador to China, Vikram Misri, Jaishankar told his Chinese counterpart that the recent events “cannot but have an impact on the bilateral relationship”.

There are indications that New



PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi and leaders of other political parties during a videoconference on the border situation, in New Delhi on June 19.

Delhi is unwilling at this juncture to come “half way” as suggested by the Chinese side. “The heart of the matter is that since early May, the Chinese side has been amassing a large contingent of troops and armaments along the LAC,” External Affairs Ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava stated in a media briefing on June 25. He also said that the PLA’s attempts to “obstruct” patrolling by Indian troops were “in complete disregard of all mutually agreed norms”. Srivastava also accused the Chinese government of not adhering to the various bilateral agreements to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC.

The 1993 “Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility” along the LAC specifically mentioned that “each side will keep its military forces in the areas along the Line of Actual Control to a minimum level compatible with friendly and good neighbourly relations between the two countries”. Ambassador Misri, in an interview with Press Trust of India (PTI), said that the Chinese side should realise that “there is no gain in changing the status quo on the ground, especially by resorting to force”.

Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Weidong, in an earlier interview with PTI, also made similar allegations against India. He said that India had violated the 1993 and 1996 agreements on the border. He said that the Indian government should conduct a “thorough investigation, hold the violators accountable, strictly discipline the frontline troops and immediately stop all provocative acts to ensure such incidents

will not occur again”.

The Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson alleged that China had been trying to “unilaterally change the status quo” on the LAC for some years and that this year it “disregarded all mutually agreed norms”. According to Srivastava, the June 15 incident is an illustration of the “recent shift in the Chinese position”. He emphasised that security along the border was the “basis” of the relationship between the two countries. “A continuation of the current situation would only vitiate the atmosphere for the development of the relationship”, the spokesman warned, signalling a hardening of the Indian negotiating position. The spokesman’s comments came after the meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs met on June 24.

HYPERNATIONALISM

In response to calls from the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and other groups to boycott Chinese goods, imports from China are being held up in Indian ports. The Indian authorities are asking for additional documents for their clearance. The imports from China that are being inordinately delayed consist of containers from U.S. companies such as Apple, Cisco, Dell and Ford. The Modi government is making little efforts to tamp down the hyper nationalism and jingoism that have gripped the country after June 15.

In the last week of June, the Delhi Hotels and Restaurant Owners Association, which claims to rep-

resent around 3,000 budget hotels, announced that the hotels would not provide hospitality to Chinese nationals. The association had come out in support of the Confederation of All India Traders, which had called for the boycott of all Chinese goods. Leading economists and industry heads have warned the Indian government against making moves against China that would further endanger the beleaguered Indian economy. Annual trade between the two countries is worth \$90 billion, with a deficit of around \$50 billion in China’s favour.

The only country that has rushed to support India in the military standoff is the United States. After the Donald Trump administration failed miserably to control the coronavirus surge and prevent mass unemployment, Washington has been blaming China for all the ills the world is facing. One of the Trump administration’s biggest China baiter, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, denounced China as a “rogue actor” which had “escalated border tensions with India, the world’s most populous democracy”. Speaking at an event in Denmark, billed as “the Copenhagen Democracy Summit”, he said China was militarising the South China Sea and illegally claiming more territory there threatening vital sea lanes.

Speaking in Germany at another event, Pompeo claimed that the U.S. was pulling out some of its troops in Germany to be redeployed in the Indo-Pacific region in order to meet the threat China posed to countries such as India. Pompeo claimed that the PLA posed an increasing threat to countries like Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines too. For the first time since 2017, the U.S. Navy has deployed three of its aircraft carriers in the disputed South China Sea along with eight nuclear submarines in the surrounding seas. The Trump administration has been using the pretext of “freedom of navigation” to flout the territorial sovereignty claimed by China in the South China Sea. Beijing has warned Washington to stop moving its “chess pieces around” and stop “flexing its military muscles around China”. □

The new resistance

Amid views of The Resistance Front's potential ability to script a **turnaround in militancy**, intelligence and security personnel believe that actors from across the border are arming and pushing battle-hardened Jaish-e-Mohammad cadre into the Valley. **BY ANANDO BHAKTO**

IN Kashmir's scarred landscape, as hardened militant commanders and their newly inducted recruits perish in relentless encounters, at times more swiftly than they emerge, it has become tempting for security analysts to predict the fate of Kashmir's three-decade-long armed insurgency. The conversation quickly gravitates towards The Resistance Front (TRF), hitherto unheard of but now increasingly viewed in Srinagar's press circles as the "new, for-

midable player" in militancy.

The TRF has made a string of claims on social media, owning responsibility for headliner militant activities such as the Handwara gunfight on May 2 in which a commanding officer, Colonel Ashutosh Sharma, was killed. Even as opinion is divided on home-grown militants' capacity to rattle the security apparatus, given the massive and persistent damage inflicted on Hizbul Mujahideen's rank and file, and a

sense of fatigue in South Kashmir's local people on the question of supporting armed combatants, some view the TRF as a potential force that could script a phenomenal turnaround in militancy.

This assessment is based on unflagging optimism. As Narendra Modi's regime appears determined to swamp Kashmir's culture and demographics by an influx of outside settlers and simultaneously spurns civilians who want to chart out a



BORDER SECURITY FORCE personnel with a Pakistani drone, loaded with a sophisticated rifle and some grenades, which they shot down along the border in Kathua on June 20.

democratic campaign to offer resistance, the indispensability of armed insurgents as a countering force is acknowledged in private conversations. People's despair and their helplessness in meeting the challenges posed by New Delhi's militaristic handling of Kashmir is driving them to buy unrealistic assertions about the TRF. The questions being asked are: Will the TRF find support from local Kashmiri people or will it rely on combatants infiltrating from across the border? Can Hizbul Mujahideen survive the unusually aggressive anti-militancy operations? What is Pakistan's game plan at the moment?

TRF NOT ON GROUND

Frontline's investigation, based on interviews and interactions with multiple sources from diverse backgrounds, found that the TRF may not be anything more than a bogey raised by elements within the home-grown militants, either aimed at providing cover to outfits such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) or give a psychological boost to their cadre, at a time when the government forces appear definitive in their proclamations of victory. *Frontline's* investigations, however, also suggest that militancy in Kashmir is not petering out, as actors from across the border are likely focussing on stockpiling and weaponising battle-hardened Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) cadre in the Valley.

As per sources in Jammu and Kashmir's security apparatus, who shared insight on recent militant activities to this reporter, there is "no specific input that the TRF exists on the ground". "We do not consider the TRF as an independent, distinct terror outfit. We do not maintain any separate column for the TRF, to mark terror modules or OGWs [over-ground workers] under it," a source said. According to this source, the Handwara gunfight involved LeT militants, although the TRF claimed responsibility for it.

On May 2, the Army and the Jammu and Kashmir Police launched a joint operation at Changimulla in Handwara town where

militants had held some civilians hostage. Five personnel were killed in an eight-hour long exchange of fire. One of the two militants killed was identified as LeT chief Haider, who hailed from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. However, the source quoted above told this reporter that "both militants could be local". If this is true, then the official version comes under the scanner. Vijay Kumar, Inspector General of Police, Kashmir, while referring to the Handwara encounter during a press meet in Srinagar on May 7, claimed that "the killing of Lashkar commander Haider in the encounter is a big jolt to the group".

Some observers view that the LeT may have floated the TRF to project it as a home-grown outfit and tasked it with giving a Kashmiri signature to terror strikes launched from Pakistan's soil. Pakistan is said to be under increasing pressure from the Financial Action Task Force to contain terrorist modules operating from inside its territory. The sources in the security and intelligence wings in Kashmir find this theory plausible, but in off-the-record conversations they admit that there are little inputs available to make any verifiable claim.

"Most militant activities in the Kashmir Valley are being perpetrated by local recruits in the Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Islamic State, and the LeT, besides the Hizbul. It is unusual that the TRF is trying to appropriate claim," said a source in Jammu and Kashmir's security apparatus. Vijay Kumar had earlier told the media that the TRF drew its cadres from the LeT and the Hizbul Mujahideen. "The TRF is not a new thing. Due to international pressure after the August 5 abrogation of Article 370, Pakistan made a conspiracy, changed the name and floated the TRF to give a local face to militancy and indicate that it has no hand in it," he claimed.

Over the past one year, Pakistan has consistently attempted to frame the Kashmiri resistance as entirely an indigenous one. This is essentially triggered by the current Pakistani regime's realisation that global percep-

tion management *vis-a-vis* its role in Kashmir is a critical component of its warfare against India. "The Indigenous Kashmiri resistance against Indian Occupation is a direct consequence of India's oppression & brutalisation of Kashmiris," tweeted Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan in May.

The early signs of the TRF emerged when the Jammu and Kashmir Police busted an over-ground workers' hideout in Sopore on March 22 and recovered a cache of arms and ammunition that militants had dumped near the Line of Control in Keran. The arrested OGWs said they belonged to the TRF. The TRF also claimed responsibility for the April 5 hand-to-hand combat in Keran which left five infiltrators and as many commandos of the Army's Special Forces dead.

A *Hindustan Times* report recently stated: "TRF is being controlled from Pakistan by top three Lashkar handlers: Sajad Jatt for South Kashmir, Khalid for Central Kashmir and Hanzala Adnan for North Kashmir." On June 1, the TRF, in a statement posted online, broadened its message to encompass a warning against influx of "Indian settlers". "Any Indian who comes with the intention to settle in Kashmir will be treated as an agent of RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh] and not as a civilian and will be dealt with appropriately," it said. The warning was sounded after the Jammu and Kashmir administration relaxed the criteria to qualify as a domicile.

Insiders in the security establishment, however, attribute both the Sopore and Keran incidents to "possibly the LeT". Kashmir's militancy had had similar experiences in the past when amorphous outfits spawned out of nowhere and deployed a stern language of resistance to capture prominence. The Allah Tigers is a case in point. In August 1989, as Kashmir stared at an imminent armed struggle, Allah Tigers' chief, one Air Marshall Noor Khan, announced a ban of cinemas. However, as Yasin Malik's Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, and later the

Hizbul Mujahideen, dominated the fractious theatre of militancy, the euphoria surrounding the Allah Tigers waned, and so did the outfit.

A conversation with senior officials monitoring intelligence in Jammu and Kashmir underscored the point that the LeT had definite presence in the Valley, but its cadre might be operating on its own. "There are not many Pakistani elements in the LeT cadre in Kashmir. My understanding is that the LeT may not be receiving institutional support or directions from handlers across the border. These are mostly groups of local boys who carry out small-scale attacks and disappear because the organisational pattern and allegiance to their parent body based in Pakistan are rapidly getting diluted," an official told *Frontline*.

There could be several explanations for this reported fluctuation in Pakistan's interest in the LeT, though one cannot be categorical about it. One view is that the LeT is more or less independent of the Pakistani establishment and possibly it has "gone out of control" or its "utility is finished for the time being". Others contend that the Pakistan Army and its intelligence agencies are alarmed by the wide outreach of Falah-e-Insaniyat, a charitable organisation run by the LeT, and are unwilling to accord primacy to the LeT, although its "Pakistan-based functionaries continue to drive money from the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence]".

HIZB ON THE WANE

A group of seasoned observers believes that Pakistan is loath to facilitate the Hizbul Mujahideen either. "The Hizbul Mujahideen is definitely on the wane... they are being killed like chicken. This is not just because the Hizb boys are new recruits, inadequately armed and rudimentarily trained, but also because their interface with Pakistan is at an all-time low. They are on their own," a senior Kashmiri scribe writing for international media told this reporter. People within the security establishment mirrored this view.

"Right now, almost all of the

Hizb's cadre is locally recruited," said a source in Jammu and Kashmir's security grid.

After the killing of Riyaz Naikoo on May 6 at Beighpora in an encounter, the Hizbul Mujahideen is facing a leadership crisis. Though Saifullah Mir, a trained pharmacologist, succeeded Naikoo, security analysts aver it would be unrealistic to think the outfit can regroup any time soon. In November, Dilbagh Singh, Director General of Police, Jammu and Kashmir, stated that "terrorism is on its last legs". The numbers do not rebut that claim. While in 2018 as many as 219 local militants were recruited, in 2019, it was down to 119. Compared with 318 terror incidents in 2018, the number was 173 in 2019.

The crackdown on militants continued in 2020, with at least 115 of them eliminated in various encounters since January. In exclusive information available to *Frontline*, the number of local militants active in the Valley is currently around 120. The different wings of the security apparatus diverge on the number of foreign militants in Kashmir, but a rough estimate pegs the number between 50 and 100.

The dwindling numbers are hardly an indicator that battle lines have been redrawn in India's favour. The assessment of the security grid in Jammu and Kashmir is that Pakistan, which imposed restraints on the Jaish-e-Mohammad in April 2019 buckling under international pressure following the Pulwama terror strike in February 2019, drastically reduced them after August 5 as friction over New Delhi's "unilateral action" in Kashmir deviated focus from Islamabad.

