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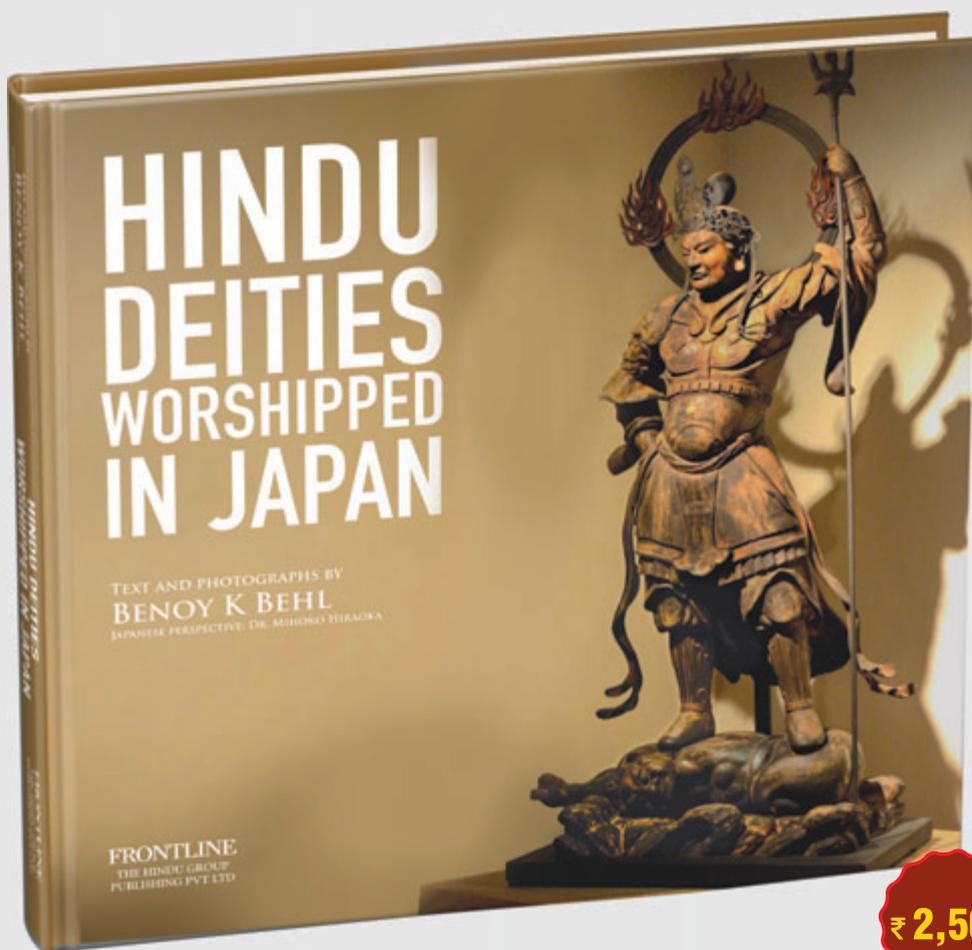
On a collision course

A photograph of Donald Trump and Xi Jinping. Trump is on the left, wearing a dark suit and a red tie, with his right hand raised in a gesture. Xi Jinping is on the right, wearing a dark suit and a blue patterned tie, looking towards the right. The background is a blue wall with a portion of the American flag visible on the right side.

The United States' efforts to check China's rise as an economic powerhouse backed by cutting-edge technology have heightened geopolitical tensions. Preserving strategic autonomy is the best option for India to protect its national interests

This coffee-table book opens a window to the practice of Buddhism in Japan, right from its arrival in that country 1,000 years ago to its growth through the worship of deities of Indian origin.

Benoy Behl's images illuminate the pages and present an invaluable account of Japan's links with Hinduism and with its Buddhist past



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U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on November 9, 2017.

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LOOMING CONFRONTATION



The U.S. and China seem to be moving inexorably towards a serious conflict, and it can be **detrimental to India's national interests** in the long run if it gets caught in the middle. BY JOHN CHERIAN

AT A TIME WHEN MOST OF THE WORLD remains focussed on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the United States and China are engaged in a quarrel over a host of issues that threatens to get out of control and enmesh the international community. The Donald Trump administration's inability to contain the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic in the U.S. has prompted the targeting of China. With President Trump facing an uphill task in the 2020 presidential election, his strategists seem to have calculated that his only route to victory is blaming China for the pandemic and the economic ills that have befallen the country in the last four years. In a racist rant in a recent statement, Trump

accused the Chinese government "of concealing the virus and unleashing it upon the world", without, as usual, providing any evidence. The U.S. and China have been embroiled in trade disputes for quite some time.

The introduction of new national security laws by the Chinese government in Hong Kong, after protesters there made the important global financial hub virtually ungovernable, has led to the U.S. and the United Kingdom imposing more sanctions on China. Trump ordered an end to the preferential trade status enjoyed by Hong Kong. The "Hong Kong Autonomy Act", unanimously passed by the U.S. Congress in early July, has given approval for the sanctioning of senior Hong

has been trying to prod the South-East Asian countries that have territorial claims in the area to become more assertive militarily and diplomatically against China. The U.S. is also trying to draw other countries like India in the broader region into the South China Sea dispute.

NEIGHBOURS MORE CIRCUMSPECT

After India's recent face-off with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Narendra Modi government seems more inclined to jump into the South China Sea dispute on the side of the U.S. In comparison, many South-East Asian nations involved in the dispute are taking a more cautious stance. The Philippine government, despite a favourable decision from a U.N.-constituted arbitral tribunal in 2016, has put the territorial dispute on the back burner, opting instead for stronger commercial and diplomatic relations with China. In the second week of July, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's spokesman emphasised that the maritime dispute "does not sum up our relations with China" and reaffirmed that the government did not want to enforce the 2016 ruling. Benigno Aquino, the Philippine President who went to the international tribunal, had adopted a pronounced anti-China foreign policy and was very close to the U.S. An American legal firm had drafted the legal case for the Philippines.

Vietnam, which has been the most vociferous in staking its territorial claims in the South China Sea, has been careful to not gang up militarily with the U.S. Vietnam and China fought a brief but bloody border war in 1979. The differences on the land border between the two countries have since been resolved.

The U.S. accuses China of not adhering to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Unlike China, the U.S. is not a signatory to the Convention, and yet it insists that other countries adhere strictly to its clauses. The Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman said in the second week of July that the South China Sea was part of the Global Commons and therefore India had an abiding interest "in peace and stability in the region". The spokesman was reacting to a comment by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that China's territorial claim in the South China Sea "was completely unlawful". Pompeo also denounced China's "bullying" of smaller powers and its alleged flouting of the international rules-based system. The Indian statement was an implicit endorsement of the U.S.' hawkish stance on the South China Sea issue. The U.S. has now formally stated its support for the claims of the South-East Asian

JUNE 29, 2019: U.S. President Donald Trump with Chinese President Xi Jinping during a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan.

Kong officials and banks. Many observers have viewed the Trump administration's moves as self-defeating. The U.S. had a trade surplus of \$26.1 billion with Hong Kong last year. More than 1,300 American companies operate from there, and around 85,000 American citizens are resident in Hong Kong.

In recent months, the U.S. has attempted to whip up tensions in the South China Sea by provocatively despatching two of its biggest aircraft carriers along with submarines into the area when the Chinese navy was carrying out a drill. Rarely do drills by competing countries happen at the same time. Rear Admiral George Wikoff, commander of the strike group led by the USS Ronald Reagan, said that the American naval exercises were in response to China's growing military assertiveness in the region. The Trump administration

countries over the South China Sea. None of the governments concerned has welcomed this unsolicited support and interference in the affairs of the region. For that matter, Taiwan, America's close ally, supports China's historic claim to the entirety of the South China Sea, though it has chosen to remain quiet on the issue.

In response to Pompeo's comments, China's Foreign Ministry said that Beijing was strongly committed to peacefully resolving disputes with other nations. China warned the nations of the region to "beware of sabotage" by the U.S. Most ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries do not want outside powers meddling in their maritime dispute with China any more than China does. The ASEAN grouping had agreed to formalise a "code of conduct" agreement with China to regulate actions in the South China Sea by 2021. It is based on the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which was signed by China and the 10 ASEAN states. ASEAN members have territorial disputes among themselves too. Indonesia and Vietnam, for instance, have a maritime boundary dispute.

Until the end of the last century, the South China Sea was treated as an American lake. Things have begun to change in the 21st century, with an assertive China determined to protect its interests and keep the U.S. military at a distance from the mainland. As it is, many U.S. military bases are in close proximity to the Chinese mainland. Japan, China's main regional rival, hosts large U.S. military bases. The U.S. also has big military bases in nearby Guam, South Korea and South-East Asian countries such as the Philippines and Singapore.

The Strait of Malacca, through which much of China's sea trade is routed, is particularly amenable to a blockade by its strategic enemies. China has countered this threat by converting many natural and man-made islands into military bases in the South China Sea. The Malacca Strait forms the shortest waterway linking the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. It is shallow and narrow, only 2 km wide at its narrowest.

In fact, many strategic experts predict that the heavy military build-up by the Americans, coupled with the Trump administration's high-decibel rhetoric demonising the Chinese government, could spark a full-blown war between the two countries. The Chinese side is prepared for a worst-case scenario, as recent statements by senior Chinese military and Communist Party officials have indicated.

After the recent clashes between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on the LAC, the Indian Navy chief, Admiral Karambir Singh, said that he had conveyed to the government the country's naval options to relieve pressure on the northern borders. In December 2019,



Admiral Singh described China as an "un-resident naval power" in the Indian Ocean. Since then, the Indian Navy has increased its surveillance missions and operations in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Navy has been more than happy to partner with the Americans in doing so. In fact, the Indian Navy chief boasted that India was the U.S.' "first responder" and "preferred security partner". The relationship between the two navies is so close that there is now an Indian officer posted in the U.S. Navy's Central Command (NAVCOM) in Bahrain.

The annual "Malabar" exercises and the establishment of a quadrilateral military alliance with the U.S., Japan and Australia are targeted against China. With the inclusion of Australia in the Malabar exercises, India hopes to expand its military reach into the broader Indo-Pacific region. With the Strait of Malacca in focus, the Indian Navy has upgraded its naval base in the Andamans, located just 80 nautical miles from the Malacca Strait. India has purchased U.S.-made Sea Hawk helicopters worth \$2.6 billion, boosting the Navy's anti-submarine capabilities. Both the U.S. and India have expressed concern about the increase in Chinese submarine activity in the Indian Ocean region.

The Indian Navy in July participated in exercises with the U.S. aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and other American ships in the Indian Ocean which were part of a U.S. naval strike force that the Trump administration had sent to the South China Sea region. A statement by the U.S. Navy said that the Nimitz Carrier Strike Force was currently deployed in the Indian Ocean in support of "a free and open Indo-Pacific". The aim of the joint exercises is "to improve interoperability" of the two navies, the U.S. spokesman said.

GALWAN FALLOUT

After the recent incidents along the LAC, the Modi government seems eager to deepen the military partnership with the U.S. and its close allies like Japan and Australia. The U.S. and India have already signed military agreements similar to the ones North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries have with the U.S. In 2015, the two sides signed a document called "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region". Recent India-U.S. defence agreements include the Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement, which gives basing facilities to American soldiers; the renewed Defence Framework Agreement; and the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement. In 2016, the Trump administration granted "major defence partner" status to India.

Nirmala Sitharaman, when she was Defence Minister, had said that defence cooperation had



NYT

become "the most significant dimension" of the strategic partnership between the two countries and "the key driver of our overall strategic relationship". According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), U.S. arms exports to India have risen dramatically since the Modi government took over. The U.S. has sold arms worth over \$20 billion to India in the last six years.

Pompeo said that the U.S. had "never been more supportive of India's security" and that India was "an important partner and key pillar" of the Trump administration's foreign policy.

A senior SIPRI researcher told *The New York Times* in December last year: "India is now at a level where it's basically like a NATO partner even if there is no alliance."