The JeM, in the weeks following the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status, iterated its commitment to violent reprisal against India. "There are people who are silent, but doing a great deal," it said in a social media message, attributing the statement to its chief Masood Azhar Alvi.

The rhetoric could not be empty, warn officials in Jammu and Kashmir's intelligence and security grid.

"JeM is sufficiently under the Pakistan Army's control. In the past three years whatever infiltrations were attempted were done mostly by the JeM. It is sending cadre that is well-trained and very close to its leadership," an official pointed out. The JeM cadre, unlike the Hizb militants, possess sophisticated weapons such as M4 sniper rifles and are known to execute high-end, coordinated terror strikes. Despite an apparent fatigue with militancy, as is admitted by Srinagar's intellectual and media elites privately, renewed local support to insurgents is not ruled out in a place where political and economic grievances fester. Jaish's hand was suspected in the foiled attempt of a vehicle-borne IED (improvised explosive device) blast in Rajpora, Pulwama, on May 28. The security grid believes that the May 4 gunfight at Wanigam village in Handwara, in which three personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force died, carried the JeM imprint, though the TRF claimed responsibility for it.

At present, the JeM is reportedly the only outfit in Kashmir that has foreign militants in its ranks. Despite a generally downward curve in cross-border infiltration, the JeM is believed to be steadily pouring into India. In 2019, India estimated that 202 insurgents had crossed the Line of Control. It was a steep decline from 323 in 2018, and 406 in 2017.

A view prevails that there is a qualitative shift in the nature of infiltration. A senior defence expert told *Frontline* that "Pakistan may be focussing on stockpiling and infiltrating higher capacity combatants, as it recalibrates its approach from 'counter-infiltration' to 'defensive territory infiltration', which is to say, in the event of a conflict with India, its assets would be ready to act on its behest."

Attempts to arm JeM foot soldiers in Kashmir are on. As recently as on June 20, in Hiranagar sector of Kathua district, the Border Security Force shot down an eight-foot-wide Pakistani drone, which was on a mission to smuggle weapons inside Kashmir Valley. □

Region of unfreedom

The new media policy in Jammu and Kashmir seeks to kill journalism in the troubled region where the local press continues to be in a state of numbness. BY **ASHUTOSH SHARMA**

SOON after three Associated Press (AP) photojournalists from Jammu and Kashmir were declared winners of the Pulitzer Prize in feature photography in May, the news agency stated in its report that “the story of India’s crackdown on Kashmir last August was difficult to show to the world”. More than 10 months after the Central government unilaterally revoked the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir and divided it into two Union Territories administered amid unprecedented security lockdown and communications restrictions, the challenges for media practitioners in Kashmir have grown manifold. In June, the administration announced a new media policy, which is viewed as an attempt to kill journalism in the troubled region where the local press continues to be in a state of numbness.

Under the new policy, the Union Territory administration through the Directorate of Information and Public Relations could initiate legal action against journalists and regulate advertisements. Since August 5, 2019, the most pressing concern in Srinagar’s media circles has been the informal, and invariably illegal, interrogation of journalists. In the wake of the Narendra Modi government’s coercive handling of the media in Kashmir, observers say, local newspapers changed their style guides and editorial policies, and advised their regular columnists and cartoonists against touching on issues that could invite the government’s ire. The organisations reduced their staff strength drastic-

ally. While most of the organisations struggle to pay salaries, the newspaper columns, observers say, are mostly filled with government press notes, reports of national news agencies or with apolitical articles.

Major rights groups have made scathing observations on the Modi government’s assault on the Kashmiri press. Reacting sharply to the Jammu and Kashmir Police’s charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) against photojournalist Masrat Zahra and the “open FIR” (first information report) against *The Hindu’s* Srinagar-based special correspondent, Peerzada Ashiq, the executive director of Amnesty International India, Avinash Kumar, said in a statement dated April 22: “Harassment and intimidation of journalists through draconian laws such as UAPA threatens the efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic and creates an atmosphere of fear and reprisal. In Kashmir, this has been compounded through the general lockdown, prolonged restrictions on internet speed and arbitrary detentions often without any kind of documentation, access to lawyers and recourse to justice. This severely undermines the human rights guarantees of the people of Kashmir and denies the people in India and around the world’s right to know.”

Peerzada Ashiq was summoned to police stations in two different districts within a span of six hours for writing a story on an encounter at Shopian. He had been summoned to the Kothi Bagh Police Station on

September 1, 2019, and asked to reveal the source of a story that he had reported on political detentions since August 5, 2019. The police had charged Gowhar Geelani, also a journalist, under the UAPA for allegedly posting “anti-national” posts on social media, in April. In September 2019, Geelani was stopped at the Indira Gandhi International airport from travelling to Germany. He said no written order was given to him on why he was stopped.

PRESS CLUB PROTESTS

The Kashmir Press Club has organised several silent protests in recent months against harassment of journalists, the Internet gag and media curbs. Its general secretary, Ishfaq Tantry, said: “Though all governments aim to control the media and the narrative, but I still feel the UPA [United Progressive Alliance government] years were comparatively better as far as media functioning is concerned. This government in an effort to stifle the free press in J&K has resorted to direct attack on the media by summoning journalists for their stories to police stations or by filing cases against them.”

In a charge sheet against a local photojournalist, Kamran Yousuf, who was booked under the UAPA in January 2018, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) observed: “He had never covered any developmental activity of any government department/agency, any inauguration of hospital, school building, road, bridge, statement of political party in power or any other social/



NISSAR AHMAD

AT A NEWS STAND during restrictions in Srinagar in September 2019.

developmental activity by State government or government of India.” In March 2018, the court granted Yousuf bail as the NIA failed to provide evidence against him. According to local reporters who did not wish to be named fearing reprisals, since then the authorities have nearly forced several journalists to disclose their sources, confiscated their laptops and mobile phones, made them fill forms giving details about their family members, relatives and properties, and so on.

Naseer Ganai of *Outlook* was summoned by the police for reporting a statement of the banned separatist organisation, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, in February. In May, Fahad Shah, editor of *Kashmir Walla*, was summoned by the Srinagar Cyber Police Station allegedly in connection with a report on the gunfight between militants and security forces. On November 30 last year, Hakeem Irfan (*The Economic Times*) and Bashaarat Masood (*Indian Express*) were summoned to “Cargo”, a former interrogation centre, where they were reportedly grilled by the police for six to eight hours. On August 14, 2019, Irfan Amin Malik, a local journalist, was picked up from his residence in Tral and released the next day.

Many journalists who were summoned by the police and counter-insurgency forces in recent months refused to even talk over the phone, saying the authorities had put their cell numbers under surveillance. Their fears do not appear unfounded as about a dozen scribes,

including those working for national media from Srinagar, have faced coercive government action for performing their duties. On December 17 last year, Azaan Javaid (*The Print*) and Anees Zargar (*Newslick*) were beaten up by the police in public in Srinagar. On October 30, 2018, Aijaz Ahmad Dar, a videographer with Zee News, was shot with pellets when he was covering a clash between protesters and security personnel in Shopian district. Asif Sultan, an assistant editor with the monthly newsmagazine *Kashmir Narrator*, is in jail since August 27, 2018. He has been charged under the UAPA. Earlier, Qazi Shibli, a south Kashmir-based journalist, was released from the Bareilly district jail, Uttar Pradesh, after charges against him under the Public Safety Act were revoked on April 13. He was arrested in July last year.

Months before its big decision on Kashmir last year, the Modi government had started tightening the noose around leading media houses in the Kashmir Valley. The NIA subjected the editor-in-chief of *Greater Kashmir*, Fayaz Kaloo, to questioning for over a week in July 2019 for articles carried by his paper during the 2016 agitation, which was triggered by the encounter killing of the Hizbul Mujahideen militant Burhan Wani. *Greater Kashmir* was rocked by a wave of layoffs nearly a month before his interrogation. Similarly, the editor of *Kashmir Reader*, Haji Muhammad Hayat Bhat, was investigated by the NIA. The paper has not only reduced the number of

pages from 16 to eight, it has also dropped its editorial page.

Noor Ahmad Baba, former dean, Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Kashmir, said: “The local newspapers used to be vibrant. One would get to read incisive political commentaries and debates—such articles have gone missing. Earlier, I would preserve newspapers to read the fine articles on later occasions. But now I hardly give even a customary look to them, and that too for the general information. Now people read newspapers for official notices, obituaries, exam date sheets, advertisements and tenders—and not for the news stories or analysis.”

Gulzar, a freelance journalist, said: “We get to know about the incidents of human rights violation from national and international media. Reporters are not allowed to document stories describing circumstances that push youth into militancy. The counter-insurgency operations are not reported on the basis of information gathered by journalists with their feet in the mud anymore.”

Pervez Majeed, a former journalist who currently teaches at Government Degree College, Baramulla, said: “As a journalism teacher and media trainer, I now find it difficult to convince my students that journalism is a profession where you can exercise the right to freedom of expression.”

CHANGED MEDIASCAPE

Well before the COVID-19 lockdown, Majeed said: “When Kashmir was put under security lockdown last year, many newspapers stopped production for some time. But none of them commented on the abrogation of the State’s special status or reported mass arrests that followed. During the curfew, people couldn’t avail themselves of health care and emergency services. Educational institutions were shut for a prolonged period. Such critical issues failed to make headlines. Those events were reported only on the basis of information extracted from press notes. We have not seen a single article in the local press criticising the new domi-

cile laws and introduction of new administrative policies.”

Commenting on the changed mediascape, Prof Hameeda Nayeem, a political commentator and professor at the University of Kashmir, said: “We are under siege. Everything has been militarised and every voice has been silenced. Thoughts and ideas have been criminalised. There are tacit instructions to the media that they cannot touch the untouchable realities. There are columnists who have been told to either stop writing or write on soft issues. Dissenting voices were subjected to forced disappearance from newspapers months before August 5 as they (authorities) were preparing the ground for larger political changes.”

Bashir Manzar, editor of *Kashmir Images*, said: “What happened last year has completely changed the politics of Kashmir. Those who say that newspapers are not raising the banner of protest must understand that newspapers are just messengers. After August 5, nothing happened on the ground. Some protests were reported. Leaders of big political parties like the National Conference, the Peoples Democratic Party and the Peoples Conference were detained. We reported. How many protests political parties have held in Kashmir against the August 5 government move? Not many. It’s wrong to expect newspapers to do what political parties and society is supposed to do. I have 40-plus employees. Why should I do something that gives the government a reason to stop my publication? All of them will lose their jobs.”

Nazim Nazir, associate editor of *Tameel-i-Irshad*, a Srinagar-based Urdu daily, said: “Ever since the revocation of J&K’s special status, just like other local newspapers, we pass off general appeals as editorials. The editorial standards die on almost a daily basis.... The press notes that are critical of the government are censored. After the State government’s Department of Information and Public Relations and the Central government’s Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity cut advertisements to our newspaper by nearly

80 per cent, we had to lay off half of our staff last year.”

Maintaining that the Urdu press was bearing the brunt of the financial crisis, he said: “Before August 5 last year, we used to publish 60,000 copies daily. Then we reduced the number to 15,000. Today, we are mostly active on social media and circulate a few hard copies, nearly 2,000, in a few pockets of Srinagar.”

Anuradha Bhasin, executive editor of *Kashmir Times*, who had challenged the “communications restrictions” and “media gag” in the Supreme Court last August, said: “The government did not implement the judgment in its true spirit. It was selectively followed as far as restoration of Internet services was concerned. Moreover, it did not have any impact on the overall status of the local press. Due to heavy-handed policies of the government, the voices of the local population are completely missing from the local press. There is no scope for any critique of the government actions at present.” The Kashmir Times group of publications had to close down its Dogri and Hindi editions in 2018 following complete stoppage of government advertisements. Describing the new media policy as “constitutionally untenable”, she said, “it is aimed at intimidating journalists and killing journalism.”

Yusuf Jameel, a Srinagar-based senior journalist, said: “Now the police are deciding here whether a certain news item is fake or not. And then they proceed against you under whatever law. That’s our major concern. It’s infringement on the right to freedom of expression and, therefore, unacceptable to us. In the past also we have raised our voice against media repression but nobody listened to us barring some exceptions. Ironically, even the Press Council of India supported the government on communications restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir in the Supreme Court last year.”

Commenting on how the Modi government’s coercive handling of the media in Kashmir is different from that of the UPA era curbs, Yusuf Jameel said: “The local press

in Kashmir has been working under tremendous pressure since 1990. We have lost 18-19 journalists to the conflict. The warring groups would try to browbeat us when militancy was at its peak. Earlier also governments had adopted coercive measures but only a couple of newspapers faced problems and cases against journalists were registered in isolated cases. But now everything is open. There is a climate of fear and self-censorship. It’s an altogether different world. And this situation is not just restricted to Jammu and Kashmir. The story of the media and the judiciary is now almost the same when compared with the rest of the country.”

Reacting to the new media policy, Ishfaq Tantry, said: “If this policy remains unchallenged, a government clerk may decide who should be a journalist in J&K. It is unheard of that for becoming a journalist or to get accreditation, one needs to get the security clearance first. The need of the hour is for all journalists, editors and newspaper owners to come forward and devise a joint response. The Press Council of India has taken cognisance of the issue after we brought it to its notice.”

Mohammed Yousuf Tarigami, leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), said: “The new policy makes it amply clear that the government does not want journalists [to be] answerable to their readers and editors. It authorises bureaucrats and security officials to decide whether a news item is “fake, unethical and plagiarised” or “anti-national” before taking legal action against journalists and media organisations. It is part of the pattern wherein the authorities have been using harassment, intimidation, surveillance and online information control to silence critical voices and force journalists to self-censorship.”

Demanding that the new media policy be rolled back immediately, he said: “A free media can help the government take the right action more effectively than sunshine stories. Newspapers in Kashmir unfortunately look like government gazettes now, reminding us of the Emergency era.” □

Power play

The proposals in the Electricity (Amendment) Bill to “reform” the power sector, issued in the midst of a pandemic, threaten to result in higher energy costs, violate long-cherished principles of federalism, and leave India’s most vulnerable to the caprices of the market.

BY TEJAL KANITKAR

THE power sector was one of the first sectors to fall under the onslaught of the economic liberalisation programme initiated in 1991. Beginning rather inauspiciously with the Enron scandal in the early 1990s, the sector has seen many changes since then. After a prolonged lull, higher private investments in power generation have been made and, more recently, a sharp increase in renewable energy generation. However, in many other respects, the “reforms” that were introduced towards the end of the 20th century, and consolidated in the Electricity Act 2003, have not only failed to provide succour to the sector that has been mired in a perpetual state of crisis, but have considerably worsened that crisis.

The Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, (EAB), 2020, ostensibly seeks to address the failure of the reform attempts of the past by re-emphasising the original plan laid out in the Electricity Act, 2003, by the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. It seeks to redress what are seen as “populist dilutions” of the spirit of the reforms by the first United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government as well as many State governments.

The timing of the release of the EAB is itself striking. Curiously, it was notified by the Ministry of Power on April 17, seeking comments, when the country was in the midst of a

debilitating lockdown.

There are three major policies that the EAB seeks to push: i) Privatising the electricity distribution companies (DISCOMs) through the introduction of distribution sub-licences and franchisees; ii) Eliminating cross-subsidies and introducing Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to support consumers that State governments may want to directly subsidise iii) Increasing the control of the Central government in the sector by a series of amendments aimed at administrative and regulatory restructuring of State-level institutions.

A major objective of the power



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

A WORKER installing the aerial fibre optic project, interlinked to the network of the two discoms in Andhra Pradesh, a file photograph.

sector reforms, which remains unachieved despite repeated attempts over the last 30 years, is the privatisation of the distribution segment of the power system. The erstwhile electricity boards were unbundled into generation, transmission, and distribution companies to facilitate privatisation. In many States, the distribution companies (DISCOMS), which deal with the low voltage (that is, less than 11 kilovolt) infrastructure and metering and billing of end users, were further divided into multiple companies in charge of smaller areas within a State. However, other than in Odisha, Delhi and Mumbai, no other distribution utility could be privatised. Fierce opposition by peasants, power sector workers and even ordinary domestic consumers forced many State governments to hastily scuttle any plans they might have had to privatise this politically important segment of the power sector.

Amongst the ones that did privatise distribution utilities, only Odisha had a large section of rural consumers, and, after multiple failed attempts at private management, electricity distribution has now reverted to the State government. Mumbai and Delhi also have a long history of problems with tariff-setting and power-procurement practices despite being urban agglomerations without the potentially sensitive agrarian reaction to

contend with. Moreover, the financial health of DISCOMs that remained state-owned entities has suffered because of the spatial breakdown that was forced on them.

Private companies in general are not interested in supplying electricity to the entire area serviced by a DISCOM, which generally includes rural consumers as well. So state-run utilities are encouraged to also sub-contract out a section of the network to private companies or other agencies, ostensibly to improve efficiency and reduce losses. These agencies, called distribution franchisees, have been tried out in various regions of the country after the Electricity Act 2003.

Predictably, in the first set of experiments with distribution franchisees, private companies were interested in urban agglomerations only. Despite such cherry-picking, the model did not work. While billing and collection efficiency improved in some regions, most franchisees could barely break even and many opted to not extend the contract beyond the first period of franchise. Although these entities could hope for marginal gains from improved billing efficiencies, reducing line losses required capital expenditure, which made the whole idea unattractive for most private companies.

The push for distribution franchisees once again in the EAB, despite this experience, is therefore not based on evidence but on an ideological position that prefers privatisation over public service provision. The EAB also introduces a “distribution sub-licencee”, somewhat ambiguously differentiated from a distribution franchisee as mentioned in the Bill. Neither entity would require a separate licence to distribute electricity and the outcome of both are likely to be similar. There will be cherry-picking; the more attractive urban regions will be privatised, leaving the loss-making rural segments to the state-owned DISCOMs. This may even lead to a further deterioration of the conditions of power supply to rural areas.

The single-minded focus on

privatising DISCOMs despite widespread protests from power sector unions, peasant organisations and consumer societies has been justified by citing the sorry state of DISCOM finances and the ever-increasing cost of power supply. However, what is forgotten in the harangue of the “inefficient” and “corrupt” DISCOMs is that power procurement costs, that is, costs to be paid to electricity generators, constitute more than 80 per cent of the total cost of electricity supply. Transmission and distribution charges account for less than 20 per cent of the all costs.

DISCOMS' WOES

One may argue that since DISCOMs decide how much power to procure and from where, they should be held responsible for buying expensive power. But this assumption is faulty because it ignores the fact that DISCOMs have no choice in the matter.

There are structural reasons for high procurement costs, beginning with the power sector reforms themselves, and going on to the poor policy choices made in the corridors of power in Delhi in the past. In the last several years, there has been a consistent mismatch between the projected and actual demand for power. The Central Electricity Authority (CEA), an agency under the control of the Central government, has made grossly inaccurate projections. Shockingly, its forecast of demand for 2019-20 was 40 per cent higher (almost 70 GW) than the actual demand. These exaggerated forecasts have had serious consequences. Many currently operational long-term power purchase agreements (PPAs) between generating companies (NTPC being the primary beneficiary) and DISCOMs are based on these dubious forecasts.

The woes of DISCOMs do not end here. Generating companies that have a PPA with a DISCOM are allowed to recover “capacity charges”, that is, the capital expenditure incurred to build the power plant, from the DISCOM, irrespective of the actual amount of electricity being drawn. In a period of low power demand, DISCOMs sell less power to

end users and therefore buy less power from generation companies. This leads to low variable costs, that is, cost of generating the required units of power. However, the DISCOMs must still pay a fixed charge so that the generator can pay back the banks which financed the project. For example, NTPC recovered Rs.4,800 crore in capacity charges in 2018-19 from DISCOMs in southern India for its new thermal power plant in Kudgi even though the plant operated at only 22 per cent of its capacity during the year. Such practices impose costs on DISCOMs that arise from circumstances entirely outside their control. How can they then be dubbed inefficient?

On the other hand, newly constructed power plants that do not have agreements with DISCOMs are fast turning into non-performing assets (NPAs) for the banks that financed them. The economic downturn, which is highlighted by poor offtake of power from these plants, has thus hit banks as well, mostly publicly owned ones.

Additionally, the increasing contribution of renewable energy, fostered by fiscal and other incentives, has contributed to the woes of DISCOMs. Solar and wind energy sources are exempt from merit order dispatch; energy offtake from these plants is not dictated by their price. All the electricity generated by renewable energy plants must be absorbed by DISCOMs, irrespective of cost. Although the recent reduction in the price of solar energy has come as a relief, one must remember that the DISCOMs must compulsorily buy not just the new, relatively cheaper, solar energy, but also energy generated by older, more expensive plants.

In Tamil Nadu for example, 1061 Mega Watt (MW) of solar energy was installed before March 2016. Electricity from these plants is bought by distribution utilities at Rs.7 per kilowatt-hour (kWh). In sharp contrast, the solar plants installed after March 2019, with a capacity of about 800 MW, cost just Rs.3.05 per kWh. The policy-induced inefficiency means that the state has to forego cheaper



THE NTPC balancing reservoir where the proposed largest floating solar power plant is to come up in Ramagundam in Telangana.

thermal power even when it is available in order to purchase all of the expensive solar power from older plants.

It must be noted that DISCOMS have not been given relief from this policy even during the nationwide lockdown, just as they received no support to cover their revenue losses. The Centre has offered loans (Rs.90,000 crore liquidity infusion for the power sector), backed by state guarantees, for the express purpose of paying dues to generators. These loans, which are to be given by the Power Finance Corporation (PFC) and the Rural Electrification Corporation (REC), have been made conditional on so many pre-requisites, in addition to requiring state guarantees, that the PFC, not surprisingly, has said that this Rs.90,000 crore “relief” is likely to be under-utilised by DISCOMS.

To sum up, power procurement costs are high not because of the DISCOMS’ inefficiency but because of consequences that arise from a series of policies forced on them. The DISCOMS can be held accountable for basing their power procurement plans on over-optimistic demand forecasts made by the CEA. But should not those making such forecasts be held accountable when their forecasts go awry?

These high costs are passed on to end users, and here DISCOMs are

held responsible for inefficient metering and billing, high technical losses, and their inability to recover the cost of electricity that is supplied. High AT&C (Aggregate and Technical and Commercial) losses have been a perennial problem in India. Despite multiple interventions, including the much-welcomed UDAY scheme (Ujjwal DISCOM Assurance Yojana), they remain unaddressed.

SUBSIDIES AND DBT

There are multiple issues here. The cost of supplying electricity to low-density rural areas is high. The multiple step-down transformers and long low-tension lines required to supply electricity for agricultural, domestic and other uses in rural areas necessarily result in higher costs. Technical losses in these distribution lines are also high (as resistive losses are inversely proportional to line voltage). On the contrary, supplying electricity to high voltage consumers is cheaper, and densely populated cities with more diversified power consumption patterns can be supplied power at a lower cost.

Moreover, a large section of rural consumers as well as poor households in urban areas are unable to pay the full cost of electricity. So the conundrum for DISCOMS is this: they have to supply electricity to consumers who are expensive to serve

but who also cannot afford to pay the full cost of electricity. This makes subsidies necessary. There are two ways of subsidising the cost of supply to consumers: i) cross subsidisation, which means that one category of consumers pays a higher than average tariff to compensate for another category paying lower tariff, and ii) direct subsidies by the State government to compensate the DISCOM for power supply to those consumers it deems worthy of support.

The new amendment seeks to eliminate subsidies in both forms. It has proposed that the State Electricity Regulatory Commissions should decide category-wise tariffs, strictly based on cost to supply power to that category, without considering any subsidies. While the EAB refers differentially to direct and cross subsidy rather ambiguously, the overall idea appears to be to eliminate cross subsidies and replace them with direct subsidies to specifically targeted consumers.

Additionally, direct subsidies must now be transferred by State governments directly to consumers using the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme.

Poor consumers—residential, agricultural, and providers of basic amenities such as public health centres and government schools—form a significant proportion of electricity users in most States and cannot afford to pay high costs for electricity.

Most of them currently consume

electricity at rates that are cross-subsidised. A report on the performance of state power utilities published by the PFC has estimated that if all this cross subsidy were to be replaced by direct subsidies, the subsidy burden on the States would increase by about 130 per cent.

Given the parlous state of States' finances, expecting them to bear this additional burden is to expect the impossible. States, already reeling under the impact of the dramatic collapse of their revenues, especially under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, are clearly in no position to provide the additional support to DISCOMS.

The resort to the DBT, touted as the panacea for all subsidy-related ills, is likely to exacerbate problems. The poorest consumers of electricity are likely to be affected the most. Administering DBT is difficult, especially with poor information and huge data gaps that inevitably lead to late and ineffective disbursement of benefits, if at all.

The All India Kisan Sabha has drawn attention to the fact that DBT will be meaningless for a majority of "real cultivators"—the landless, the tenants and sharecroppers—because only landowners and pump-set owners would be eligible for the subsidies. This would also apply to working-class households that live on rented premises.

DBT also adds an unnecessary administrative burden. For instance, DBT will require the government to build a database of details of beneficiaries. Currently, subsidy benefits for many consumer categories vary on the basis of actual consumption. The government will thus have to update its database regularly (every month, in fact), aligning it with information from the DISCOMS. If at all benefits to certain consumers must be re-examined, say because of improved economic status, it is much easier to do so within the existing framework, that is, by transferring subsidies directly to the utilities. Timely disbursement of dues by State governments has been a major problem in the past. The distressing fiscal situation is likely to only make mat-

ters worse. It is reasonable to assume that under the new administrative regime, transfer of benefits will either not happen in time or not happen at all. In effect, those who need support most are likely to be left in the lurch.