India's military embrace of the U.S. and the sacrifice of the country's strategic autonomy have not gone unnoticed in the region and the world. One of the reasons attributed to the Chinese army's recent exertions along the LAC is a growing belief in China that India is actively assisting the U.S. in the build-up to a military confrontation. China feels that some of India's recent actions do not adhere to the "Wuhan spirit".

CHINA'S ALLIES IN THE REGION

All countries in the region, barring India and Bhutan, have good relations with China. Nepal has shifted away from India dramatically in the last decade and is now noticeably closer to China. Some short-sighted moves by the Modi government have backfired. After the Doklam fiasco on the border between Bhutan and China, Bhutan too seems eager to chart its own foreign policy course. Bhutan is the only country that does not have full diplomatic relations with China. Freely spending

AN F/A-18E SUPER HORNET lands on the flight deck of the USS Ronald Reagan in the South China Sea on July 6. Photograph provided by the U.S. Navy. The U.S. has been ratcheting up its naval presence in the Pacific.

Chinese tourists had started visiting the country in large numbers and were a source of valuable foreign exchange. The Bhutanese would like to settle their border dispute with China. Beijing has once again made an offer for an exchange of territory: a "package solution" involving a territorial swap with China handing over territory to the north of Bhutan in exchange for territory on the west. Doklam falls in this area. China had earlier made a similar proposal, which the Bhutanese were tempted to accept because the country would make a gain in territory. But the Indian government dissuaded the Bhutanese from accepting it.

The Chinese have built deep sea ports in Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan and are in the process of building one in Kyaukpyu in Myanmar. The ports are part of the infrastructure-building work undertaken under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The port in Myanmar will help China avoid the Malacca Strait while accessing goods and energy from the West Asian market. But policymakers in Washington and New Delhi believe that these ports could potentially be used as military bases by the expanding Chinese Navy.

India, with great fanfare, had signed an agreement to develop the Iranian port of Chabahar, which lies adjacent to Gwadar. The project has been hanging fire for a long time as the Indian government has failed to start serious work on the upgradation of the port because of American pressure and a resource crunch.

The Iranian government, labouring under draconian

Pressuring China

THAT relations between Washington and Beijing are spiralling downward has been apparent for some time. If any more evidence was needed, it was provided by the Donald Trump administration's decision to summarily ask the Chinese government to vacate its consulate in Houston, Texas, on July 22. The administration alleged that the consulate was "a hub of illegal activity" and gave it only three days to close down. China had no option but to reciprocate. Two days later it asked the Americans to vacate their consulate in Chengdu in Sichuan province in the south-western part of the country.

The order for the closure of the United States mission in Chengdu came a day after yet another bellicose speech by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Speaking at the Richard Nixon library on July 23, he declared that the U.S. would henceforth target every aspect of the bilateral relationship. "We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won't get it done," he said. "We must not continue it and we must not return to it."

President Nixon was the first U.S. President to establish full diplomatic relations with China. Pompeo, a conservative Republican like Nixon, representing another right-wing Republican administration, is more intent on starting a new Cold War.

The closure of consulates was preceded by tit-for-tat restrictions that the two countries imposed on the movement of diplomats. In June, the Trump administration initiated visa restrictions and expelled Chinese journalists. Washington sharply reduced the number of Chinese journalists allowed to work in the U.S., claiming that they all worked for their government. The Chinese side has reciprocated by asking many American journalists to leave.

The Trump administration has started the process of revoking the visas of thousands of Chinese students and researchers in U.S. universities, claiming that they had ties with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese government. The more than 3,00,000 Chinese students form a huge source of revenue for the U.S. The Chinese government has not taken any action against the thousands of Americans working in China.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said the closure of the U.S. consulate in Chengdu was a "necessary response" to the U.S.' "unjustified act". China apparently chose the Chengdu consulate for closure because of its proximity to the autonomous provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang. If it wanted to retaliate in a stronger way, it could have ordered the closing



PROTESTERS hold up signs and flags outside the closed Chinese consulate in Houston on July 24. China is fast becoming an issue in election-bound U.S.

down of the consulate in Hong Kong, which is full of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives and covert agents.

'CONCENTRATION CAMPS'

According to the U.S., more than a million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities such as Tajiks are being detained in Xinjiang. In late July, Pompeo for the first time went to the extent of stating that there were "concentration camps" in Xinjiang.

The Chinese government flatly denies the allegation. At a meeting on the sidelines of the National People's Congress held last year, Shohrat Zakir, chairman of the Xinjiang government, said: "Some voices internationally have said that Xinjiang has concentration camps or re-education camps. These claims are pure lies." He said that what the West described as concentration camps were in fact "educational training" centres where people were taught vocational skills and these were part of a "de-radicalisation" programme.

Many Uyghurs had joined radical groups like the Islamic State and the Al Qaeda and were in the forefront of the fighting in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Some of them were involved in heinous terror incidents inside China. China has blamed the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) for the attacks. The U.S., incidentally, had held 22 Uyghur terrorists in Guantanamo Bay on charges of terrorism. Yet, Washington has once again started supporting the Uyghur separatist movement, giving it the kind of importance that it accords to the Tibetan separatist movement. The CIA-funded National Endowment of Democracy gives financial support to the World Uyghur Conference and the American Uyghur Association.

Chinese officials point out that the U.S., which has the biggest prison population in the world, should be the last country to complain about mass internment. The Trump administration recently ordered Federal

troops into cities to put down peaceful protests.

Trump has been floating the idea of expanding the G7 grouping into a G11 grouping by including Russia, India, South Korea and Australia. China is pointedly excluded. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was quick to accept Trump's invitation to attend, to the chagrin of the Chinese government. Russia, on the other hand, has chided the U.S. for not including China. Excluding the world's second biggest economy from such a grouping is laughable.

EGGING TAIWAN ON

The U.S. has also been encouraging Taiwan to adopt a belligerent position on the reunification issue. China wants Taiwan to rejoin the motherland under the "one country, two systems" formula. In order to prevent this, the Trump administration has virtually changed the "one China" policy that the U.S. followed after the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1979. After being elected President, Trump talked to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen before making a call to Chinese President Xi Jinping. In July 2019, the Trump administration approved a \$2 billion arms deal with Taiwan despite strong objections from China.

Only a few countries support the Trump administration's hard-line policy against China. The European Union has refused to side with attempts to diplomatically isolate China over a host of issues, including the passage of the national security law in Hong Kong. Even Japan refused to join the U.S. in condemning the recent steps China has taken in Hong Kong. It is even less likely that America's allies will back its military containment policy against China.

The Trump administration has been trying to divert the American public's attention from the serious mismanagement of the pandemic as the presidential election approaches. After the latest development, China's foreign ministry spokesperson said: "We are not interested in interfering in the American elections. We also hope that the American side will not use the China card in the election."

China has been buying large quantities of American wheat, sorghum, pork and corn. It has so far not reneged on its commitment to the Phase-1 Trade agreement it signed with the U.S. in January this year. If it stops importing the large amounts of food from the U.S. that it has committed to under the agreement, the American farming community, which voted massively for Trump in the last election, will receive a hard blow. But China does not want to burn all its bridges with the U.S. It would prefer to wait and watch until the results of the U.S. presidential election are out.

John Cherian

American sanctions, has finally lost patience. In the third week of July, Iran announced that an important rail project that India was to undertake, connecting the Chabahar port to Zahedan, would now be completed without Indian participation. The line is to be extended to Zaranj, across the border in Afghanistan. The railway was a trilateral agreement between Iran, India and Afghanistan to build an alternative trade route to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. India signed the rail agreement four years ago but then apparently lost interest after the Trump administration re-instituted sanctions on Iran. From available indications, China will step into the project.

The Iranian government said that the \$400 million project would be completed in two years. The announcement followed the news that Iran was on the verge of signing a 25-year, \$400-billion strategic partnership deal with China, involving investments in infrastructure, manufacturing and upgrading of energy and transport facilities, ports, refineries and other installations. Iran had proposed a tie-up between the Chabahar and Gwadar ports. The Gwadar port is an important component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Iran has already offered parts of the Gwadar port to China for development. If India dilly-dallies any further, the entire Chabahar project will fall into China's lap.

In the same week, India lost its stake in the Farzad-B gas field in the Persian Gulf, estimated to possess 21.7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation had discovered the field, and India was expected to invest \$6 billion to develop it. After India kowtowed to the Trump administration's ultimatum to cease all economic dealings with Iran, it was clear to the Iranians that the promised Indian investments would not be forthcoming any time soon. It will not come as a surprise if the contract for developing the field goes to a Chinese company.

India's siding with the U.S. in the Asia Pacific region can be detrimental to its national interests in the long run. Preserving "strategic autonomy" still remains a laudable goal, notwithstanding External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's claim that times have changed and groupings like the Non-Aligned Movement have lost their relevance. Pompeo, meanwhile, urged India to "move supply chains away from China and reduce its reliance on Chinese companies in areas like telecommunications, medical supplies and others".

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has admitted that relations between Beijing and Washington are at a historic low and are facing the biggest challenges since diplomatic relations were established in 1979. Wang, however, emphasised that China "never intends to challenge or replace the U.S.". But most American policymakers, cutting across party lines, view China as a clear and imminent danger. A few years ago, Henry Kissinger predicted that from a "historical point of view, China and the U.S. are almost destined for a conflict". India should not be caught in between. □

Trade and tensions

The Donald Trump administration uses every mechanism to cut China out of the global supply chain, but nothing seems to be working as a resolute China is unwilling to back down and dismantle its technological gains. BY VIJAY PRASHAD

NOT A DAY GOES BY WITHOUT A STRONG statement against China from the Donald Trump administration. United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been particularly blustery. On June 19, he addressed the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, a platform set up by the Alliance of Democracies (created in 2017 by Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or NATO). China, Pompeo said, had become a “rogue actor” and Europeans must join the U.S. in a grand alliance against it. “I’ve seen tyranny first-hand,” Pompeo said. “And I’ve dealt with all manner of unfree regimes in my previous role as Director of the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and now in my current role as Secretary of State of the United States of America. The choice isn’t between the United States and China, but it is between freedom and tyranny.”

Such is the old Cold War language, the clichés of freedom and authoritarianism, that the State Department had deployed against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Underneath the use of the word “freedom” sits uncomfortable facts, such as that the U.S. has the largest prison population in the world and that it has been the primary instigator of bloody wars across the planet. Such facts are brushed aside. Pompeo can even bring up the CIA to establish the essential “freedom” of the West against China. No eyebrows were raised at the Copenhagen summit.

At an earlier time, China would have ignored these statements. But not now. Wang Wenbin, spokesperson for China’s Foreign Ministry, called Pompeo’s statements about China and COVID-19 “groundless”; he accused Pompeo of lying to the public. Xu Bu, China’s ambassador to Chile, has been outspoken in his criticism of Pompeo and the anti-China rhetoric that the U.S. has tried to spawn across Latin America. In the Chilean newspaper *La Tercera*, Xu Bu called Pompeo a “liar”. That both Wang Wenbin and Xu Bu have accused Pom-

peo of lying suggests a new attitude from Beijing; these are strong words in the world of diplomacy. Chinese diplomats have been making the case from Chile to Iran that their country has been actively engaged to the mutual advantage of both China and the individual countries; this, they say, is the opposite of the U.S. position, which facilitates agreements to the advantage of multinational corporations and not to the various countries of the world.

Matters have escalated rapidly. In late July, the U.S. told the Chinese Foreign Ministry that its consulate in Houston must be closed in a few days. No specific allegations were made against this consulate, but the general tenor is that this is part of a U.S. government attack on

Chinese espionage against U.S. businesses. The Chinese Foreign Ministry said that this was a “political provocation unilaterally launched by the U.S. side, which seriously violates international law, basic norms governing international relations, and the bilateral consular agreement between China and the United States”.