CENTRALISATION OF POWER

The power sector remains one of the few sectors that still contribute to State finances. Responsible for an important input for industrial development, the sector has a significant role in shaping state policy. Nevertheless, the geographic distribution of primary energy sources, both conventional and renewable, makes it incumbent on the Centre to play the critical role of coordinator in order to ensure equitable access to national resources. This is the reason why the sector is appropriately in the concurrent list of the Constitution. However, there is little doubt that the proposed amendments will disproportionately increase the Centre's control over the sector in violation of constitutional safeguards.

A common central committee is to be set up for the appointment of the chairman and members of State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERC), the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission, the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity, and the new proposed Contract Enforcement Authority. The composition of the committee will be such that the Centre will have a stronger voice simply by dint of bureaucratic seniority. This flies in the face of all established norms of impartial selection processes, especially for membership in institutions that are expected to perform quasi-judicial functions.

A slew of other amendments have been proposed that will give Central and regional institutions, such as Regional Load Dispatch Centres, far more powers over DISCOMS. The most aggressive step in the ongoing attempt to wrest control from States is the proposed creation of a new Electricity Contract Enforcement Authority (ECEA). This centrally appointed authority will be in charge of ensuring the "sanctity" of contracts, even if iniquitous, a task

that was heretofore assigned to the SERC. This is likely to benefit private generating companies, renewable or otherwise, while further reducing any impartial recourse to regulatory authorities that the DISCOMS may have had.

The Narendra Modi government has been trying to push these amendments in the power sector since 2014. However, it has faced opposition from State governments and labour unions. It is particularly disingenuous to try to bulldoze these changes during a national health emergency that has been compounded by a severe recession. It is ironic that the set of proposals, instead of offering relief in these dark times, is likely to only offer more misery.

The abiding lesson of the last 30 years of reforms in the power sector is that the fetish of allowing the free and unhindered play of markets as a solution to problems can only have disastrous social and economic consequences. Electricity is unlike other commodities. It is a key economic input across the economy; but even more importantly, its consumption is critical for human well-being. Ironically, the reforms, undertaken in the name of shedding inefficiencies—measured by the logic of the market in terms of prices—will have one certain consequence: a steep increase in electricity prices. How can a set of reforms, undertaken in the name of improving efficiencies, but which results in much higher prices, be termed efficient?

The centrality of electricity as a critical input is the reason why State governments feel obligated to expand access to power, by means of subsidies if necessary, in order to make it available to all for productive activity as well as for consumption. The derisive dismissal of the political exigency of providing cheap electricity as "populism" ignores the expectation of the polity that the state safeguard and promote production and consumption of electricity across a badly divided economy and society. □

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Against all reason

The Central government appears determined to auction off the country's coal resources **despite the widespread opposition** to it and the fact that the human and environmental costs of opening up the coal mining sector to commercial exploitation far outweigh the benefits.

BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

IN one of the biggest protest actions during the lockdown, five and a half lakh coal workers of Coal India Limited (CIL), a public sector undertaking, and Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), which is jointly owned by the Union government and the government of Telangana, will go on strike for three days from July 2 to protest against the decision of the National Democratic Alliance government to auction 41 coal blocks and open the coal sector for commercial mining.

The unions spearheading the strike are the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the Indian National Trade Union Congress, the All India Trade Union Congress, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha and the All India Coordination Committee of Trade Unions. The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, which is the trade union affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, has lent its support to the strike. The protest will also involve the five recognised coal worker federations. On June 26, former Member of Parliament and Telangana Rashtra Samithi leader K. Kavitha led a protest of the Telangana Boggu Gani Karmika Sangham, the union of SCCL workers.

This will be the second protest by coal sector workers in less than a month. On June 10, 1.5 lakh coal workers in all the 535 collieries spread over eight coal-bearing States and offices of subsidiaries of CIL and

SSCL held a one-day protest against a coal block auction scheduled for June 11. The government called off the auction process, but in less than a week it went back to its original plan.

The government also decided that the Central Mine Planning and Design Institute, a fully owned subsidiary of CIL, should be made independent of CIL in order to make its consultancy services available to private miners, a decision unions oppose. The 41 coal blocks up for auction include both fully explored and partially explored mines and four coking coal mines, all of them located

in the States of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha. Not only coal workers but also the governments of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra have objected to the auction on various grounds.

The trigger for the three-day protest was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's launching of the process to auction coal blocks for commercial mining through a videoconference on June 18. The move, he said, would free "the coal sector from decades of lockdown". The actual e-auction will take place in August, said



PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi launching the auction process of coal blocks through videoconference in New Delhi on June 18.

PIB/PTI



AT THE GEVRA coal mines in Chhattisgarh, a 2009 picture.

RUPAK DE CHOWDHURI/REUTERS

D.D. Ramanandan, president of the All India Coal Workers' Federation. "This is to give time to the bidders, most of whom are reluctant to invest due to problems relating to land issues and opposition from workers," he told *Frontline* over telephone from Ranchi. It was, he said, a free-for-all. Anyone could bid for the auction, whether they had mining experience or not.

Both CIL and SCCL together accounted for 92 per cent of India's coal output. In 2019, the government took two major decisions: allowing 100 per cent foreign direct investment in coal and allowing commercial mining. The auction process could not be held that year because of resistance from workers. The lockdown has given the government an opportunity to push the auction through.

The Prime Minister's announcement was part of a series of announcements under the government's self-reliance movement, or Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan. This, he explained, would reduce India's dependence on imports for its energy requirements and generate lakhs of jobs for the youth. Apart from officials from the Coal Ministry, representatives of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), including its president, and of industrial groups such as Vedanta and Tata Sons were present at the June 18 videoconference. While the representative of Tata Sons remarked that the decision was "one of the big stepping stones towards our journey towards a \$5 trillion economy", the

FICCI president called it a "landmark reform" that would "unlock the country's natural resources, stimulate the economy and catalyse India's path to a \$5 trillion economy".

In his address on the occasion, Modi said State governments would get more revenue and that the coal sector reforms would make eastern and central India, the tribal belts in particular, "pillars of development". Both regions had a number of aspirational districts and had not been able to reach the "desired levels of progress and prosperity", he said. The NITI Aayog had categorised some 117 districts in the country as "aspirational districts" on the basis of their socio-economic indicators. There were 16 such aspirational districts, Modi said, that had huge coal reserves but the people there had not been able to get the benefit of the coal stocks.

The coal blocks auction would contribute substantively to projected coal production in 2025-26 and generate employment for 2.8 lakh people. Ramanandan told *Frontline* that private players would cut costs, steal coal from CIL mines and pay workers less. "Anyone who has a *gutka* business can start a coal mine under the new rules," he said. The figures of projected employment were exaggerated he said. Even if employment was generated, it would be exploitative and workers would be made to work for 12 hours or more. "They postponed the auction on June 11 because there were no bidders. We protested, too, but they called it off because there were few takers. It takes five years to develop a block. No

businessman will take that risk. Besides a shift to renewable forms of energy has begun the world over," he said. The government also decided to spend Rs.50,000 crore to create infrastructure for coal extraction and transportation, which, according to the Prime Minister, would also create employment opportunities. Pralhad Joshi, Union Minister for Coal and for Mines, praised CIL for playing a key role in the energy sector and said that the production from all coal mines had registered a quantum jump in the last six years. The auction methodology and laws for commercial mining had been framed, Pralhad Joshi claimed, with "thorough stakeholder involvement". The blocks had been identified after public consultation, he said and added that this was the "best time for private companies to enter the mining sector".

Opposition to the auctioning of blocks and commercial mining has been widespread. In the second week of June, the sarpanchs of nine gram panchayats representing 25 villages in the Hasdeo Forest gram sabha area in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, wrote to the Prime Minister saying that the land and forests represented *atmanirbharta* for them and that by auctioning mining blocks to corporate entities, the government was helping private companies become self-reliant. They wrote that they were opposed to the auction process started on June 18 and reminded the Prime Minister that all the areas in the Hasdeo Forest were protected under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution, the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

They also reminded Modi that when the government attempted a similar auction of coal blocks in 2015, 20 gram sabhas had passed a resolution opposing it and had informed his office about it. They wrote that they had remained consistent in their opposition but, with the lockdown in effect, could not convene a gram sabha. However, on the basis of discussions with tribal people and forest dwellers, it could be said that they were still opposed to the auction



PTI

EMPLOYEES of Bharat Coking Coal at Jharia in Jharkhand during a token strike by coal workers on September 24, 2019.

and were determined not to give permission for mining, which was a legal requirement. A copy of the representation (in Hindi) is with *Frontline*.

Expressing astonishment, they wrote that despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, six mining blocks from their area were listed for auctioning. They reminded the Prime Minister about the eco-sensitive nature of the zone, which they said had been described in official documents as the “lungs of Chhattisgarh” as it had diverse flora and fauna, including a substantial elephant population. In 2010, the Hasdeo Forest area was declared a “no-go” zone as far as mining was concerned. They wrote that 18 out of 20 blocks came under the “inviolable” policy of the present government and that the maximum of “inviolable blocks” were in the Hasdeo Forest area. The “inviolable policy” being referred to was introduced in 2015, in Modi’s first tenure as Prime Minister, and it involved developing parameters to designate as “inviolable” forest areas that were critical habitats. On June 20, Mohammad Akbar, the Chhattisgarh Forest and Environment Minister, wrote to the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change about the increasing instances of man-animal conflict in the Hasdeo Forest areas and how mining would worsen the situation for both man and animal alike. On the same day, Chief Minister Hemant Soren of Jharkhand tagged the Coal Ministry and the Prime Minis-

ter’s Office in a tweet saying: “the decision to go ahead with commercial mining and coal block auctions without acknowledging our concerns around the potential socio-economic and environment costs and the impact on our forests and tribal population is a blatant disregard of co-operative federalism.” The same day, the Jharkhand government moved the Supreme Court challenging the virtual auction process on several grounds. First, the auctions were being held even though the Mineral Laws (Amendment) Act, 2020, had lapsed on May 14. (The Act amended the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, and the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015, allowing companies with no prior mining experience to participate in the auction of coal and lignite blocks. It liberalised the mining sector, allowing for the allocation of coal blocks in a wide geographical area. It also liberalised the criteria for participation in an auction process and licensing processes.) Second, what could be done in “Schedule Areas” falling under the State *vis-a-vis* the limitations specified in the Constitution needed to be factored in. Third, there was a need for a fair assessment of the social and environmental impact on the huge “tribal population” and vast tracts of “forest lands” of the State and on the residents who were likely to be adversely affected. Four, the negative global investment climate prevailing because of COVID-19 was

unlikely to fetch reasonable returns proportionate to the value of the scarce natural resource through the impugned auctions for commercial coal mining. Five, the constitutional and statutory rights of the petitioner, that is, the State as a lessor flowing out of the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, which has been placed at Serial Number 1 of Schedule IX of the Constitution, needed to be considered.

Addressing the media, Hemant Soren said that the decision to auction the coal blocks appeared to be an individual one and one-sided. The State government should have been consulted, he said, as mining was a sensitive topic in the State. He said that it appeared that there was an attempt to go back to the “old system”. “There should have been a survey of the benefits of mining in the State,” he said, adding that the Central government appeared to be in a hurry. Responding to a question, he said that the hurry could be because a few corporate houses had the government in their stranglehold. He expressed surprise that the government expected investors to come when the whole world was going through lockdowns and people were unable to travel, demand was at an all-time low and there was a marked slowdown in business.

Others echoed Hemant Soren’s sentiments. On June 22, Aaditya Thackeray, Minister of Tourism and Environment in the Maharashtra government, tweeted that he had written to Union Minister for Environment and Forest Prakash Javadekar opposing the proposed auction of a mine site near the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. “We cannot have the destruction of our wildlife corridors,” he tweeted.

The human and environmental costs of opening up the coal mining sector to commercial exploitation far outweigh the benefits and that is one of the main reasons for the opposition to it from the real stakeholders of the sector and the environment. The morality of pushing through the auction process when huge parts of the country are still battling COVID-19 is the other dimension to the government’s decision. □

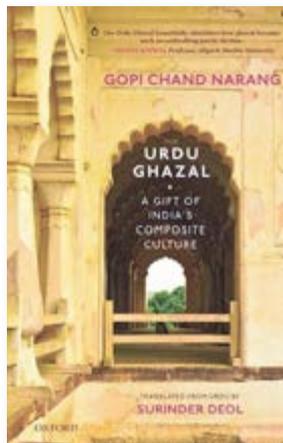
Story of ghazal

A comprehensive tribute to Urdu ghazals and the cross-cultural roots of the **enthraling poetic form**. BY **A.J. THOMAS**

“THE ghazal is a marvel of the magnetic dynamism of *husn o i’shq* (beauty and love) in highly charged metaphoric idiom. It is a celebration of love and freedom in an ambience of pure ecstasy and unremitting joy as well as profound capacity for enduring pain and suffering. The ghazal is the soul of Urdu poetry and the play of creativity at its peak.” This is how the author Gopi Chand Narang opens the preface to his monumental work, *The Urdu Ghazal: A Gift of India’s Composite Culture*.

The book is not a mere monograph on the Urdu ghazal, but a detailed inquiry into the beginnings of the form in Persian, the dawn of Sufism and its spread to India, the composite culture which developed in India through the marriage of Sufi mysticism and the Bhakti movement towards the end of the first millennium C.E. that nourished it, and its journey through the second millennium C.E. and its position now in the third.