These diplomatic spats came after Pompeo made a tough statement saying that the U.S. would contest China in the entire territory of the South China Sea. This has already been U.S. policy for decades, but the mere statement of it in such a brusque manner and the deployment of the two U.S. aircraft carriers—the USS *Nimitz* and the USS *Ronald Reagan*—into the region significantly raised the stakes. China responded by sending forces onto two islands in the Paracel Archipelago to conduct live-fire drills. The Chinese government has said that it is responding to U.S. intervention, which “is the real pusher of militarisation in the South China Sea”.

Wrapped up in this war of words are a range of issues that the U.S. raises punctually to intimidate China: allegations of industrial espionage, allegations of currency manipulation, allegations around the coronavirus pandemic, allegations of human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Each issue is not taken seriously by itself, but the group of issues together are utilised to paint a portrait of China as either dangerous or unreliable, and—as the rhetoric gathers force—that the Chinese government must be changed. There is no doubt that behind the U.S. policy since 1949 has been a desire to overthrow the Communist government in Beijing; no doubt yet that the rapprochement in 1972 when President Richard Nixon went to China was merely a wedge in the Cold War and

not a true reconciliation with the Chinese government; no doubt either that the current heightened tension is not merely about currency manipulation or Hong Kong, but about the desire to damage China’s rise in the world and change the political situation within China.

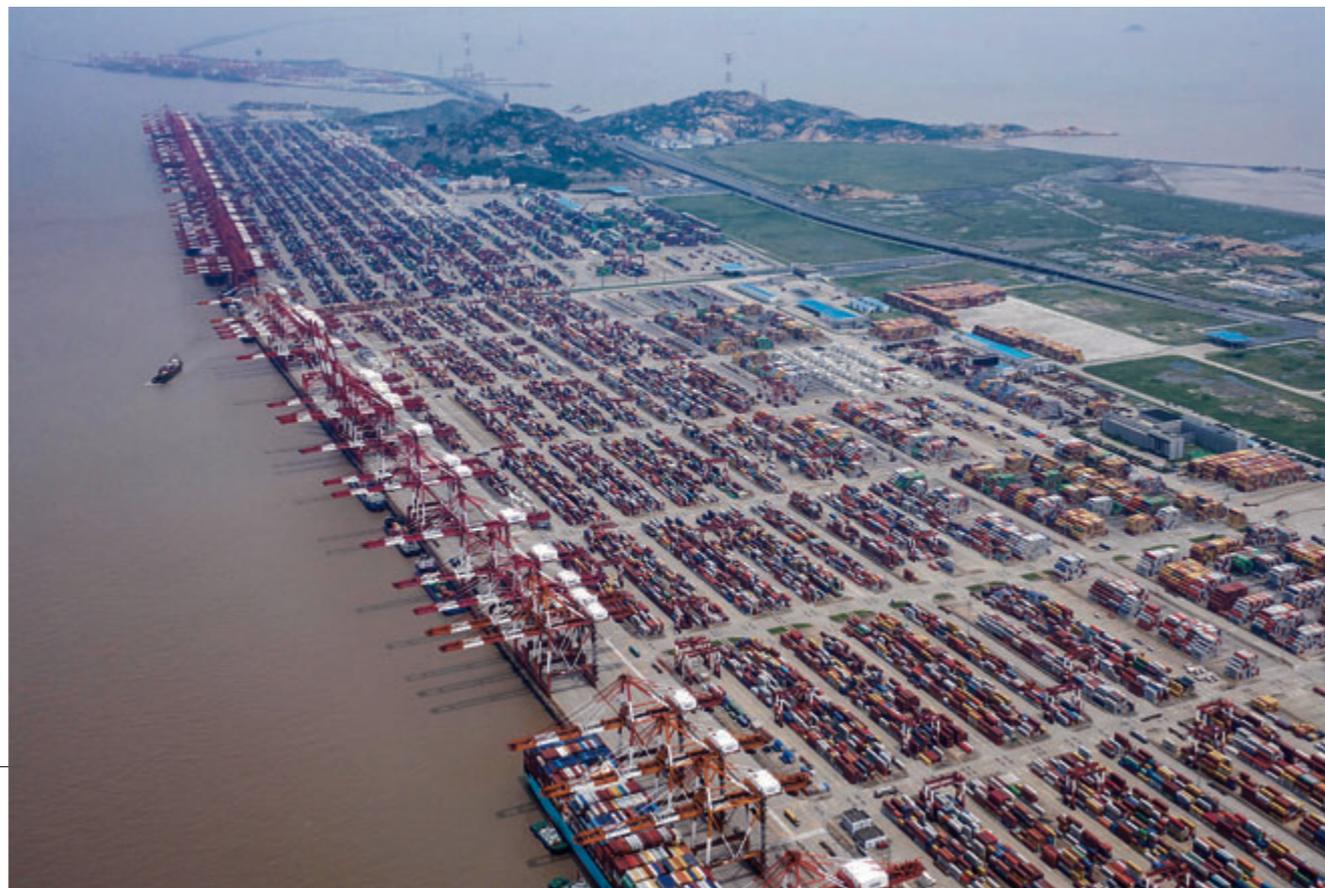
On April 1, Admiral Philip Davidson—the head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command—told Congress that he would like \$20 billion to create a robust military cordon that runs from California to Japan and down the Pacific Rim of Asia. His proposal, titled “Regain the Advantage”, pointed to the “renewed threat we face from Great Power Competition. ... Without a valid and convincing conventional deterrent, China and Russia will be emboldened to take action in the region to supplant U.S. interests.” In January 2019, Acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan told U.S. military officials that the problem was “China, China, China”. This has been the key focus of all Trump nominees for the Defence Department, whether it be Shanahan or the current chief, Mark Esper. Esper cannot open his mouth without blaming China. He told the Italian paper *La Stampa* that China was using the coronavirus emergency to push its advantage through “malign” forces such as Huawei and by sending aid to Italy. As far as Trump and Esper are concerned, China and to a lesser extent Russia are to be contained by the U.S. with armed force.

MISSILE GAP IN CHINA’S FAVOUR

Senator Tom Cotton (Republican from Arkansas) has pushed the view that China’s military modernisation programme has created a missile gap in its favour. In March 2018, Cotton asked Admiral Harry Harris, commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (now U.S. Ambassador to South Korea), about China’s missiles. “We are at a disadvantage with regard to China today in the sense that China has ground-based ballistic missiles that threaten our basing in the western Pacific and our ships,” Harris told Congress. To remedy this, Harris suggested that the U.S. exit from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which Trump did in early 2019 (Trump blamed Russian non-compliance, but it was clear that the real target was this fear of a Chinese missile advantage). In August 2019, the U.S. tested an intermediate-range missile, signalling that its intentions long preceded its withdrawal from the INF.

In March 2019, Cotton went to the Heritage Foundation to say that the U.S. should start production of medium-range ballistic missiles, which should be deployed at bases on the U.S. territory of Guam and on the territories of its allies; these missiles should directly threaten China. “Beijing has stockpiled thousands of missiles that can target our allies, our bases, our ships, and our citizens throughout the Pacific,” Cotton said in characteristic hyperbole. Exaggeration is central to people like Cotton. For them, fearmongering is the way to produce policy, and facts are inconvenient.

In November 2018, before the U.S. left the INF, Admiral Davidson spoke at a think tank in Washington on “China’s Power”. In 2015, Davidson said his prede-



SHIPPING CONTAINERS seen at the Yangshan Deepwater Port in this aerial photograph taken in Shanghai, China, on July 12.

cessor Harry Harris had joked that the islands off the coast of the People's Republic of China were a "Great Wall of Sand". Now, he said, these had become a "Great Wall of SAMs", referring to surface-to-air missiles. Davidson, from the military side, and Cotton, from the civilian side, began to say repeatedly that China had a military advantage by the "missile gap", a concept that required no careful investigation.

The U.S. has the largest military force in the world. In April, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute found that the U.S. military budget rose by 5.3 per cent over the previous year to total \$732 billion; the increase over one year was by itself the entire military budget of Germany. China, meanwhile, spent \$261 billion on its military, lifting its budget by 5.1 per cent. The U.S. has 6,185 nuclear warheads, while China has 290. Only five countries have missiles that can strike anywhere on earth: the U.S., Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France. Be in terms of intercontinental weapons or air power, China simply does not possess a military advantage over the U.S.

Every known inventory of weapons shows that the U.S. has a much greater capacity to wreak havoc in a military confrontation against any country, including China, but the U.S. understands that while it can blast a country, it can no longer subjugate all countries. Chillingly, the U.S.' allies are now moving their own forward policy: Japan has indicated that it will develop a "first-strike" position. India, however, has been aggressively joining U.S.-driven naval exercises in the Indian Ocean.

Admiral Davidson's April report calls for "forward-based, rotational joint forces" as the "most credible way to demonstrate U.S. commitment and resolve to potential adversaries". What the Indo-Pacific Command means is that rather than have a fixed base that is vulnerable to attack, the U.S. will fly its bombers into bases on the soil of its allies in the Indo-Pacific network (Australia, India, and Japan) as well as others in the region (South Korea, for instance); the bombers, he suggests, will be better protected there. China will still be threatened, but Chinese missiles will—so the theory goes—find it more difficult to threaten mobile U.S. assets. Davidson's report has a stunning science fiction quality to it. There is a desire for the creation of "highly survivable, precision-strike networks" that run along the Pacific Rim, including missiles of various kinds and radars in Palau, Hawaii, and in space. He asks for vast amounts of money to develop a military that is already very powerful. Furthermore, the U.S. is committed to the development of anti-space weapons, autonomous weapons, glide vehicles, hypersonic missiles, and offensive cyber weapons—all meant to destabilise missile defence techniques and to overpower any adversary. Such developments presage a new arms race that will be very expensive and further destabilise the world order.

Trump's trade war has oscillated between blunt statements about cutting out China from the global supply chain and sanctioning Chinese Communist Party mem-



U.S. SECRETARY of State Michael Pompeo speaking at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library & Museum in Yorba Linda, California, on July 23. Pompeo cast China's leaders as tyrants bent on global hegemony.

bers to being conciliatory to Chinese production and to China's role as the supplier of goods and credit to the world. Reality is hard to stomach, and the trade war itself seems grounded in enormous doses of unreality. Tariffs on Chinese goods assume that these goods do not already have inputs from the U.S. in them (which they do have) and they assume that the goods are not being produced on behalf of U.S. multinationals (which they are); Trump's trade war hurt Chinese exports, certainly, but they also damaged the global economy considerably. Latitude for a scorched earth policy against China's trade is simply not available.

Australia, a loyal U.S. ally, for instance, was partly shielded from the coronavirus recession by its trade with China. Keith Pitt, Australia's Minister for Resources, said in late July, "Resources have been a shining light of Australia's economic story. The sector has managed to keep pretty much all its people employed and engaged, that is over 240,000 direct jobs. If you look at iron ore specifically, 62 per cent of China's iron ore imports came from Australia in 2019-20." Any escalation of trade wars between China and Australia will hurt the latter's economy fatally. India decided to ban Chinese-made apps, which account for a large percentage of apps, but found it impossible to substitute them with apps made elsewhere, which is why clones of these apps have now returned to Indian phones. Any attempt to cut China out of the global supply chain in general—a stated U.S. policy—will simply not be possible in the short or medium term. Reliance on China for its industrial production—not only of the extraction of raw materials but of the production of high-tech commodities—is almost total for all countries in the world; it will be expensive, in the midst of the coronavirus recession, to pivot on such an enormous scale.

Neither the issue of Hong Kong nor the issue of Xinjiang is important for themselves. To imagine that Western governments, which had no problem with the destruction of Iraq and Libya and the archipelago of



DEFENCE SECRETARY Mark Esper. As far as President Donald Trump and Esper are concerned, China and to a lesser extent Russia are to be contained by the U.S. with armed force.