Although there are many books dwelling technically on the ghazal form, from the scholarly *Hazaron Khawaishe Aisi: The Wonderful World of Urdu Ghazals* by Anisur Rahman to the handbook,



**The Urdu Ghazal
A Gift of India’s
Composite Culture**

By Gopi Chand Narang (translated from the Urdu by Surinder Deol)
Oxford India, New Delhi, 2020. Library Edition
Pages: 499+x
Price: Rs.1,395

The Art and Science of Urdu Ghazal, by Elizabeth Kurian ‘Mona’, the scope of Professor Narang’s volume far exceeds them. His deep erudition and life-long passion for the Urdu language and its literature shine through the work.

The Urdu Ghazal is a timely contribution to our era when language and literature are marked and tracked by religious and communal identities, losing sight of the underlying humanity of Urdu ghazals.

AMIR KHUSRAU

The book primarily concentrates on the “cross-cultural roots of the Urdu ghazal”.

From the 11th century C.E., Islamic culture and Hindu culture commingled in the Indian territories, and the resulting

composite culture captivated millions of people down the centuries. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), disciple of the Chisti Sufi saint of Delhi, Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, was a poet and musician who wrote in Persian and then in the hybrid proto-model of Hindustani, his mother tongue, which he called Hindavi. (His father was a Turkish courtier and his mother was a Rajput). When he mixed Persian to the ghazals that he wrote in Hindavi and sang them in Sufi gatherings, this language became known as Rekhta.

The Muslim rulers who extended their reign to Gujarat and the Deccan took this hybrid language along, which was called Gujarati in Gujarat and Dakhani in Deccan.

This is the same lan-

guage that was called Hindavi, Hindustani, Urdu, Urdu-e Mualla and Hindi.

Amir Khusrau was the first poet who pioneered folk genres such as *doha*, *paheli*, *geet*, *qaul*, *quallaba*, and invented the passionate, soulful song form *qawwali*, in which he sang his ghazals in the Persian-Rekhta mix form.

The ghazal form became quickly accepted in the languages allied to Urdu such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Saraiki and Baluchi and a neighbouring language like Kashmiri, a form in which many modern-day poets such as Sunita Raina Pandit are specialising; it has greatly influenced several Indian languages such as Bengali, Gujarati, Odia, Telugu and Kannada. H.S. Shivaprakash and a few other Kannada poets are known for their ghazals in that language.

Poets writing ghazals in the English language—ranging from stalwarts such as Aga Shahid Ali, to young ones such as Maaz Bin Bilal and Asiya Zahoor—have enriched the genre. Nepali and Sinhalese languages also boast of the ghazal form in their poetry.

The ghazal has conquered the popular imagination through films

for almost a century now. Narang points out that “besides the wonder-world of metaphorical meaning and beauty, reality and non-reality, it has its magical innate musicality.” This quality makes the genre exclusively suitable for singing. Begum Akhtar, Kamla Jhariya, K.L. Saigal, Mehdi Hassan, Ustad Amanat Ali Khan, Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Farida Khanum, Jagjit Singh and others have made astute use of the ghazal form to hold millions in successive generations in thrall, observes Narang.

STRANDS OF HINDAVI

Three main strands of the Urdu language, past its stage as Hindavi, determined by geographical and demographical factors at its earliest stage of development, can be observed: Dakhani (of the Deccan), Dehlavi (of Delhi) and Lakhnavi (of Lucknow), not necessarily in a linear development, but with inevitable overlaps in time.

The earliest Urdu poets who developed the ghazal were Dakhani poets such as Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutub Shah, the illustrious ruler of the Qutub Shahi dynasty of Hyderabad, Deccan (1565-1612), Mulla Wajhi (early 17th century), Mulla Nusrati, Daem Gawwasi (both 17th century), Wali Mohammad Wali (Wali Dakhani-1667-1707) and Siraj Aurangabadi (1715-1763).

Dakhani poetry is characterised by its absorption of local words, similes and metaphors. This was because the royal patrons of this language were really sons of the soil



AMIR KHUSRAU.

who loved their land. Another factor was the pervasive Mughal presence in south India during the heyday of that empire. Ideas from the south travelled north, and vice versa. Wali adopted all these into his poetry; his was a presence much awaited in Delhi poetry circles, when he made his periodical visits. Wali's contribution is considered decisive in the development of the Urdu language as well. It was Wali's *diwans* (poetry collections), circulated widely in Delhi circles, which persuaded many contemporary poets to switch over from the courtly Persian to people's Urdu.

Although several Delhi Urdu poets continued in the line of Amir Khusrau, most of them confined their creative writing to *Sabke Hindi* (Indianised Persian). Wali drew them towards Urdu, which was

until then primarily Dakhani. The ghazal further developed in the hands of poets of the northern plains—Dehlavi and Lakhnavi. It took at least three centuries after Khusrau to see the rise of a great poet like Sauda in Delhi (1713-1781). But Delhi being the main theatre of wars of invasion, like the repeated depredations of Ahmad Shah Abdali and Nadir Shah, most of the Urdu poets of Delhi moved to the next relatively peaceful royal haven, the court of the Nawab of Awadh, in Lucknow. Thus, most of the great Dehlavis are also Lakhnavis by default. The best example of this phenomenon is Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810) of Delhi and Lucknow. He was born in Agra, grew up and flourished in Delhi and shifted to Lucknow when Ahmed Shah Abdali attacked Delhi. Kwaja Mir Dard (1720-1785) was a Naqshbandi-Mujaddadi Sufi saint and lived in Delhi. It was Ghulam Hamdani 'Mas'hafi' (1751-1844) of Lucknow who coined the name “Urdu” by shortening *Zaban-i-Ordu*, which was the common name for the language known as Hindustani/Hindvi/Hindi/Dakhani or Rekhta and colloquially called Lashkarizaban or simply Lashkari. Momin Khan Momin (1800-1851) of Delhi was a poet, writer

and *hakim* (physician). Mirza Ghalib (1797-1868), the last of the great classicists who actually represents all Urdu-speaking regions, though born in Agra had lived in Delhi from the age of 13, and was associated with the Mughal court.

Sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Zauq (1790-1854), a contemporary of Ghalib, was appointed poet laureate at the age of 19. He was the Ustad of Bahadur Shah “Zafar” (1775-1862), the last Mughal Emperor and also an Urdu poet and ghazal writer. Daagh Dehlavi (1831-1905) and Altaf Hussain Hali (born in 1837 in Panipat and died there in 1914) were the last of the great poets of Delhi who lived through the First War of Independence of 1857, and contributed significantly to the genre of the Urdu ghazal into the early 20th century.

The 20th century saw eminent Urdu poets who used the ghazal form for socio-political and cultural themes of the times such as nationalism, independence struggle, progressivism, resistance and protest. Special mention should be made here of how the Urdu ghazal during this period contributed to the revolutionary Progressive Writers' Movement by incorporating epistemological and ideolo-

The Urdu ghazal contributed to the Progressive Writers' Movement by incorporating epistemological and ideological shifts on a global level, later progressing into modernism and postmodernism.

logical shifts on a global level, later progressing into modernism and post-modernism.

The book pays tribute to the Urdu ghazal in a comprehensive fashion. It is divided into three parts: Part I is devoted to the cultural landscape, to the exploration of India's composite culture; Part II explores the classical foundation of the Urdu ghazal in which concepts of love, beauty and the self and rhetorical aspects such as metaphors, similes, symbols and imagery are dealt with in a profound analysis; and Part III details the 20th century panorama of the development and dispersal of this graceful literary form, exploring neoclassicists, progressives, modernists and postmodernists..

Narang begins Part I with a picturesque quote from Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who said, as quoted in *The Muslim Dilemma in India* by MRA Baig (1974:52), "Hindus and Muslims are two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan". (It is quite strange, though, the Two Nation Theory is traced back to this great man.) Even here, a more detailed description of the Urdu ghazal is attempted. "When we think of the Urdu ghazal, the following words come to mind: Elegance, mindfulness, a sur-reptitious mystical feeling, density of thought, a solid system of denotations and connotations, passionate imagery, innate musicality, and rich beautification of meaning. Each couplet has an imaginative story to tell, a compressed narrative of love, both existential and universal. The world



MIRZA GHALIB and Mir Taqi Mir (below), the two giants of the Urdu ghazal.



of the ghazal is imaginative and metaphorical. Brevity is the soul of the structure of the ghazal.... The language is compressed to its limits: phrase upon phrase; *izafat* (the connector 'é) upon *izafat*; elipsis of connectors, possessives, pronouns and auxiliaries—highly complex, almost to the point of the limits of language—or silence, which otherwise is the fountainhead of all signification. Everything is mystical, everything is the stuff of dreams...." I think I have borrowed the author's words enough to paint a three-dimensional portrait of the Urdu ghazal by now.

After tracing the advent of Islam in India and the composite culture that was formed following this event, Narang traces the Bhakti movement that took root among the Indian masses. He then dwells on the origin and

evolution of Sufism in the Arab lands and how it came in later along with the intensely spiritual followers of Islam. He considers at length the social dimension and the creative and aesthetic dimension of Sufism and how the latter and the Bhakti movement together traced a new passionate spiritual trajectory exemplified by Hazrat Nizammudin Aulia, Amir Khusrau, Kabir, Guru Nanak and others.

HINDU GHAZAL WRITERS

Incidentally, Narang places on record the contribution of Hindus in the development of the common language of the composite culture, known by different names such as Hindavi, Rekhta, Braj and Khari.

Kayasth Hindus, who served in royal courts, were excellent in writing in Persian. He quotes Syed Abid Husain from his *Hindustani Qaumiyat Aur Qaumi Tahzeeb* (1946) that, "Leaving aside Abul Fazl and Alamgir, there were few Muslim prose masters who could stand a comparison with Munshi Har Karan, Chander Bhan Brahman (1574-16620), Munshi Madhav Ram, Munshi Lal Chand and Munshi Uday Raj." The first Urdu ghazal was written by Chander Bhan Brahman.

Having developed from the proto-Rekhta model of Amir Khusrau, a hybrid Urdu with the Khari Boli dialect of Hindi as its base, it had developed enough for ghazals to be written in it by the time of emperor Shahjahan.

His son, Prince Dara

Shikoh, was a champion of the composite culture, having commissioned the translation of 50 Upanishads into Persian, titled *Sirr-e Akbar* (The Confluence of Oceans - 1654-55) when he was the governor of Benares.

Under his patronage, Chander Bhan Brahman had flourished. Other Hindu poets writing in Urdu during this period, as Narang notes, were Anand Ram Mukhlis, Lachhmi Narain Shafiq, Kishan Chand Ikhlis, Banvari Das Vali, Syalkoti Mal Varasta, Jaswant Rai Munshi, Shiv Ram Haiya, Tan Sukh Rai Shauq, Tek Chand Bahar and Anand Ghan.

Narang further notes that as a symbol of perfect communal harmony in ghazal writing, Hindu ghazal writers began with the Islamic invocation "Bismillahi-r-Rahmani-r-Rahim" and Muslim poets began their works with an invocation to Sri Ganesh or Ma Saraswati.

Finally, he presents the origin and development of the genre of the Urdu ghazal in great detail, describing how it began as a part of the Arabic poetic form *qasida*, moved over to the Persian poetic tradition and underwent a thorough transformation in the hands of Iranian poets, beginning with Firdausi (b.935); and Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), who did not write ghazals proper, but wrote in the *masnavi*, or narrative mode, and *rubba'ait*, or quatrains, in which the ghazal form was subsumed; progressed through Khaqani (1121-1190), the first major writer of the perfect ghazal in Persian; Sa'di Shirazi



THE HINDU ARCHIVES



THE HINDU ARCHIVES



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

ALI SARDAR JAFRI, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Firaq Gorakhpuri, some of the prominent Urdu poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement.

(1210-1291), the author of *Bostan* (The Orchard) and *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden); Hafiz Shirazi (1325-1389); and others, including Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), and in the final stages of its evolution, ended up as an indigenously Indian form, with no connection to the Arabic beginnings.

Narang begins Part II with the concept of love, which he analyses in the context of the Urdu ghazal. The Sufi way of life, or *tasavvuf*, which is at the centre of the devotional act of offering unconditional love for the Absolute, was the cradle of the Urdu ghazal.

This love was defined as entirely different from the love between two human beings. *Tasavvuf* was fundamentally revolutionary in that it went beyond all limits set by religious tradition. In an age when marriages were settled taking into consideration several factors regarding the two families involved, and not the love between the man and woman concerned, it became almost a societal norm for married men to visit nautch girls and courtesans and to keep mistresses. Gradually,

courtesans became the custodians of music and art, and even literature in some cases.

However, the orthodox religious structure of Islam was vehement in denouncing all this. Practical licentiousness on the one side, and rigid orthodoxy on the other, produced a hypocritical social set-up. The purdah system set married women apart from male gaze, while the men were free to go anywhere and do whatever they liked.