"dark sites" for torture (including the U.S. base at Guantanamo), now have a special concern for Muslims is to bedevil the imagination; accusations about human rights violations in Xinjiang are being made for political and commercial ends not on strictly human rights grounds. Certainly, the new laws over Hong Kong's security, minor compared to the lack of any political freedoms in Saudi Arabia, can hardly be the actual issue that detains the British government; as it seeks to sanction China, it increases arms deals to Saudi Arabia. These issues—Hong Kong and Xinjiang—are part of a wider assault on China's role in the world, to weaken China in the public imagination since China cannot be easily weakened economically.

5G TECHNOLOGY

It is one thing for China to be the workshop of the world, to deliver its workers for multinational corporations. It is another for China to become a key technological producer in the world. That is the reason why the U.S. government—pushed by Silicon Valley—has gone after the Taiwan-based technology company Huawei. The next generation of high-speed wireless technology, 5G, is currently being dominated by Huawei, with Sweden's Ericsson and Finland's Nokia far behind. No U.S. firm is near these three in the production of 5G technology.

In April 2019, the U.S. government's Defence Innovation Board released a report that noted: "The leader of 5G stands to gain hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue over the next decade, with widespread job creation across the wireless technology sector. 5G has the potential to revolutionise other industries as well, as technologies like autonomous vehicles will gain huge benefits from the faster, larger data transfer. 5G will also enhance the Internet of Things by increasing the amount and speed of data flowing between multiple devices and may even replace the fibre-optic backbone relied upon by so many households. The country that owns 5G will own

many of these innovations and set the standards for the rest of the world. For the reasons that follow, that country is currently not likely to be the United States." Since U.S. firms are unable to manufacture the equipment currently made by Huawei and others, only 11.6 per cent of the U.S. population is covered by 5G. There is no indication that AT&T and Verizon will be able to manufacture fast enough the kind of transmitters needed for the new technological system.

The erosion of U.S. firms in the telecommunications industry can be directly attributed to the deregulation of industry by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Many firms fought to gain market share, with different mobile standards and carrier plans with different configurations that made it hard for consumers to switch companies. This fragmented market meant that no firm made the necessary investments towards the next generation. It has meant that U.S. firms are at a grave disadvantage when it comes to the next generation of technology.

The rapid advance of Huawei and European firms threatens both U.S. technology firms and the U.S. economy in general. Over the past few decades, the U.S. technology firms have become the main investors in the U.S. economy and are the engines of its growth. If these firms falter before companies such as Huawei, then the U.S. economy will begin to splutter on fumes. Trump's war against Huawei is not as irrational as it seems. His administration—like others before it—has used as much political pressure as possible to constrain the growth of technology in China. Accusations of theft of intellectual property and of close ties between the firms and the Chinese military are meant to deter customers for Chinese products. These accusations have certainly dented Huawei's brand, but they are unlikely to destroy Huawei's ability to expand around the world.

The attack on Huawei, with the U.K. now agreeing with the U.S. that it will not use its products, is a centerpiece of the anxiety over China. Mexico's candidate for the post of chief of the World Trade Organisation, Jesus Seade, said that he would like to use his job to ease the tension between the U.S. and China. He would like to create a robust "dispute resolution mechanism [which] could help settle U.S.-China trade tensions". But this misses the point. The tension is not over a lack of mechanisms to settle the dispute, since China and the U.S. have repeatedly spoken together about the differences. The problem is that the U.S. acknowledges that China's rapid technological growth is a generational threat to the main advantage that the U.S. has had for the past decades, namely its technological superiority. It is to prevent China's technological ascent that the U.S. has used every mechanism—from diplomatic pressure to military pressure; but none of these seem to be working. China, for now, is resolute. It is unwilling to back down and dismantle its technological gains. No resolution is possible unless there is an acknowledgment of reality: that China is equal to if not more advanced in terms of its technological production than the West, and that is not something that needs to be reversed by warfare. □

Colonial legacy

The **undefined border** between India and China, which has caused several incidents in the last couple of years, is a legacy of colonial rule. BY JOHN CHERIAN

AS THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT LIKES TO frequently remind the world, the Sino-Indian border dispute is a legacy of colonial rule. Chinese historians and commentators never fail to point out that the government in Beijing, even when it was at its weakest, had refused to accept the ad hoc border imposed by the British colonialists. The British organised a conference in Shimla in 1914, which the representatives of China and Tibet attended. The conference's objective was to negotiate a treaty that would demarcate the border between Tibet and British-ruled India. The British plan was to put pressure on the weak Chinese central government to grant more autonomy to the Tibetans and redraw the border in India's favour.

There was a bigger imperial British plan: to gradually dismember China, by first cutting off Tibet and then Xinjiang. Britain expected China, which was then under a weak central government and was being dictated to by European powers, to capitulate easily. The Chinese delegation refused to be browbeaten and succumb to the machinations of the British. But the British went ahead and signed an agreement with a handpicked Tibetan delegation delineating the northern border, which came to be known as the McMahon Line. It was named after a British colonial officer working in India by the name of Henry McMahon.

China vehemently rejected the ad hoc border that the British sought to thrust down its throat. The British warned the Chinese government that there would "be great trouble" if Beijing did not accept the McMahon Line as the border between Tibet and India. Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary at that time, warned: "If China does not sign but resorts to an aggressive policy, the consequences must be disastrous for China."

Both the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Communists under Mao Zedong refused to recognise the McMahon Line, arguing that Tibet was not an independent country and therefore had no right to sign a separate border agreement with the British.

Independent India and Communist China established good relations that lasted almost until the end of the first decade of Indian Independence. The Chinese side tried to prevail on the Indian government to negotiate an acceptable solution to the impasse on the border, but Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru swore by the sanctity of the McMahon Line bequeathed by the departing colonial power.

ZHOU ENLAI'S VISIT

In a last-ditch attempt to find an amicable solution to the border dispute, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visited New Delhi in 1960. The Chinese government offered to recognise India's claim over Arunachal Pradesh up to the McMahon Line in return for India's recognition of China's claim over the Aksai Chin peninsula. Nehru rejected the offer and adopted an inflexible diplomatic posture on the border issue.

Nehru was in a unique position to compromise as the border issue had not become as emotive as it is today. The ruling Congress party had an overwhelming majority in Parliament and controlled all the State legislatures. Only the Jan Sangh (the Bharatiya Janata Party's predecessor) and the small Socialist bloc led by Ram Manohar Lohia, all supporters of Tibetan independence, were against the resolution of the border issue.

The issue of Tibetan independence had become a "cause celebre" in the West and among right-wing and social democratic political parties in India. The Dalai Lama, who had raised the banner of revolt against the Chinese government, sought and was given political

APRIL 20, 1960: Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in New Delhi. The Chinese government offered to recognise India's claim over Arunachal Pradesh up to the McMahon Line in return for India's recognition of China's claim over the Aksai Chin peninsula. Nehru rejected the offer and adopted an inflexible diplomatic posture on the border issue.

refuge in India in 1959, angering Beijing. A Tibetan government-in-exile was set up under the Indian government's patronage with liberal funding from the West. The Chinese Communist Party did not let the Tibet issue come in the way of negotiations although a noticeable hardening of positions on each side was visible.

Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, has claimed that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) covert operations in Tibet, which had started in 1956, had made Beijing suspicious about India's reluctance to settle the border issue. With the tacit approval of the Indian authorities, the CIA had trained and financed a failed guerilla campaign under the leadership of Thondup for a few years after the 1962 war. It is indisputable that one of the major reasons the Chinese decided to go to war in 1962 against India was the perception that New Delhi wanted to restore the "status quo ante" in Tibet so that the autonomous region could return to its pre-1949 status.

'FORWARD POLICY'

Nehru's "forward policy", which gave the Indian military the green light to set up military outposts in territory under the military control of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), sparked off the 1962 war. The goal was to expel the Chinese military from all the areas claimed by India. It was a serious miscalculation. The Henderson-Brooks Report on the 1962 India-China war, which the

Indian government commissioned, concluded that the "forward policy" increased the chances of conflict with China. The classified report, which is now widely available online, stated that the Indian Army was not militarily in a position to implement Nehru's "forward policy". According to Chinese military scholars, Nehru's adventurist military policy was aimed at turning Tibet once again into "a buffer state" between India and China. The Chinese viewed this as a continuation of Britain's imperial policy.

There is no doubt that Nehru harboured sympathies for the Tibetan cause, but at the same time it should be remembered that it was India which turned down an U.S. proposal made in 1951 for joint action to support the cause of Tibetan independence. In 1954, India had formally recognised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. However, New Delhi also encouraged the Dalai Lama to fight for increased autonomy from Beijing. Beijing accused the Nehru government of playing a role in the uprising staged by the Dalai Lama's followers in Lhasa in 1959. Nehru had sent a message to the Dalai Lama saying that he was welcome to seek political sanctuary in India.

Bruce Riedel, who has held senior posts in the CIA and is an expert on the region, in his book *JFK's Forgotten Crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and the Sino-Indian War* (2017), has revealed that the covert operations by the CIA and others in Tibet played a role in Mao's decision to invade India. The Dalai Lama later said that the covert American actions were only part of the "Cold War tactics" to undermine the socialist bloc. The CIA was actively supporting the Tibetan separatists from 1957 to 1961 and it could not have been done without the cooperation of the Indian intelligence agencies.

After the recent clash between the Indian Army and the PLA on the Ladakh border, Riedel, in an article, observed that there was a danger of the clashes escalating into a full-blown war like the 1962 conflict "which almost brought the United States to war with China". Nehru had sent an SOS to John F. Kennedy, officially requesting for the U.S.' help after the Chinese invasion. Riedel writes that the Americans and the British had airlifted arms to India soon after the 1962 war to help the beleaguered Indian Army. But the aid was not enough to stave off a massive military defeat. According to recently declassified Kennedy administration documents, Nehru had asked for 350 U.S. war planes along with 10,000 U.S. Air Force personnel for help in bombing Chinese targets.

Before Kennedy could decide, the Chinese army had withdrawn from most of the Indian territory they had

The spurt in infrastructure building on the Indian side of the border has put the PLA on high alert.

occupied, keeping only parts of Aksai Chin they had claimed. Riedel also writes that the Kennedy administration restrained Pakistan from exploiting the situation in 1962. Pakistan wanted to seize Kashmir as the Indian Army was busy fighting the Chinese. “Kennedy made it clear that he would view any Pakistani involvement as an act of war,” Riedel has written.

CONFRONTATION IN 1967

The war lasted a month, with the PLA making deep inroads into Indian territory. The Chinese announced a ceasefire after less than a month of fighting. The McMahon Line was officially replaced by the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The next serious confrontation between the two armies occurred in 1967 at Nathu La and Cho La. Then, as now, the two sides had differing perceptions about the LAC. A scuffle between Indian and Chinese soldiers escalated into a full-fledged military fire fight at the time. More than 140 Indian soldiers were killed. The PLA, too, lost a large number of their troops. That was the last serious confrontation between the two sides until the events of June 15 this year in the Galwan valley.

The two sides were on the verge of clashing on several previous occasions but better sense prevailed. In 1986, the two sides were on the verge of a clash on the eastern border in Arunachal Pradesh following a misunderstanding about the goals of a military exercise the Indian Army conducted near Tawang. The eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation did not degenerate into a violent one.

THE 1993 PACT

To avoid further misunderstandings and accidental confrontations, India and China signed the landmark “Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control” in 1993. The pact’s confidence-building measures included a commitment by both sides against the use of force to settle disputes along the LAC and to resort to the dialogue process to settle boundary disputes. The two sides also pledged to reduce troop levels along the LAC. Additional border agreements were signed in 1996, 2005 and 2013.

But the undefined border between the two countries continued to witness several minor and a few slightly more serious incidents in the last couple of years. No shots, however, were fired in the past 35 years. But with the coming of the hyper-nationalistic Narendra Modi government to power, which coincided with the ascendance of the assertive President Xi Jinping, the temperature along the LAC has risen. The spurt in infrastructure building on the Indian side of the border, which included building of all-weather roads and the upgradation of airports in the Ladakh sector adjacent to Aksai Chin, has put the PLA on high alert.

The Chinese side would not have forgotten that the previous National Democratic Alliance government had openly identified China as India’s chief strategic rival while justifying the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee wrote a letter to the then U.S. President, Bill Clinton, explaining the rationale be-

hind the Pokhran test. “We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which has committed armed aggression against India in 1962. Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem,” the letter bluntly stated.

There were no major problems along the LAC during the 10-year rule of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that followed. However, it was in that period that the government started implementing the India-China Border Roads (ICBR) programme in a big way. The UPA government ordered the construction of 73 border roads in areas where India and China had differing perceptions about the border. After signing a defence agreement and the nuclear deal with the U.S., the UPA government had moved closer to Washington on key foreign policy and security issues, especially on issues pertaining to China.

The Barack Obama administration found a willing partner in the Indian government as it launched its military pivot to the East as part of its “containment policy” against China. The U.S. wanted India to strengthen its border infrastructure against China and possess a “blue water” navy that would project power in the Asia Pacific region in tandem with the U.S. Navy. It was the UPA government that started the permanent build-up of forces across the LAC and sanctioned the raising of a 70,000-strong mountain corps.

After the Doklam standoff, the Modi government further hastened the road construction. Many commentators attribute the Galwan clash to the construction by the military of an all-weather Darbuk-Sayok-Daulat Beg Oldie road. The road is situated very near the Karakoram Pass and the highway connecting Tibet to Xinjian. The road is crucial to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project and the Belt and Road Initiative. The CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan over which India has not relinquished claims.

RELATIONS OFF TO A BAD START

Sino-Indian relations got off to a bad start after Modi took over. The Dalai Lama’s Tibetan government-in-exile was invited for the Prime Minister’s swearing-in ceremony for the first time. On the campaign trail, Modi constantly criticised the Congress party for not taking a strong stand against China on the LAC and not raising the Tibet issue. India, under the BJP, started using the “Tibet card” more frequently. The Dalai Lama was allowed to visit Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the holiest places in Tibetan Buddhism. China refers to Ar-

India, under the Bharatiya Janata Party, started using the “Tibet card” more frequently.



MANISH SWARUP/AP

WORKERS of the Border Roads Organisation rest near Pangong Lake in Ladakh region on September 14, 2018. Many commentators attribute the Galwan clash to the construction by the military of an all-weather Darbuk-Sayok-Daulat Beg Oldie road.

unachal Pradesh as Southern Tibet and has not given up its claims on the region. Chinese forces had seized Tawang in 1962 but had withdrawn after declaring a ceasefire unilaterally. Relations were back on an even keel after the visit of Xi Jinping to India in 2014 where Modi hosted him in Ahmedabad.

For the Chinese side, therefore, the incident at Doklam in 2017 came as a surprise. The Chinese leadership was preparing for the all-important 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party scheduled in October of the same year. The face-off between the two militaries lasted more than two months in the desolate Himalayan heights. It ended only after both sides agreed “to withdraw” from the disputed area, situated at a trijunction where the borders of India, Bhutan and China intersect. The disputed area in Doklam was in fact a territory claimed by China and Bhutan. Last heard, the PLA has built permanent structures in the area they had occupied.

The Bhutanese side has been unwittingly caught in the middle of the conflicts between its two giant neighbours. The kingdom now seems to be on the way to resolving the border dispute with China on its own. It was after the Doklam incident that the 2018 Wuhan summit took place. Both Modi and Xi agreed “to properly manage and control their differences” and provide “strategic guidance” to their respective militaries to strengthen institutional mechanisms to prevent tensions from escalating in the border areas. The two leaders again met in

Chennai in 2019 and pledged to work together to promote regional and international cooperation.

The bonhomie of the last two years has evaporated within six months of the last meeting between the leaders of the two most populous countries in the world. After the June 15 incident which resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers, emotions are still running high, but both the sides have continued to talk and defuse tensions along the LAC.

The PLA has withdrawn from some of the “pressure points” it had occupied, and a buffer zone has been created to separate the two armies. In the third week of July, both sides agreed to not use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) near the friction points along the LAC. Earlier, the two armies had agreed on suspending foot patrolling for a month to reduce tensions. The corps commanders of the two armies have held four rounds of talks since the first week of June.

India is demanding the restoration of the status quo as it existed until earlier in the year. Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, on a visit to Ladakh in the third week of July, acknowledged that the negotiations could take time and ultimately might not bring the desired results.

The Indian External Affairs Ministry, in a statement issued on July 23, called on the Chinese side to work “sincerely” on the disengagement plan that the two sides had agreed upon after the discussions held between the Indian National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, and the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, in the first week of July. The PLA had not withdrawn from pressure points around the Pangong Tso lake which they had recently occupied. As both sides know, only a comprehensive agreement on the border, involving give and take on both sides, can bring about lasting peace. □

Debt as Chinese weapon?

Concerns over China's rise as a global economic power and its military prowess have led to a narrative that sees lending or **investment by China** in developing countries as a sign of expansionism. BY **C. P. CHANDRASEKHAR**

DECLARED BY THE UNITED STATES AND ITS allies as the leading threat to global stability, China has been accused of transgressions varying from stealing hi-tech secrets, spying and interfering in domestic politics of other countries to spreading viruses. Sometimes, even normal measures adopted by countries as part of their international economic relations are presented as crimes when they are practised by China. A case in point is lending abroad, especially to developing countries, including the poorest among them.

China, of course, deploys its hard currency surpluses in multiple forms in a wide range of countries, including the U.S., with a small share flowing to developing country partners. Rather than being seen as an inevitable fallout of China's successful accumulation of those surpluses, such capital transfers to developing countries are read as evidence of China's effort at trapping countries in debt and exploiting their vulnerability to control their natural and physical resources and bring them into its sphere of influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which promises large investments in infrastructure in countries in need of foreign finance, is seen as a convenient tool for China in this effort.

MAJOR CREDITOR IN THE WORLD

It is indeed true that in recent years, China has become a major creditor in the world economy. According to the Institute of International Finance, China's outstanding debt claims on the rest of the world had risen from \$875 billion in 2004 to \$5.5 trillion in 2019. The latter figure amounts to 6 per cent of world gross domestic product (GDP). This expansion in China's claims reflect the fact that, because of large current account surpluses it has earned over the years, it has accumulated large reserves and been forced to export capital to earn reasonable returns on those accumulated surpluses. Much of that went to developed country destinations. The outflows of capital in the form of portfolio investment in debt secur-

ities from China include investment in reserve assets, or low return and liquid paper in which foreign reserves are invested by Central banks and government. Flows of this kind amounted to as much as 4.5 per cent of global GDP. On the other hand, lending to overseas investment and construction projects that can be included under the BRI, is estimated at around \$730 billion or 13 per cent of China's total overseas debt claims. That figure is also only a third of the total value of China's overseas investment and construction exposure; this is estimated by the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker database as standing at \$2.1 trillion. Since there are limits (which have been falling) on the Chinese investment that developed countries and better-off developing countries would be willing to host, moving to



CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (formerly One Belt, One Road), which promises large investments in infrastructure in countries in need of foreign finance



THE LOTUS TOWER, a multifunctional telecommunications project funded by China, in Colombo.

less developed countries was an option that China had to exercise.

Lending to and investing in those countries do carry high risks. It is likely therefore that Chinese investment there would flow predominantly from government or state-owned enterprises, and they, too, would invest in countries and activities that are seen as benefiting the Chinese economy in multiple ways. For example, given its voracious appetite for natural resources during its long phase of extra-high growth, a significant share of investment went into activities that facilitated the extraction, transportation and export of those resources. The large investments this involved resulted in a spike in Chinese capital flows to these economies, many of which were income-poor but resource-rich.

It is true, as a result, that exposure to China is high for some low-income countries. Thus, according to the International Monetary Fund, China accounts for around 11 per cent of the external public debt of a group of 37 low-income countries covered in a study by the organisation. That is significantly higher than the share in total debt (5.9 per cent) of bilateral credit to these countries provided by members of the Paris Club. On the other hand, it is well short of the 25.7 per cent coming from bilateral credit flows from countries (excluding China) which are not members of the Paris Club, the 42.1 per cent from multilateral lenders and 15 per cent from commercial creditors.

A more elaborate and recent database, built by the World Bank, relates to 73 countries eligible for the G20's post-COVID-19 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), which provides for suspension of interest and amortisation payments from May 1, 2020 until the end of

the year. According to those numbers, the governments of this group of countries owed China \$104 billion at the end of 2018 or 20 per cent of their foreign debt, and that China accounts for around 30 per cent of their debt service in 2020. The exposure of individual countries varies significantly around this average, from a negligible share in a country such as Comoros to more than 90 per cent in the case of Tonga and the Maldives. Overall, this is indeed a substantial level of exposure, but the total owed to China is lower than the \$106 billion they owe the World Bank. These governments even owe \$60 billion to private bondholders. In Africa, the continent that is often presented as a test case of Chinese expansionism, multilateral institutions and the private sector are estimated to account for 35 and 32 per cent of debt respectively, as compared with China's 20 per cent. Not satisfied with these figures, controversial efforts are under way to argue that China's presence in these countries is under-reported because of a conscious Chinese strategy of hiding evidence on large parts of its international engagement.

That said, China has emerged as the single largest player in the developing world. This not just because of the surpluses it accumulated but developments in poor countries as well. The picture that emerges is that poor countries have pursued development trajectories that have kept them debt-dependent. The level of their exposure to debt is not restricted from the demand side, given the failure of these countries to hold back on incurring additional external debt, but from the supply side. On the other hand, capital flows from the developed countries on a bilateral basis are waning, with flows increasingly mediated through the multilateral institutions. Even though private flows are becoming more important globally,

Looking forward

The future of India-China relations in the wake of the Galwan Valley clash is not only a **historic challenge** to both countries but also our responsibility to future generations. BY **BOFENG HU**

THE GALWAN VALLEY CLASH OF JUNE 15 IS believed to be the first incident in nearly 45 years along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in which the armed forces personnel of both India and China were killed. Although Chinese officials have not disclosed the number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) casualties, the personal losses suffered by the soldiers' families are the same, whether Indian or Chinese. In this regard, no one wins the clash; we all lose.

Along with talks through military and diplomatic channels, both India and China have emphasised the need for an expeditious and phased de-escalation as a

priority. Currently, the Chinese frontline troops have disengaged on the ground. But we are probably still some way from reaching a complete understanding on the solution to the tension.

Fortunately, peaceful dialogue, and not confrontation, is under way. Talk benefits both sides while confrontation serves neither. Looking into the future of India-China relations, we have to find answers for some important questions. What kind of relationship should we build together in the interests of both countries as well as of the world? Will conflict and confrontation be unavoidable between the two? Can they “decouple” from



CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the second informal summit held at Mahabalipuram near Chennai on October 11, 2019.



ADAM DEAN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE HAMBANTOTA PORT, built by a state-owned Chinese company, now taken over by China on a 99-year lease in lieu of repayment of the loan by Sri Lanka.

such flows to poor countries or the so-called “frontier markets”, while rising, do not as yet make up for the inadequacy of official bilateral and multilateral flows relative to their demands.

It is not surprising, therefore, that when China decided to put its large foreign exchange hoard to use abroad, including in developing countries, rich and poor, the exposure of these countries to China increased significantly. But because of fears about China's rise as a global economic power, breaching frontiers in high-technology exports, and concern about its growing military prowess, this increased exposure has given rise to a narrative that sees even the pursuit of commercial and economic interests as a sign of expansionism. Credit from, and investment by, China are seen as a means of subordinating countries materially, politically and even culturally. Investment in or loans for production and export of raw materials are cited as evidence of colonial plunder. Resolution measures adopted in dealing with debt stress and default, involving sale of assets in lieu of debt service payments, are interpreted as evidence of that lending being (secretly) backed with those assets as collateral, the acquisition of which is seen as the real intent of Chinese engagement.