However, covering the female body with purdah hiding its beauty was not in the tradition of Indian graphic and plastic arts. Also, love for the "beloved" in the Persian tradition was love for the *mazhar* or *saqi* (literally a beautiful boy who served wine in a tavern), so as to avoid reference to a female. This was abhorrent to the Indian sensibilities. The enlightened souls who became Sufis sought to break such earthly boundaries through *tasavvuf* taking advantage of India's pluralistic ethos, with each Sufi order developing its own rules and practices, including singing and dancing, as against those in the

monolithic cultures of Islamic kingdoms.

LOVE IN CLASSICAL GHAZALS

In analysing love in the classical ghazal, Narang delineates four categories. In the first, it is pure and simple love for the Absolute. Only the great Sufi masters are capable of it. He names Kwaja Mir Dard, Siraj Aurangabadi, Shah Niaz Barelvi, Abdul Alim Aasi, and perhaps Asghar Gondavi and Jigar Morabadi in this exalted league. In the second, the poets were influenced by certain aspects of Sufism. Though they have apparent mystical aspirations, in effect they are earthly and mundane in their practices. Some contemporaries of Mir Taqi Mir and Sauda qualify to be in this category. They, however, contained their expressions of human love within metaphors and similes, and reached high poetic levels, but fell short in the spiritual department. The third category is truly great poetry inspired genuinely by Sufism, but cannot be mechanically compartmentalised as worldly or other worldly, and expresses a sublime and

burning agony of separation from the beloved. Ghazals of Mir Taqi Mir and Ghalib belong to this kind of exalted poetry. The last category is bereft of any Sufi influence and is downright flesh-bound and lustful, as the kind that flourished in the Lakhnavi circles.

Narang then discusses true Sufi love, which is transcendental, and cites the cases of Dard and Siraj Aurangabadi, Barelvi, Aasi, and others. In this context he discusses Dabistaan-e Delhi (Delhi School), including poets such as Shah Hatim, Sauda, Qayem Chanderpuri, Abdul Hai Taban, Inamulla Khan Yaqeen, Mir Asar, Jafar Ali Hasrat and Ahsanulla Khan Bayan and their works through excerpts quoted. In the Daabistan-e Lucknow, he lists Jurrat Lakhnavi, Insha Allah Khan Insha, Imam Baksh Nashik, Agha Hasan Lakhnavi, Tek Chand Bahar, Aftab-Ud-daula Lakhnavi, Rind Lakhnavi, Mir Wazir Ali Lakhnavi and Atish and their works. Revisiting Dabistaan-e Delhi, he discusses the concept of love in the works of Momin, Zafar, Hali, and ends this section, with extensive analyses and quotes from the two giants of the Urdu ghazal, Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Ghalib.

CREATIVE IMAGINATION

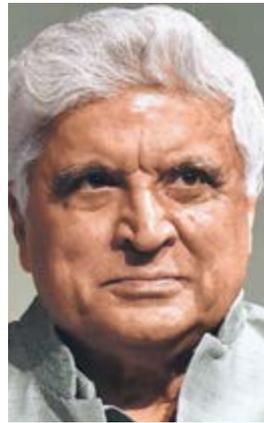
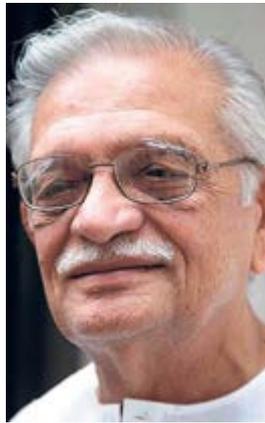
The concept of beauty and elegance (*husn o jamaal*) in the Urdu ghazal is also a product of India's creative imagination, which is based on the freedom of the mind. There is a misconception that the "beloved" in the Urdu ghazal

was borrowed from the Persian tradition, that of *mazhar* or *saqi* so as to avoid inclusion of women which was against Islam's tenets.

In the Dakhani ghazal, it was the traditional Indian model that found inclusion and not a beautiful boy.

Though the northern ghazal initially followed the Iranian model for some time, Wali Dakhani's influence changed it completely. The Dakhani ghazal had contained purely Indian imagery and female verbal markers, as against the Persian model in which gender could not be indicated grammatically. The Dakhani ghazal writers "used the same themes of beauty and grace that were used in regional languages such as Telugu, Marathi and Gujarati. In later Urdu ghazals, these became the new standard."

Narang lists here first the names of the important Dakhani ghazal writers beginning with Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah and then those of the north, and provides illustrations through excerpts from their representative ghazals. He also explains the amazing beauty of the Dakhani ghazal; Dakhani's influence on the early Delhi ghazal; the influence of *tasavvuf*; the concept of beauty in Mir Taqi Mir; the pinnacle of beauty in Urdu poetry; the poets and poetry of Dabistaan-e Lucknow in the context of beauty and elegance; with the names and quotes from the works of the prominent Lakhnavi poets; revisits Dabistaan-e Delhi; and describes the nucleus of Urdu ghazal's new



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

GULZAR AND JAVED AKHTAR are listed among the modernists and postmodernists in Urdu ghazal writing.

achievements, charting the careers of Zauq, Zafar, Ghalib, Nawab Mustafa Khan Shefta, Daagh and Hali. Finally, he discusses the Urdu ghazal as a thing of beauty in itself.

Apart from love and beauty, the most important element of an Urdu ghazal is the concept of self. Helped early on by the idea of *tasavvuf*, the ideal ghazal would always be concerned with the soul in total love-communion with the Absolute, the Creator.

Along with this, deep contemplation about the place of humankind in the world, the purpose and meaning of life, the cross-cultural milieu in which the Urdu ghazal evolved—all these elements contributed to the concept of self. The Hindu concept of the creator as "Brahma", belonging to a trinity along with Vishnu and Mahesvar (Siva) forming a Supreme Deity, then the One Supreme Godhead which the Vedantins propounded, and Allah being the One God in the Islamic theology, were in fact akin to each other.

Therefore, the unity of existence, the unity of

mankind, the self as the essence of absolute consciousness, are all discussed and examples quoted from the lines of all major Urdu ghazal writers, listing them one by one.

Next, Narang discusses the rhetorical aspects of the Urdu ghazal, such as metaphors, similes, symbols and imagery, through detailed illustrations by way of excerpts from major Urdu poets.

Lastly, the 20th century panorama is discussed, beginning with neoclassicists, singling out the leading lights among them who were also ardent nationalists—Hasrat Mohani, Akbar Allahabadi, Allama Iqbal, Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Shad Azimabadi, Ram Prasad Bismil, Brij Narain Chakbast, Yagana Changezi, Asghar Gondvi, Jigar Moradabadi, Fani Badauni, Hafiz Jalandhari, and Arzoo Lakhnavi. The author then discusses the prominent Urdu poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement—Josh Malihabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Makhdoom Mohiuddin, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majaz Lakhnavi, Anand Narain Mulla,

Ali Sardar Jafri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ahmed Faraz, Khatir Ghaznavi, Ale Ahmed Suroor, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Habib Jalib and Zehra Nigah—along with excerpts from their works as illustrations.

Narang discusses the modernists and postmodernists in Urdu ghazal writing.

He lists them as Miraji, Majeed Amjad, Nasir Kazmi, Rajinder Manchanda Bani, Jameeluddin Aali, Krishan Bihari Noor, Munir Niazi, Jaun Elia, Shakeb Jalali, Shuja Khavar, Parveen Shakir, Shahryar, Nida Fazli, Mohammed Alvi, Zafar Iqbal, Ahmad Mushtaq, Gulzar, Bashir Badr, Kishwar Naheed, Iftikar Arif, Javed Akhtar, Munawwar Rana, Farhat Ehsaas, Jayant Parmar and Shakeel Azmi, with samples of their ghazals.

The book ends with an Epilogue which is, in effect, a summing up of the contents discussed.

The translator, Surinder Deol, has done wonderfully well in transmitting a complex and intricate discourse through an alien language. The thesis of the creative cultural transformation of a popular genre is well established, and the book stands out as a unique study of an ever-growing form:

Raah-e mazmuun-e taazaa band nahien

Taaqyaamat khula hai baab-e sukhan (Wali)

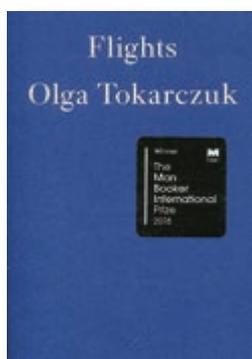
(The road to new themes and subjects is never ending

the door of creativity is ever open till the Day of Judgment (eternity). □

Surpassing modernity

Flights contests to be a good read to surpass the syndrome of modernity and its constant test of time. BY SANKAR VARMA K.C

There is something progressively constant in this dynamic world. They are the dynamic others. This dynamic other can blow you in the form of a breeze without any prescription in this viral world. It is in this blowing of the breeze that an existence of the “Other” starts getting ingrained in the self. *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk is a book that is not gross in conveying humanity but has contents that are evidently gross. This evidently gross phenomenon perhaps is a reflection of the modernity syndrome. A transaction of forcing the “other” to come to terms with modernity to such an extent that the anatomy of the self gets contained into a museum piece of orchestrated bones scattered along with the scattered other. This is what makes the book one of the most humane texts for the centuries to come and, more importantly, the centuries past. That is, though the book speaks on the anatomy, history and a very divergent understanding of the self through the other, the point is the book in its entirety is a documentation



Flights
By Olga Tokarczuk
Replika Press 2017

of the past, present and future. A book, in other words, that has already withstood the test of time and space both in the physiological and in the economic sense much before it took the form of a book. This is the brilliance of the narrative imagination of Olga Tokarczuk. Something that drives readers into a space that is boundary-less, which is trying to lay foot somewhere but is immediately routed off to an “other somewhere”.

But today with the outbreak of COVID-19, the routing of the root has become a terrible problem. The “Other somewhere”

has gone beyond the question of mobility. There is no longer a plurality in the mobility of the “self” or even for the “other”. Blowing of the breeze as mentioned before has lost its capacity to pluck one’s root because there is a virus that has started ruling over the breeze. Perhaps the breeze in itself is a virus that is calling for a moment of stationarity. With this very arrival, most of us have been driven towards something that is called a lockdown. Lockdown is a situation when people are instructed to stay within the walls of their house. In other words, it is an effective orchestration of limiting one’s “self” to a limited boundary in order to prevent and contain the virus from spreading to others.

However, there still exist a bunch of people who do not have the ability to lock themselves down. These are the people who do not have the privilege of a forced limited boundary, though the time commands them to be so. They are devoid of all the lockdown privileges, unlike others. They do not have a house to limit themselves to, they do not have the

capital to stock commodities and they do not have the privileges to afford a lockdown. In other words, they are the people who have gone beyond an identification of a space and time. They are the ones who only have the sky above their heads and the earth below their feet. They are the “Others”. The others do not have their roots firm; nobody can master their moves; they do not have a limit in anything they experience; they do not believe in the panopticon; their bodies and minds keep moving.

This takes us to the ultimate realisation that the others are nothing but “Flights”.

The current state the world is in, as per the flow of changes that COVID-19 has brought about, calls for a stationary time and space. In the book the author writes: “Place as an aspect of space pauses time. It is the momentary detainment of our perception on a configuration of objects. It is in contradistinction to time, a static notion. Understood thus, human time is divided into stages as movement through space is broken up by place-pauses. Such pauses anchor us within the flow of time.” Perhaps now is the time for a pause. A pause to regain normalcy into a lot of things time has digressed from. This understanding of digressions through a narrative imagination of making one’s self understand the binary oppositions of life through the ‘other’ makes the book *Flights* a good read and all

the more relevant in these times of a lockdown.

In 1994 when Pina Bausch (the famous dancer and choreographer) last visited India, she attended a conference conducted by Georg Lechner, the then head of Max Mueller Bhavan. Lechner tried very hard to make her admit that, at heart, she was a German artiste. Pina refused to respond to his questions, blowing rings of cigarette smoke instead. When he asked the same question a third time, she put her cigarette aside, looked him in the eyes and said, "Gorg, had I been a bird, would you have called me a German bird?"

It is in this historical background that Olga Tokarczuk also ends up in identifying the geographical root, as per genes, as not the right routing of the root, rather it is the breeze that takes one through his/her being and becoming that routes the right root. This being and becoming of a root is attained through a constant conflict that the self enters into after looking back into the chronicles of a travel experienced through the breeze. It is from these chronicles of a travel that the author roots the syndromes of the world and its spontaneous illogicity. Spontaneous illogicity reflects or is manifested in the form of macro events that are problematic socially but are reduced to a micro being personally. She identifies this as a syndrome which is small, portable and not weighed down by any theory but is episodic.