It is true that China's interests are not just altruistic. But that is just as true of all countries that have the wherewithal to increase their presence abroad and was true (and remains so) of the international engagement of the developed market economies that are part of the G20. The issue, if any, is whether China has insidiously exploited its advantageous position and deployed its resources in the form of debt to serve substantially expansionist objectives in the poorest countries.

DEBT RESTRUCTURING

Here, too, opinion can differ on how the evidence is interpreted. If a country chooses to take on excess debt from the rest of the world, including China, and finds itself unable to meet its debt service commitments, debt restructuring or rescheduling is inevitable. If the loan is

large, then the restructuring must go beyond a mere temporary suspension of payments or an extension of the term of the loan. These are the principles China, too, has adopted. For example, in the case of the loan provided to Sri Lanka for the Hambantota port, which the Sri Lankan government decided was no longer viable, China worked out an arrangement wherein it took over the port and 15,000 acres of surrounding land on a 99-year lease in lieu of payments due on the loan. This outcome of a wrong investment decision on the part of the Sri Lankan borrowers has been interpreted by its critics as the successful realisation of China's real goal when financing the project. A report in *The New York Times* argued that it was not a commercial decision but one based purely on strategic considerations, on the grounds that it “gave China control of territory just a few hundred miles off the shores of a rival, India, and a strategic foothold along a critical commercial and military waterway.”

When Myanmar suspended construction of the Myit-sone dam because of popular protest over adverse environmental consequences, but was not in a position to repay China which had financed the project, China agreed to accept repayment in the form of equity in new dams in the country. This, too, could be interpreted as part of a process of economic expansion. Criticism of China often seems to suggest that these loans had no economic rationale in the first place and were solely contracted to get these extraneous benefits.

This response to China's engagement with developing countries has, on occasion, taken a bizarre turn. Developed countries have opposed IMF support for debt-stressed developing countries on the grounds that the IMF's (and therefore their) money would be used to meet interest payments and pay off loans due to China. In the U.S., a group of 16 Republican senators have demanded that the Donald Trump administration insist that developing countries being considered for a debt restructuring or aid package be required to disclose their debt and other obligations to China. If China is seen as using debt to buy influence, providing money to pay off that debt must be a good thing, because it keeps those countries free of Chinese influence. But in the all-out opposition to China, born out of fears originating in its perceived rise to economic and military dominance, rational decision-making is sometimes the casualty.

China, meanwhile, continues to do what it thinks it must do, and claims to follow all international rules of economic engagement. When the G20 took the decision in the wake of the COVID-19 shock to provide debt relief in the form of suspended debt-service payments to poor countries seeking help, China signed on. It agreed to reschedule debt owed to it according to the G20 guidelines, rather than going solo and extracting strategic concession from its debtors. But clearly, the effort to isolate China economically and brand it enemy number one is bound to tell, as the growing aggression in China's rhetoric suggests. Whether and how this would affect its relations with its developing country partners is yet not clear. □

Divided over Huawei

The **coordinated attack** against Chinese telecom giant Huawei threatens to split the ranks of the Western alliance, even as Donald Trump's caprices endanger companies in the global telecom ecosystem. BY **V. SRIDHAR**



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

OCTOBER 21, 1954: Mao Zedong, Chairman of the People's Republic of China with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Peking (now Beijing).

each other? This is not only a historic challenge to both our countries but also our responsibility to future generations.

Seventy years ago, on April 1, 1950, India established diplomatic relations with China, thus becoming the first non-communist nation in Asia to do so. Photographs that capture the historic moment of the top leaders of both countries shaking hands still adorn my office wall. However, what I observe when I watch the debate taking place in Delhi is that India believes it faces a new China which has become more assertive, more expansionist and more aggressive. I appreciate all constructive thought and reflection. However, I believe that tactical conflict should not affect strategic judgment or shake our mutual trust and established policy.

Chinese President Xi Jinping said at the second “informal” summit held in Chennai in October 2019 that as important neighbours, “China and India are the only two countries with a population of more than one billion”, and also noted that maintaining and developing good relations between the two countries was China’s unwavering policy. China’s policy has not changed either before or after the stand-off in Ladakh. Therefore, the choice for us is clear. India and China have to work together to build a strong and stable relationship which is based on cooperation, peace, mutual trust and which looks forward.

To return to the tactical issue, besides the boundary conflict, India and China have a lot of points of friction which are sensitive and complicated. We need to find a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution through equal consultation and peaceful negotiation. That India and China differ on some issues is nothing to wonder about, nor does any disagreement not justify confrontation. We need to discuss the issues, but more

importantly, we need to understand the whole picture, which is that both countries need a peaceful and stable neighbour policy, and that no tactical accident should interrupt it.

MUTUAL DEPENDENCE

Some people are trumpeting the so-called decoupling of India-China relations in the spheres of economy, trade and even diplomacy. While it is undeniable that the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan emphasised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a smart policy, it is not a good excuse for decoupling, banning Chinese companies and rejecting their investments. India’s imports from China in 2019-2020 were \$65 billion of \$81 billion worth of bilateral trade. India exports raw material and intermediate products, and imports finished products, key components, and so on. According to recent reports, Chinese investments in the Indian economy total nearly \$8 billion in myriad sectors, including Indian start-ups and tech companies. Chinese smartphones such as Oppo, Vivo, OnePlus and Xiaomi command a lion’s share of the Indian market, and have also created a large number of local jobs. Just as Chinese companies have become dependent on the Indian market, India, too, relies on the China for many vital goods and services. Generally speaking, the decoupling of two countries in trade and economic development goes against globalisation and the tide of history. Personally speaking, considering China’s advantages in costs, markets, supply chains and its growing edge in innovation, to decouple from China is to decouple from opportunities.

Certain experts on diplomacy and strategy suggest that the Indian government play the Tibet, Hong Kong or Taiwan cards to balance or redefine India-China relations. On such issues, the one-China principle forms the political foundation of India-China relations. It would be unwise for India to touch the red line as it will cause long-term damage to our relations and even get India embroiled in an unwanted conflict. It is indeed harmful and not helpful.

It is fully understandable that there may be temporary jitters about a fast-developing China. But it is extremely dangerous and irresponsible to base Indian policy on protectionism and label China as a strategic rival or even as an adversary. Can a major adjustment of China policy, as touted by some, favour India? While I agree that all reactions and reassessment caused by the border clash be considered in a calm, rational, positive manner, so that we come to a right choice, we also need to think about how to develop together along with others. India and China, as great powers with responsibilities not only towards themselves but also to the world, have to base their policies on a good perception of common interests, on growing regional and global challenges. Do not allow suspicion, fear or hatred to hijack foreign policy. □

Bofeng Hu is associate senior journalist of People's Daily of China and a Fellow of Taihe Institution. Email: barryhbf@hotmail.com

NO CORPORATION IN THE HISTORY OF modern capitalism has faced the kind of coordinated attack that the global telecom equipment leader Huawei has in the last few months. The United States administration under President Donald Trump has not even pretended to abide by either diplomatic niceties or business courtesies. Instead, it has brazenly tried to obstruct the progress of a company that has had a meteoric rise in the global telecom business in the last decade (“Boycotting Chinese products: Bravado is no substitute for business” *Frontline*, July 31, 2020).

As the world stands at the cusp of the next wave of innovation in communications, heralded by the possibilities offered by 5G, the U.S. establishment’s unsubstantiated innuendo against the Chinese giant threatens to bend relations with its allies to breaking point. Meanwhile, the brash move threatens to disrupt or even wreck the 5G global technology ecosystem in which Huawei has played a key role.

ATTACK ON HUAWEI

For several years now there have been allegations, mostly unsubstantiated, that networks using Huawei components may be prone to attacks because of “back doors” that enable surveillance. These vague threats escalated in May 2019 when the Trump administration, citing allegations that Huawei had violated sanctions against Iran, barred U.S. companies from supplying



THE BRITISH FLAG and a smartphone with a Huawei and 5G network logo on a PC motherboard.

“dual-use” military-grade technology to Huawei.

But this move was largely inconsequential for U.S. companies because the sales of overseas subsidiaries of U.S. companies remained unaffected by the ban. For instance, even a leading chipmaker such as Intel has about 40 per cent of its assets located overseas. Other U.S. semiconductor companies such as Analog Devices, and leading chipmakers such as Samsung (South Korea) and TSMC (Taiwan), also have most of their productive assets located outside the U.S. The sale of the basic building block in electronics thus escaped the ban on supplies to Huawei.

The “top dozen” global semiconductor majors have only one-fifth of their physical assets located within the U.S., according to a recent estimate by *The Economist*. Thus, U.S. companies, too, have been participants in the global supply chain, which required their own production bases to be closely aligned with other entities in the global market.

Realising the utter inconsequence of his actions, Trump escalated the attack on Huawei a year later. On May 15, the U.S. administration announced that any entity, anywhere in the world, that supplied hardware or software that went into any components of Huawei-designed equipment would be barred from U.S. markets.

This marked a qualitative shift. The conflict now threatened to engulf entire supply chains not just in the telecom ecosystem but everything in the realm of electronics manufacturing. Not surprisingly, Huawei has been the cynosure of all eyes because it is widely acknowledged to be the leader in the development of the 5G family of technologies, which are still evolving. Huawei is way ahead and the leader of the pack. In fact, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, industry experts across the world reckoned that it had a 12-18-month lead over its nearest rivals.

DIVIDED ALLIES

These developments have created deep schisms not only within industry and business but also between governments. U.S. adventurism is increasingly seen as unviable, especially in a world that has been cajoled by sermons on globalisation that demand a seamless world. While coun-

Ram temple, the last resort

The Hindutva combine once again takes recourse to the Ayodhya issue by conducting a ground-breaking ceremony for the **Ram mandir construction to divert attention** from the Modi government's mismanagement of the COVID pandemic and military reverses in Galwan Valley. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**

tries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have succumbed to U.S. pressure, it is unlikely that other countries, such as Germany and the rest of the European Union, will fall in line soon. Germany is expected to decide on this issue only in September at the earliest; even then, it is not clear what the scope of its decision would be, or whether it is even considering a complete ban. Reacting to the shrill demands in the U.S. that Europe fall in line, and chastened by the U.S.' threat of sanctions against them for sourcing gas from Russia, Europeans are increasingly in a mood to resist U.S. pressure, even if only as a "nationalistic" response. Governments in East Asia, Africa and even Latin America are unlikely to fall in line with U.S. demands quickly. After all, it is evident that China is likely to be the first country to decisively emerge from the ongoing global recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson was the first to capitulate to the new wave of U.S. pressure. Ironically, he had sold himself as a self-certified "Sinophile" just five years ago when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Britain. In January, the U.K. said it would limit the use of Huawei equipment in its networks; there was no talk of a ban then. However, Johnson did a U-turn on July 14, when he announced that imports of Huawei equipment would be stopped after the end of the year. More significantly, he said all Huawei equipment—not just 5G-related gear but even legacy equipment in existing networks—would have to be ripped out and replaced by 2027. Of course, the extended time frame was itself an admission of the significant problems and costs that would be caused to network operators working with wafer-thin margins.

In the U.S., successive waves of deregulation in the telecom industry since the Reagan years have resulted in the emasculation of equipment companies. Significantly, not a single U.S. equipment supplier has the production scales that a company like Huawei—or even Nokia and Ericsson, for that matter—has. Naturally, this makes them uncompetitive vis-a-vis the top-tier equipment manufacturers. This results in network operators pricing products, especially the new and high-end ones, out of reach of the mass market. In fact, smaller network operators in the U.S., such as those serving remote or rural areas, for instance, have complained that non-Huawei options are simply too expensive.

Meanwhile, the fragmented nature of the European telecom market and its implications for communications in the E.U. is certain to be a major factor in deterring the nature of the German reaction. After all, Germany is Europe's economic engine. But the European market is badly splintered. Vodafone has the highest market share, just 17 per cent; only three other network operators in Europe have market shares in double digits. Operators work with wafer-thin margins, which inhibits their ability to invest in technology. In such a situation, Johnson's "rip-and-replace-Huawei" mantra may have few takers. Deutsche Telekom, German's biggest telecom operator, in which the government owns a third of the stake, has lobbied against a ban on Huawei. It has argued that a ban

on Huawei would delay 5G rollouts significantly. Given that 5G is not one piece but a family of technologies, this implies that companies across the world are working on different aspects of what will eventually evolve into a family of solutions. The ban on the leader of the pack would thus have a debilitating impact on developments everywhere.

Telecom equipment suppliers are also worried that a Chinese retaliation may hit them hard. For instance, telecom equipment companies such as Ericsson have been allowed to operate in China, producing not just for local sale but also for export. However, there have been reports that China is considering banning exports by companies such as Ericsson and Nokia from production bases in China. These are sure to hit these companies hard, especially in an ongoing global recession. Both companies have major manufacturing facilities that employ thousands in China. The Chinese government is also reported to be compiling a "blacklist" of "foreign entities" that have failed to supply Chinese firms by citing "non-commercial" reasons.

Recent media speculation indicates that the Indian government is considering a ban on seven Chinese companies, including Huawei, Tencent and Alibaba, each considered among the world's best in their respective domains. They have been targeted ostensibly for being close to the People's Liberation Army.

The notion that Huawei equipment is vulnerable to security risks is not ingenious to anyone with a basic understanding of electronic systems. Although it is perfectly understandable that networks ought to be as safe as possible from "leaks" that compromise security, the question of identifying deliberately designed "back doors" or "Trojans" that facilitate siphoning of information is difficult to identify. "Software designed by humans is always time- and objective-specific, so when conditions change, they need to be upgraded," a software engineer told *Frontline*. Most electronic equipment, including TVs, require periodic software upgrades, which reflect this reality.

Obviously, all equipment sourced from Huawei or other Chinese companies (ZTE is another major telecom gear supplier from China) in use in India would require upgrades as long as they are in use. In fact, not upgrading them would put the networks to exactly the kind of risks that advocates of a ban now cite. The recent wholesale leak of data from Twitter, the ransomware attack on Cognizant in April, the periodic leaks of Facebook data, and instances of leaks of Aadhar data of citizens from servers hosted by the Indian government, point to the larger problem of vulnerabilities in systems and networks.

It is obvious that promoting national self-reliance is a pursuit that is worthy in its own right; it does not require justification through jingoism. The hypocrisy of nationalists who, until the other day, were singing paeans to globalisation and calling for unfettered access to markets would appear truly comical if not for the flames of the trade wars that have been fanned. □

VINAY KATIYAR, founder-president of the Bajrang Dal, the militant youth wing of the Sangh Parivar, used to refer to the Ayodhya Ram temple issue as a perennial source of political energy for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Sangh associates. In the 1990s, Katiyar was elected to the Lok Sabha from Ayodhya three times. He used to describe his electoral victory as an indication of the special blessings showered by Lord Ram on him and his party. "Whenever Vinay Katiyar and the BJP have faced difficult challenges politically and organisationally we have always turned to the Ayodhya issue and have benefitted every time without fail," Katiyar often remarked, referring to himself in the third person.

Indeed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the BJP was the principal opposition party at the national level and the Bajrang Dal was constantly in an agitation mode, they frequently invoked the Ayodhya issue. When the BJP under Narendra Modi stormed to power at the Centre in 2014, with a majority of its own, Katiyar said it was possible that many in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and perhaps even in the BJP, may have felt that the utility of the Ram mandir slogan had largely diminished in this situation

but he himself was sure of its lasting value. As the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, which has been formed to facilitate the construction of the Ram temple at the site where the Babri Masjid once stood in Ayodhya, gets ready for the "bhoomi puja" (ground-breaking ceremony) for the temple on August 5 in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Katiyar and his associates in the temple town aver that their faith in the validity of the temple issue stood vindicated.

In fact, many Katiyar followers in Uttar Pradesh argued that the "re-

turn of the Ayodhya Ram temple issue at the current juncture" had special relevance in national politics. *Frontline's* interactions with Sangh Parivar activists in different parts of northern and western India made it clear that they shared similar perceptions on the special significance of the issue in contemporary national situation. Although the views expressed by these Sangh Parivar leaders and grass-roots workers were different in terms of detail, there was a common drift in their expressions.

They dealt mainly with five points. First, the BJP and its government at the Centre and in the States did not face any big or concrete political challenge primarily because the opposition is generally in disarray and without a strong leadership. Second, the near-total surrender of the media, especially the electronic media, before the Prime Minister and Home Minister Amit Shah has also greatly facilitated this domination. Third, in spite of the absence of concrete political resistance, more and more laypeople were getting disillusioned with the BJP and its leadership on account of various factors, including galloping prices of essential commodities and other basic requirements. Fourth, the mismanagement of COVID relief



VINAY KATIYAR, founder-president of the Bajrang Dal and three-time BJP MP of Faizabad (Ayodhya).

activities by the NDA governments, especially in the northern States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, has aggravated this popular resentment. Fifth, the domineering perception on the ground with regard to the Sino-Indian conflict are not in consonance with the “all is well” position adopted and propagated by the leadership at the Centre, including the Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Home Minister.

Some of the senior activists and grass-roots workers said that these negative perceptions of the government’s stand on the Sino-Indian conflict were dominant among the security forces too, both among serving officers and the retired personnel.

DISQUIET IN ARMED FORCES

A senior RSS activist based in Jaipur, himself a former middle level officer in the Indian Army, said: “Discussions are happening in the armed forces on social media platforms, especially WhatsApp groups, by serving and retired army officers on the border situation, The drift of these discussions is not positive. The general tone and tenor of the discussions are hugely critical of the mismanagement of the border situation by the Modi government. Sometimes the purport of these discussions leak out to the general public, compounding the perception problems caused by the military situation.”

Frontline could independently verify the prevalence of this perception among servicemen on the border situation. An animated conversation in a couple of ex-servicemen groups on July 21 revolved around the question of how the Chinese were still holding on to the “encroached territory in spite of multiple rounds of talks at the diplomatic and military levels”. The conversations underscored the point that the Chinese were not fulfilling the agreements on disengagements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh and that as many as 40,000 troops of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) were still stationed in the region. The discussions pointed to the need for

revival of senior-level interventions involving the National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi so that disengagement in regions such as Galwan Valley, the finger area (Pangong) and Patrolling Points could resume. They also stressed that the Chinese had shown signs of actual disengagement around the second week of July, but in the third week there was a great deal of hesitancy on their part.

Given these developments, it was surmised in one of the groups that it would be logical to presume that the Chinese were in no hurry to move out of the forward areas along the LAC in eastern Ladakh. The biggest worry among BJP and Sangh Parivar activists privy to these discussions is that these revelations tend to work against, and at times blow to pieces, the grandiose pronouncements made by the Prime Minister on not losing an inch to the Chinese. “Clearly, Ayodhya and the spirit of Lord Ram is godsend resource to have at this point of time,” the Jaipur-based senior RSS activist told *Frontline*.

Although not viewed as seriously as the reactions from the armed services and the general public on the border situation, some developments in relation to the handling of the COVID situation are rankling the Sangh Parivar rank and file. A senior RSS activist based in Lucknow said: “The daily exposures on ground-level mismanagement have not led to a concerted movement by the opposition and that is a big relief. However, some happenings at the level of higher judiciary and bureaucracy are a cause for concern.”

PANDEMIC—A DEMAND FOR INQUIRY

One of the concrete developments in this connection is the appeal moved by six retired bureaucrats—K.P. Fabian, M.G. Devasahayam, Meena Gupta, Somasundar Burra, Amit Bhaduri and Madhu Bhaduri—in the Supreme Court seeking an independent inquiry by a commission appointed under the Commissions of Inquiry Act, 1952, into the Central



government’s “gross mismanagement” of the pandemic in India. It pointed out that the Centre’s response to the pandemic had a deleterious effect on the lives and livelihoods of the citizens of the country and was a “severe infraction of the fundamental rights of people”. This made it a definite matter of public importance and warranted the appointment of a commission, the appeal said.

It highlighted the fact that the government failed to “undertake timely and effective measures for

THE RAM Janmabhoomi Tirth Kshetra Trust general secretary Champat Rai (second right) at a temple construction workshop in Ayodhya, on July 21.

der the Disaster Management Act, 2005”, including drawing up a National Plan or issuing guidelines for providing minimum standards of relief to vulnerable sections of society “as well as the colossal oversight to consult the National Task Force, which consisted of experts in the fields of epidemiology and public health, before the imposition of the nationwide lockdown and its subsequent extensions”.

Commenting on the appeal, a senior RSS leader based in Lucknow said that it would collapse at the very outset in the Supreme Court. Still, the view among Sangh Parivar leaders is that the court proceedings in this case need to be followed closely so that it did not trigger public reactions.

UTTAR PRADESH Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath with Mahant Nritya Gopal Das, during a visit to the Ram Janmabhoomi site to inspect the work relating to temple construction, in Ayodhya on June 28.

containing the transmission of the disease within India” although the World Health Organisation (WHO) had issued a notification on the matter in January. The appeal also pointed to the “government’s failure” to adhere to “statutory obligations un-

But the mood in Ayodhya among Katiyar and his followers as well as activists of other Sangh Parivar outfits, including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the key organisation involved in the Ayodhya Ram mandir movement, is celebratory. Swami Govind Dev Giri, treasurer of

the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, told *Frontline* that the Prime Minister’s arrival for the *bhoomi puja* would speed up the construction of the temple and a grand mandir would be ready, probably by the end of the year. Katiyar pointed to the symbolism associated with holding of the ground-breaking function on August 5.

He said: “August 5 this year marks the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the State of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories, clearly a red letter day, which led to the fulfilment of a long-standing promise of the Sangh Parivar to the people of Hindustan. If you look at the sequence of events everything has happened with divine blessings. In November 2019, three months after the abrogation of Article 370, the five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court directed the handing over of the ‘disputed’ land to Lord Ram’s devotees. Now, we are on course.”

On their part, opposition parties, including the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), have questioned the timing of the *bhoomi puja*. Congress leader and Maharashtra Revenue Minister Balasaheb Thorat said it was a clear gimmick to divert attention from the Centre’s failures on many aspects of governance, including the management of the COVID situation. NCP leader Sharad Pawar observed that the “eradication of COVID-19 is the priority of the Maharashtra government, but some people think constructing a temple will help in its mitigation”.

Barring voices like those of Pawar and Thorat, the overall response from the opposition to the *bhoomi puja* announcement has been muted. A cross-section of Sangh Parivar activists pointed out in their interactions with *Frontline* that playing the Ram temple card offered better protection for the BJP government against public resentment than resisting any concerted move by the opposition to build a movement around the dominant issues of the day. □

Promising first results

Four candidate vaccines are ready to proceed to the critical third phase of clinical trials. But, as this phase takes a long time and as controlled laboratory studies do not guarantee that a vaccine will work in normal settings, realistically, there is **not likely to be a vaccine for public use before early to mid 2021**. BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

NEARLY 140 VACCINE DEVELOPERS HAVE been in the race to come up with a COVID-19 vaccine. Among them, four of the five who were first off the blocks, soon after Chinese scientists made public (January 11) the genetic sequence of the causative virus SARS-CoV-2 (Wuhan strain), have turned in the results of their performances in the first important round, called the phase 1/phase 2 of human or clinical trials. And, all of the candidate vaccines look promising enough to enter the next, critical round, the third phase of clinical trials. (The preclinical stage involves animal trials that are meant to delineate the broad action profile of a drug or a vaccine, its general safety and to identify its toxicity patterns.)

The phase 1/2 results show that all the candidate vaccines have the potential to protect vaccinated individuals against the disease. But do they actually protect vaccinated individuals? And if they do, how much protection do they confer, and how long will the conferred protection last—months, a year or years? Is a booster dose required even to mount a significant initial immune response? The answers to these questions are what the results of phase 3 trials are expected to provide. While three of these front runners have published their results in peer-reviewed journals, the fourth is yet to be published its results in such a journal but the authors have made them public through *medRxiv*, a “not yet peer-reviewed” open e-print web repository.