Let us look into the series of events that has happened within these few



SASCHA SCHUERMANN/AFP

OLGA TOKARCZUK after she was awarded the 2018 Nobel Literature Prize, in western Germany on October 10, 2019.

days after boundaries have been designated in the name of citizenship. These events are not small; in fact they are huge and large but are made small because of a bourgeois ailment at the end of the day. The bourgeois ailment starts when a comfortable "self" can maintain a social and emotional distancing with the "other". This distancing can conveniently result in a situation when blood becomes just a matter of the colour red and not anything emotionally trivialising. In fact, blood here becomes a pilgrimage that is the prelude to another pilgrimage. That is, seeing blood in this context automatically becomes an activity of knowing citizenship and not knowing blood as a spurting out of a reaction carried out of an inhumane activity. Hence the way of seeing is altogether turned upside down wherein we all end up into

a knowing of spontaneous illogicity, gang-marked by a systematic pedagogy through oppressing the "Other". In her book Olga writes, "The showcase holds several dozen people with no relation to one another, separated from each other by space and time—now in such a beautiful resting place, spacious and dry, well-lit, and condemned to eternity in a museum. They must be the envy of those bones that got stuck in eternal wrestling matches with the earth."

Eternal wrestling matches with the earth are probably played by the environment on the environment against the environment is the underpinning feeling that is well abetted and effectively manufactured by humans. This is the terrible germination of a despotic conscience wherein the exceptionality of the other

is effectively misutilised (here the other being the earth). Hence in actuality, the eternal wrestling matches are played by humans on humans against humans and this has happened from time immemorial. It is also evident because human beings have become a larger fraction of the whole. However, once the larger fraction of the whole realises that all that we are reduced to is ashes that remain in the grave at the end of the day, it is probably in that point of a realisation that the seeds for a new world of and for the other germinates. Episodes of despotic events shall also cease to exist then. Sadly, the whole is greater than the part is what we all are taught, but it must be realised by now that it need not necessarily remain the same as always. This is because when we look into the fractions of the whole it is the humans. Humans govern the earth. In other words, humans govern the whole.

This also in a way proves that the whole is no longer greater than its part. It is at this point another question arises, "who is the earth?" And there the earth ceases to be earth and is forced to become the "other" thereby worming in humans as the dominant bearers of the earth. This results in the earth in itself becoming a space only for the humans. This kind of a perfective domination over the "other" mastered through human anatomical functionalities and conflicts is what is brilliantly mind-bombed through the book *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk. The author perfectly orches-

trates the functioning of the self by proving the point that for the self the self always seems real and the other is nothing but a vague spectre, a Flying Dutchman just darting over a distant horizon. Sadly, the distant truth is that the “real” is the “vague spectre of the Flying Dutchman” and the “unreal” is the “real” which is the “self”. An absolutely orchestrated earlier said “spontaneous illogicity” that again is an after-product of a bourgeois ailment. This illogicity arrives in a confirmation that human beings become the “Heart of an economy” that pumps capital for development. However it is interesting to look into the perception of Heart through the author’s lens:

“The heart. All its mystery has been conclusively revealed — for it’s that unshapely lump the size of a fist, its colour a dirty light brown. Please note that that is, in fact, the colour of our bodies: greyish brown, ugly. We would not want to have walls in our houses or a car that colour. It’s the colour of insides, of darkness, of places light can’t reach, where matter hides in moisture from others gazes, and there isn’t any point in it showing off. The only extravagance able to be afforded went to blood:

blood is a warning, its redness an alarm that the casing of the body has been breached. That the continuity of the tissue has been broken.

“In reality, on the inside we have no colour. When the heart pumps out blood as it’s supposed to, blood looks just like snot.”

The in-between of one’s life is brilliantly portrayed here with a stunning inference that blood is something that can be afforded. A good that has a monetary value assigned to it so much so that it achieves a state that can make the commodity alarmingly colourful from the outside but physiologically colourless from the inside.

This in a way also is a symbolic reinterpretation of the fetishised interests of the mind constantly in play over the body in acquiring commodities of varied interests. This fetish inside out behaviour is deconstructed with utmost reason by confirming that the colour of inside is ugly, dark, and that showing it off is pointless. Perhaps it is at this juncture that the beginning to the end of the body-mind relationship of the self for the others ends up in becoming “snot”. Snot because it is a transactional movement that begins with the “self” and

ends with the “self”. In this transaction, conscience has always been bereft of the concern for the other and hence ultimately ends up in a state of being forced to be crippled. Today we are forced to be crippled and it is in this state the book tries to explain the episodes of various events.

In the book Tokarczuk presents an eminent professor of Greek history who suffers a stroke. Once he is affected by the stroke, he is taken into the extraordinary image of all the places he spent his life steadily drowning in a never-ending flood of red fluid, linking the blood filling his brain with Homer’s famous “wine-dark sea”. This is a scene used by the author to recapture the spaces that the professor has seen through his lens. However, to arrive at a stage of this level one has to get affected with a stroke, and this is the larger backdrop of the story. Each stroke is a moment in the documentation of a history and each history is a memory to be grasped hold of in the moment of a danger.

Flights, for that matter, continue to document history ceaselessly forever, because the writer and the book have identified the self through the thoughts that are documented in terms with the other. And it is in this backdrop, memory as a conflicting arena moulded out of fetish binaries becomes all the more important. Travelling of the mind along with the body and travelling of the body always with the mind henceforth has to continue, and that is how memories are created and memories continue to

be created. “Your head in the Other world and the Other head in your world” perhaps matters the most in these testing times of COVID-19 which we all are living through. An approach of come what may is inherent in human beings and with this firm belief we strive forward, thinking “this too shall pass”. This in its absolute actuality seems to be the ultimate realisation the book *Flights* tries to embark upon the reader.

A fitting craft of the book can be seen through an overt influence of the author in the poet William Blake. An encompassing factor of the book also rests its subject in a poem of Blake *The Fly*.

*“If thought is life
And strength and
breath,
And the want
Of thought is death,
Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.”*

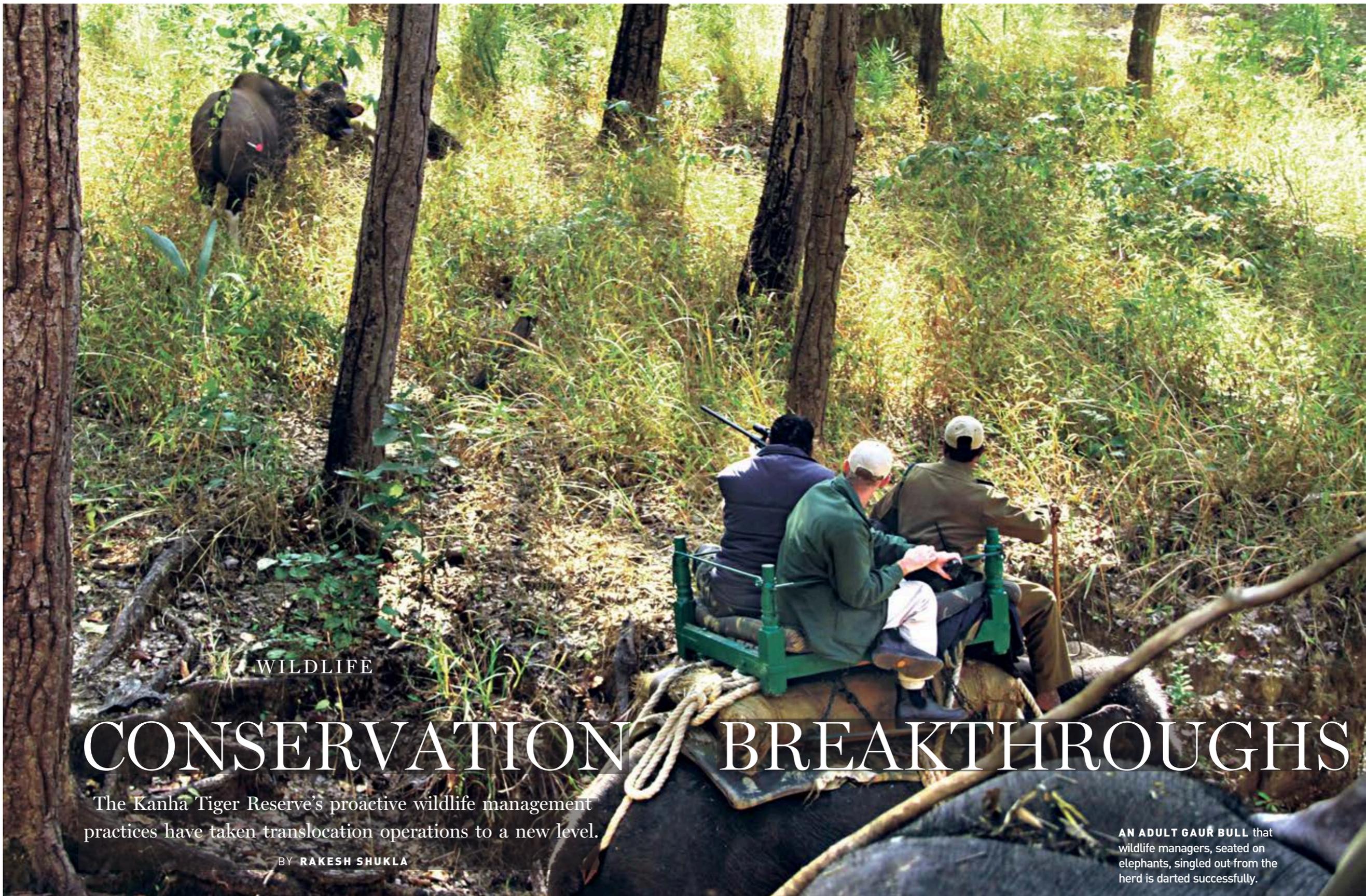
This stanza is probably the beginning and it never ceases to end because the duty of one is to keep on flying. Today while most of us are home-quarantined or socially and physically distanced because of a virus that is flying, let us also not forget to fly around. *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk contests to be a good read to surpass the syndrome of modernity and its constant test of time. □

Sankar Varma K.C, is a Research Fellow (Christ Deemed to be University)

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“The Fly” by William Blake

The book is not gross in conveying humanity but has contents that are evidently gross. This evidently gross phenomenon perhaps is a reflection of the modernity syndrome.



WILDLIFE

CONSERVATION BREAKTHROUGHS

The Kanha Tiger Reserve's proactive wildlife management practices have taken translocation operations to a new level.

BY RAKESH SHUKLA

AN ADULT GAUR BULL that wildlife managers, seated on elephants, singled out from the herd is darted successfully.

SUDHIR MISHRA

ON a chilly winter morning in January at the Kanha Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, four elephants ambled through long grass and bushes amid the light mist covered forest of stately sal trees. The elephants were on a mission that was part of the larger conservation efforts involving the wildlife managers and veterinarians riding on their backs. Soon the elephants came close to a grazing herd of gaur, which they moved gently to a relatively flat and suitable terrain. While doing so they made sure that an adult bull that the managers had singled out had been sufficiently separated from the herd.

The bull was now ready for immobilisation. Once the animal was in clear sight, a dart from a projectile gun found its mark and the animal gradually lost consciousness, staggered and slowly sank down on its haunches. All this while the elephants made sure that the rest of the animals stayed well clear of the bull.

Once complete immobilisation was achieved, the teams got off the elephants, quickly blindfolded the animal to protect its eyes from light, injury and dust, shifted it onto a stretcher and maintained it in a sternal recumbency position (with raised head and folded fore- and

hindquarters) to avoid respiratory pneumonia, gas formation and regurgitation of rumen contents. The veterinarians recorded the animal's vital health parameters and administered some injections. This was the first of the 50 animals that were reintroduced into the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve some 250 km away, in Umaria district, in 2011-12. This population is now thriving with around 140 animals.

Since the late 1960s Kanha, regarded as one of the best-protected areas in Asia, has been undertaking proactive wildlife management practices such as expanding and improv-

ing the protected area with the aim of achieving the larger goal of biodiversity conservation in all its facets. Initially, these proactive practices were measured and purely local. Gradually, however, experience in adaptive management and the knowledge gained from the evolving science of conservation inspired the Kanha management to take up several ambitious undertakings.

BEYOND THE ROUTINE

Speaking generally, except for wildlife protection and rescue operations, most management practices at Kanha are conventional and have al-



SUDHIR MISHRA



SUDHIR MISHRA

CONSTRUCTED in 1972, the barasingha enclosure has proved to be a game changer that has assured increased numbers of this endangered and endemic deer.

most a fixed time frame for their completion. The management just has to take up these practices at select sites and in the proper seasons as envisaged in the tiger conservation plan as a response or “reaction” to managerial prescriptions. While these tasks are important, their unchanging regularity and dependence on nature makes them monotonous, and eventually, wildlife managers lose their enthusiasm to innovate and achieve higher conservation goals. “Proactive management” in the context of wildlife conservation is the opposite of the “routine” and “reactive” management. This approach looks beyond the routine and anticipates future challenges for timely preparedness. It requires a deep understanding of wildlife ecosystems, animal ecology and behaviour, and threats that may arise in the future.

Proactive measures could range from purely local innovations relevant only to Kanha to rather ambitious projects involving a multidisciplinary team of experts and other protected areas of the region. Local proactive measures may include special species- and habitat-

THE BULL was restrained and blindfolded for veterinary intervention and then loaded onto the recovery vehicle.

specific and tourism management programmes, and so on. Regional measures, such as species supplementations, reintroductions and animal translocations, involve at least one more protected area in order to complete the donor-receiver scenario. While all these proactive practices are important, handling wild animals for translocation/introduction is the most exciting and newsworthy task in conservation, attracting attention from all quarters.

The conceptualisation and implementation of a proactive intervention entail serious deliberations and planning to achieve goals that may appear to many rather atypical and unconventional. To ensure success, practitioners of proactive management have to step out of their comfort zones to take the risks involved in such unorthodox interventions. Understandably, the approach may also raise questions about the expertise of the practitioners if the desired goal is not achieved or if the achievement does not fare well in a typical cost-benefit analysis. The more ambitious the goal, the higher the risk involved.

The team responsible for a proactive operation involving wild animals is always under pressure, from the media and higher-ups. And, if the



SUBHRANJAN SEN

**THE
CONSERVATION**

of the hard ground barasingha at Kanha is an inspiring success story.

NATURAL, biological and ecological constraints had resulted in the low population growth of the barasingha at Kanha, so it was decided to relocate some animals to a geographically separate habitat.



SHARAD VATS

target species happens to be iconic or endangered, it compounds the problem manifold. Besides, if some reintroduced/translocated animals die after settling down or simply do not fare as well as expected in the population viability analysis, uncomfortable questions are bound to be raised. The success of proactive management, however, has its rewards, and these innovations provide encouragement, build a foundation for future ventures and bring immense professional satisfaction to everyone involved.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The science and art of reintroduction/translocation of wild animals have grown steadily over the years along with advancements in sophisticated drugs and equipment. The expertise of professional wildlife managers, veterinarians and biologists is required to capture, restrain, transport and release immobilised animals safely. Although in the recent past, the Kanha management has had some satisfying achievements in this area, such managerial intervention is still in its infancy in India. In several African countries, restraining, capturing and translocating hundreds of large mammals between different private wildlife reserves is a common practice.

Successful translocations/reintroductions need painstaking planning, well-coordinated effort and mutual trust between professionals of different disciplines. The choice of immobilising drug, its antidote, emergency and supportive drugs, darting guns and other instruments, use of customised vehicles and the crew's responsibilities, the schedule of field activities, and actual transportation route and release mode need to be discussed thoroughly and checked and rehearsed before the actual operation. The same amount of planning is required even in the case of non-invasive physical capture and translocation operations in which only calming drugs may be used before the translocation begins,

Post-release monitoring by researchers and veterinarians is

equally important. There have been instances when the animals safely translocated and released into the wild died within days of release. Depending upon the resilience and versatility of the species involved, its physical condition, the climatic conditions and habitat variability at the relocation site, wildlife managers may choose between a "hard release" (animals released directly into the wild) and a "soft release" (animals first kept under observation in an enclosure, then released into the wild) to ensure a successful reloca-

tion. These conservation translocations have to follow a detailed protocol prepared following guidelines and advisories prescribed by either the State or Central government to avoid criticism and disapproval. In a project involving the capture and translocation of wild animals, mortality during an operation beyond the acceptable limits is a serious issue that may lead to severe criticism and eventual abandonment of the project.

The restoration of the endangered and endemic hard ground



SUDHIR MISHRA

VITAL health parameters of a radio-collared tiger being checked.



SUDHIR MISHRA

AN IMMOBILISED tiger being carried away for weighment and veterinary interventions before translocation.



ONCE locally extinct, the blackbuck can now be seen at Kanha.



KANHA also supports a good population of sambar.

barasingha (*Rucervus duvaucelii branderi*) was one of Kanha's projects. It involved assiduous management of native grasslands and water distribution for this exclusively graminivorous species. Large chunks of habitat were reclaimed in the late 1960s through village relocation. The sensitive and difficult task of resettling the residents to areas outside the park required gentle persuasion and confidence-building measures. This is regarded as the first relocation programme for wildlife conservation in independent India. Now, with the relocation of 35 villages, an impressive number of different wildlife populations enjoy perfect tranquillity in the core zone. Through committed proactive measures, the barasingha is now also back from the verge of local extinction from a mere 66 animals in 1970 to around 1,000 now.

The Kanha management recognised the importance of conservation science in wildlife management a long time ago. Quality in-house research, monitoring and inventorying of wildlife resources became the basis for effective decisions about resource use and manipulation. A research wing started in the late 1960s with a field laboratory was strengthened gradually to the extent that today Kanha is a centre for wildlife studies that also welcomes researchers from national and international institutes/universities.

With the deep conviction that Kanha has tremendous knowledge to offer on nature and wildlife conservation, reserve developed an excellent park interpretation programme, the first of its kind in India, in the early 1990s in collaboration with the United States National Park Service. This popular programme proved ahead of its time and was upgraded in 2005 and again in 2019 to integrate conservation history, new research findings, scientific management practices and new trends in wildlife management, and national and international tiger conservation perspectives.

In the recent past, the Kanha management has taken up projects that it did not attempt earlier be-



DR SANJAY K. SHUKLA

AN AERIAL VIEW of the capture boma used for ungulate species. The boma method of South Africa involves using a large makeshift funnel-shaped enclosure of iron sheets and opaque cloth for capture operations.

cause of hesitancy and lack of technical expertise. Good veterinary support also became available for conservation when the State wildlife wing established good veterinary support by inducting veterinarians into tiger reserves and training them in wildlife health management and rescue and translocation operations.

The first such important undertaking was the reintroduction of the gaur (*Bos gaurus gaurus*) into the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve from where the species went extinct in the mid 1990s. After many intensive consultations with some South African experts, preparation of customised vehicles, procurement of veterinary drugs and equipment and training of a multidisciplinary team, the reintroduction operations were accomplished under a meticulous protocol. A total of 50 animals were darted, restrained, captured and transported to Bandhavgarh in several trips in 2011 and 2012, where they were kept in a specially designed in-situ enclosure for some time before being released into the wild.

Natural biological and ecological constraints have resulted in the low population growth of the baras-



SUDHIR MISHRA

A HERD of chital trapped in the capture boma from where they can be gently driven into the transportation truck.

ingha. Besides, this small population faces a grave risk from an unanticipated epidemic at Kanha. In view of this, it was decided to relocate some animals to a geographically separate habitat. The Satpura Tiger Reserve (STR), some 400 km away in Hoshangabad district, met this requirement, and as a former distribution range of this cervid, it was considered safe for the reintroduction and multiplication of the barasingha. The boma method of South Africa, which involves using a large

makeshift funnel-shaped enclosure of iron sheets and opaque cloth, was employed for capture operations. Connected to the tapered end of the funnel was a customised transport truck. The target animals were lured into this large boma over some days and were gently driven into the truck.

In this way, a total of 46 barasingha were translocated to the Bori Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a part of the STR, between 2015 and 2020. They were first kept in a specially



THE CUSTOMISED truck to transport ungulates.



A MALE barasingha being released in a new reserve.

designed in-situ enclosure and later released gradually into the wild. At present, there are around 90 barasingha at Bori.

The Kanha of the late 1970s had a different landscape, with several villages and agricultural fields dotting the landscape. It also had a population of around 100 blackbucks (*Antelope cervicapra*) that gradually declined and became locally extinct, which was considered a blow to the concept of biodiversity conservation.

A plan was made to capture some animals from a nearby district and release them into an in-situ enclosure for safe multiplication and future release into the wild. Around 50 animals were captured from agricultural fields over several nights. Several men with lights fitted on their heads and buzzers fitted at their waists and carrying long nets would move together towards a blackbuck herd. The animals would get dazed and confused by this combination of light and sound and would stand as if frozen, making it easy for them to be captured and shut in specially designed crates for transport to Kanha. While some animals died of capture myopathy after release into the enclosure, the rest sur-

vived. Around three years ago, 27 animals were released into the wild, and now there are around 60 animals in the enclosure.

Kanha is visualised as comprising two ecological entities: the Banjar valley and the Halon valley, named after the respective rivers. While the Banjar area supports a good population density of chital (*Axis axis*), the Halon area has a low population. The low density of chital also results in a low number of carnivores, especially tigers. Therefore, to rectify the skewed density distribution and expedite population build-up, some relocated village sites were developed as good grasslands, and chital were captured and translocated from the Banjar area for release into the Halon area to supplement the existing population. So far, around 1,300 chital have been released in these operations.

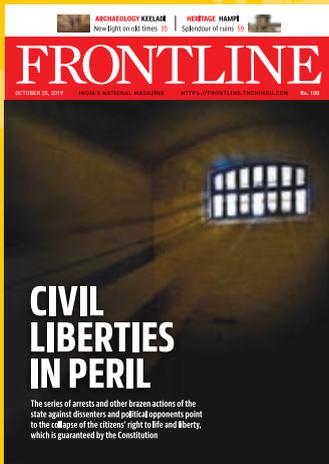
The core zone of the Kanha Tiger Reserve is a well-monitored high tiger density area. The dynamics of this population affect some individuals. For instance, sometimes, a resident male kills a mother tigress in fierce infighting, orphaning all her cubs. The Kanha management thought that instead of sending these cubs to a zoo they should be reared

and trained for rewilding in a low tiger density area. This idea paved the way for keeping orphaned cubs in a quarantine house for some time and later shifting them into a specially designed in-situ enclosure that is completely fenced with grass so that neither the animals inside can look out nor can people outside look in. This ensures minimal disturbance to the animals. Besides all provisions of security and tranquility, the 35-hectare enclosure also has a mechanism that allows prey animals to be driven into it for predation.

Young tiger cubs are given a diet of goat milk, eggs, poultry and mashed meat. Gradually, they are given ample opportunity for predation by way of the ungulates driven into the enclosure. Once they are the right age and after meticulous monitoring of natural predation, these cubs are translocated and released into a low tiger density area outside Kanha. So far, nine such orphaned tigers have been rewilded, including two famous tigresses credited with producing several litters that restocked the Panna Tiger Reserve in northern Madhya Pradesh, once totally bereft of tigers. □
Rakesh Shukla is a Research Officer at the Kanha Tiger Reserve.



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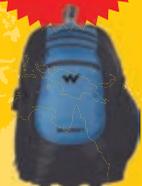
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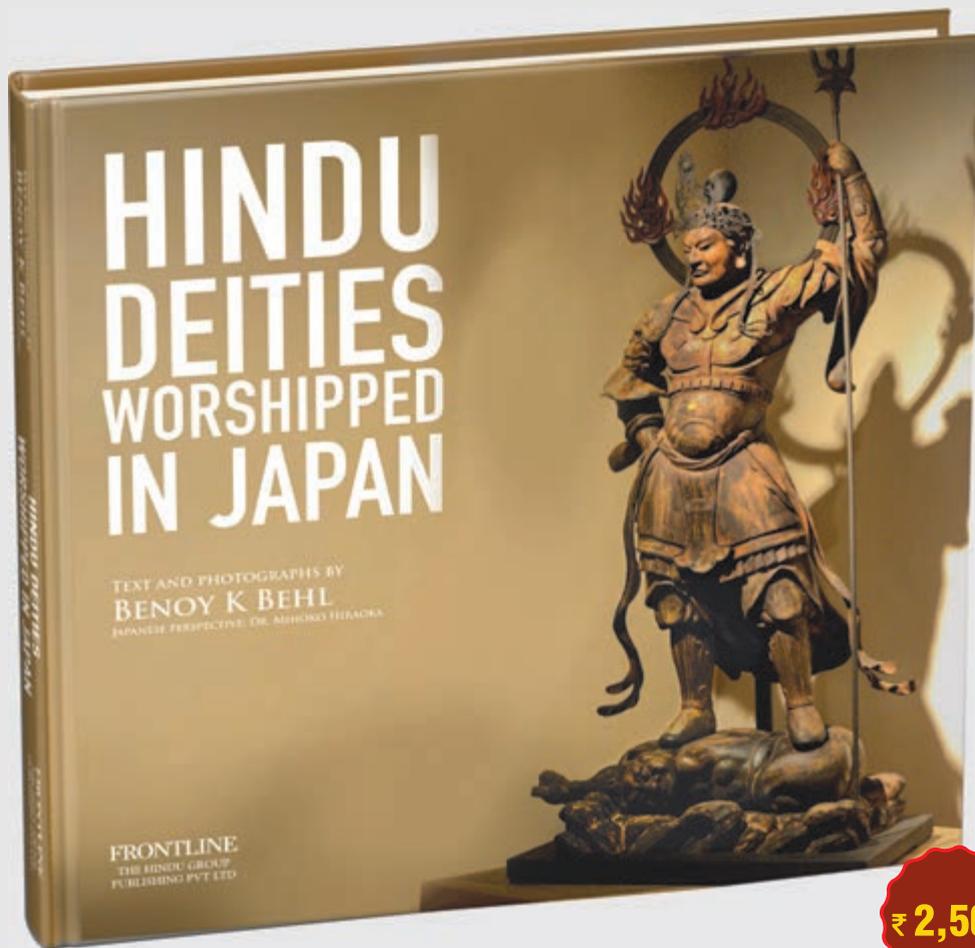
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