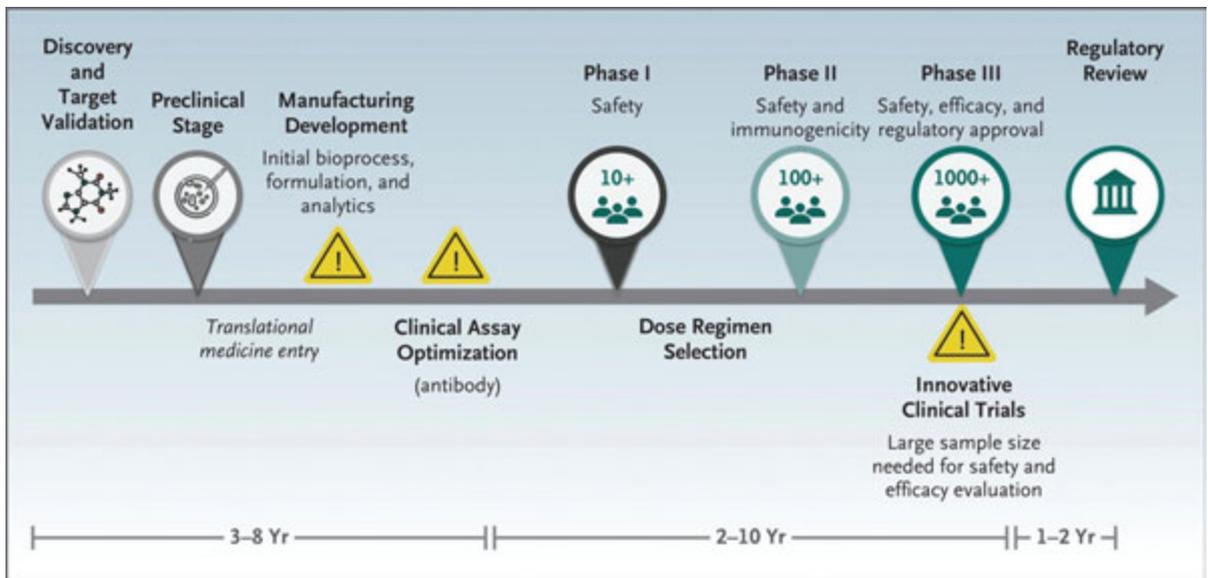
The earliest of the four to take off were Moderna, a biotechnology company in the United States that is collaborating with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) of the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), and CanSino Biologics, a Chinese biotech company. These two started their phase 1 trials in March itself. The other two—the Oxford Vaccine Group

(OVG) in the United Kingdom that has partnered with the British-Swedish company AstraZeneca, and a collaboration between the U.S. multinational Pfizer and the German BioNTech, a relatively new company specialising in mRNA (messenger-RNA) based human drugs and therapeutics—began their trials only in April. But all four started the vaccine development work soon after the genome sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 was published.

These four candidate vaccines deploy advanced vaccine technologies and none of them has the whole virus (live attenuated or inactivated), as is common in older vaccines. To be sure, no vaccine based on these technologies has so far been licensed for public use for any other disease; all earlier attempts were only up to preclinical or early clinical stages.

Moderna-NIAID and Pfizer-BioNTech have used the mRNA platform to code for antigens—the relevant proteins of any pathogen, in this case SARS-CoV-2 (an RNA virus)—so that the vaccinated individual mounts an appropriate immune response against it. Upon the delivery of the vaccine into the body, the host cells translate the RNA sequence to produce the encoded antigens, which then stimulate the body’s adaptive immune system to produce antibodies against the pathogen. According to the promoters of this technology, RNA/mRNA vaccines provide flexibility in the design and expression of vaccine antigens that can mimic antigen structure and expression during natural infection. While RNA is required for protein synthesis, it does not integrate into the genome, it is transiently expressed and is metabolised and eliminated by the body’s natural mechanisms and is, therefore, considered safe. Importantly, the RNA-vaccine manufacturing platform has the ability to rapidly produce large quantities of vaccine doses irrespective of the encoded

FIGURE 1



THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE, JULY 23

pathogen antigen. The CanSino and OVG candidate vaccines contain a viral vector to deliver the genetic sequence of the identified antigenic component of the pathogen that is integrated into the vector by recombinant technology. So, when a person is vaccinated, the necessary immune response is generated. In recent times, adenoviruses have emerged as the vector of choice for vaccination because they do not integrate with the genome of the host and are also non-replicating.

Both the OVG and the CanSino vaccine candidates have a genetically altered adenovirus as the viral vector, but with a crucial difference. While the Oxford group uses a chimpanzee adenovirus (ChAd), which does not infect humans, CanSino uses the human-infecting adenovirus called adenovirus5 (Ad5). Most humans thus normally carry antibodies to human adenoviruses, and this, as we shall see later, can have a confounding effect in the interpretation of trial results of vaccines with human adenoviruses as the carrier. The true antibody response of such a vaccine would be hard to delineate.

The initial (phase 1/phase 2) results of the trials of all four vaccine candidates were published in July, with the Pfizer-BioNTech trial results still to be peer-reviewed. The pace at which these four vaccine developers have successfully poised themselves to begin phase 3 of the trials in July itself, just four to five months after the start of their phase 1 trials, is indeed remarkable considering that these stages of vaccine development are known to take several years (Figure 1). The urgency dictated by the unprecedented scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted scientists, industry and regulators to fast-track the development of vaccines by combining, or having concurrent running of, phase 1 and 2 trials, and with fewer trial recruits than normal.

Moderna's vaccine basically consists of mRNA instructions to build the coronavirus's spike (S) protein. The S protein (which has two subunits, S1 and S2) is the crucial antigenic component of the COVID-19 virus

(SARS-CoV-2) that enables it to bind to human cells, gain entry into them and use the host's replication machinery to multiply itself (Figure 2). The S protein is, in fact, the primary target of most candidate COVID-19 vaccines. Emerging vaccine technologies have enabled delivery through suitable platforms of just the relevant antigens of the pathogen, in this case the S protein alone—not the virus' entire DNA or RNA—which enables human cells to produce the foreign protein in sufficient quantities so that the immune system is suitably primed to respond when infected by the actual SARS-CoV-2. Called mRNA-1273, Moderna's vaccine consists of a suitably stabilised mRNA that encodes the SARS-CoV-2 S protein, which is encapsulated in a lipid nanoparticle. The first results of the phase 1 trials of this vaccine were announced through a press release in May, but it lacked details whereby experts could judge its real efficacy. The details were only published on July 14 in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, but as a "preliminary report". But even now many experts would reserve their judgment until complete details are published.

"Experience with the mRNA platform for other candidate vaccines [Moderna has used it to develop bird flu vaccines]," the authors write in their paper, "and rapid manufacturing allowed the deployment of a first-in-human clinical vaccine candidate in record time." In fact, the first trial participants were vaccinated on March 16, just 66 days after the genomic sequence of the virus was posted. The NIH conducted the trials. The results showed that the recruits (between 18 and 55 years of age) for the trial who received the vaccine made more neutralising antibodies than were seen in convalescent COVID-19 patients. But a second booster dose, four weeks after the first, was required before the vaccine produced a substantive immune response. This preliminary report is stated to be the first of three reports of data from the phase 1 trials. The second will include data from adults older than 55 years, and a final report will include

results on the safety aspects and on how long the immunity is expected to last. A durability study will be based on following up the participants' immunogenicity profile over a period of one year of the phase 1 trial.

The first part of the study enrolled 45 healthy individuals of 18-55 years of age, who were divided equally into three groups and received two injections of the trial vaccine 28 days apart at 25 micrograms, 100 micrograms and 250 micrograms respectively. The vaccine was administered as a 0.5 ml injection in the upper arm muscle. According to the authors, the two-dose regimen was generally without serious toxicity; systemic adverse events after the first vaccination were all mild or moderate. However, greater reactogenicity was seen after the second vaccination, particularly in the 250 microgram group, and in all the three dose groups, local injection-site reactions were primarily mild.

To assess the immunogenicity of the engineered vaccine, through suitable assays the study measured the binding antibody response to the virus' entire S protein and specifically to the receptor-binding domain (RBD), which is a part of the subunit S1. The vaccine-induced neutralising antibody response was also assessed through an assay that used a pseudotyped lentivirus (a lentivirus combined with the coronavirus' envelope and S-proteins) and also a wild-type SARS-COV-2-based assay. (B-cells produce a diversity of antibodies and not all antibodies produced can neutralise the pathogen to prevent it from infecting cells; some just bind to a pathogen's antigen and signal the other arms of the immune system to act.) These assays tell us whether the vaccine can also produce antibodies that actually neutralise the virus.

The study compared the vaccine-elicited immune response to that induced by actual infection in recovered COVID-19 patients for which the serum specimens of 41 convalescing patients were used. The study notes that the binding antibody titres increased rapidly after the first vaccination, with seroconversion (when antibodies can be detected in body fluids) being attained by all participants by day 15. It was seen that binding antibody titres increased with the dose for both the first and the second vaccination. RBD-specific antibody measures, according to the study, were similar in pattern and magnitude.

While the median value of the antibody titres after the first vaccination (for both the S protein and the RBD) were similar in magnitude to that in convalescent serum specimens, the titre on day 57 (after trial participants got a booster shot on day 29) for the S protein antibody, even for the lowest dose of 25 micrograms, was more than double the median value in the convalescent serum samples. These responses, according to the authors, are quite robust. As regards the neutralising antibodies, while responses (which were dose-dependent) were detected only in fewer than half of the volunteers before the booster dose, neutralising antibodies could be detected (on day 43) in all the participants with the lowest response seen in the 25 microgram group and similar responses in the other two higher dose groups. These responses, according to the paper, were similar to the

upper half of the distribution of values in the serum samples. More importantly, on day 43, the neutralising activity against the wild-type SARS-CoV-2 assay reduced virus infectivity by 80 per cent or more in all the participants. And these too were either similar or higher than the values seen in the convalescent serum samples. This, the paper notes, supports the need for a vaccination schedule that includes a booster dose. According to experts, while the vaccine does seem to elicit antibodies that neutralise the virus, what we do not know is how much we actually need for protection.

T-CELL RESPONSES

As important as the above antibody responses is the observation of T-cell responses in the trial. T-cells are certain types of white blood cells and part of the immune system. While the so-called CD8 T-cells directly target infected cells and eliminate them, the CD4 T-cells, also called helper T-cells, trigger other parts of the immune system to act in achieving the same goal. The 25 microgram and 100 microgram doses elicited the CD4 T-cell response. The CD8 T-cell response could, however, be elicited only at a low level in the 100 microgram group and that too only after the second vaccination.

"The hallmark of a vaccine," Dr Anthony Fauci, the director of the NIAID and the top government medical expert in the U.S. efforts to combat the disease, has been quoted as saying, "is one that can actually mimic natural infection and induce the kind of response that you would get with natural infection. And it looks like, at least in this limited, small number of individuals, that is exactly what's happening. The data really look quite good [and] there were no serious adverse events."

Of the three doses evaluated," says the study report, "the 100-microgram dose elicited high neutralisation responses and... CD4 T cell responses, coupled with a reactogenicity profile that is more favorable than that of the higher dose. These safety and immunogenicity findings support advancement of the mRNA-1273 vaccine to later-stage clinical trials." Following the observation of some serious adverse events in the 250 microgram group, the researchers have dropped the idea of using this high dose in the forthcoming trials.

A phase 2 trial of the vaccine in 600 healthy adults, evaluating doses of 50 micrograms and 100 micrograms is currently in progress. A large phase 3 efficacy trial, expected to evaluate a 100 microgram dose in 30,000 participants, is scheduled begin on July 27, according to the U.S. government registry of clinical trials.

PFIZER-BIONTECH'S VACCINE

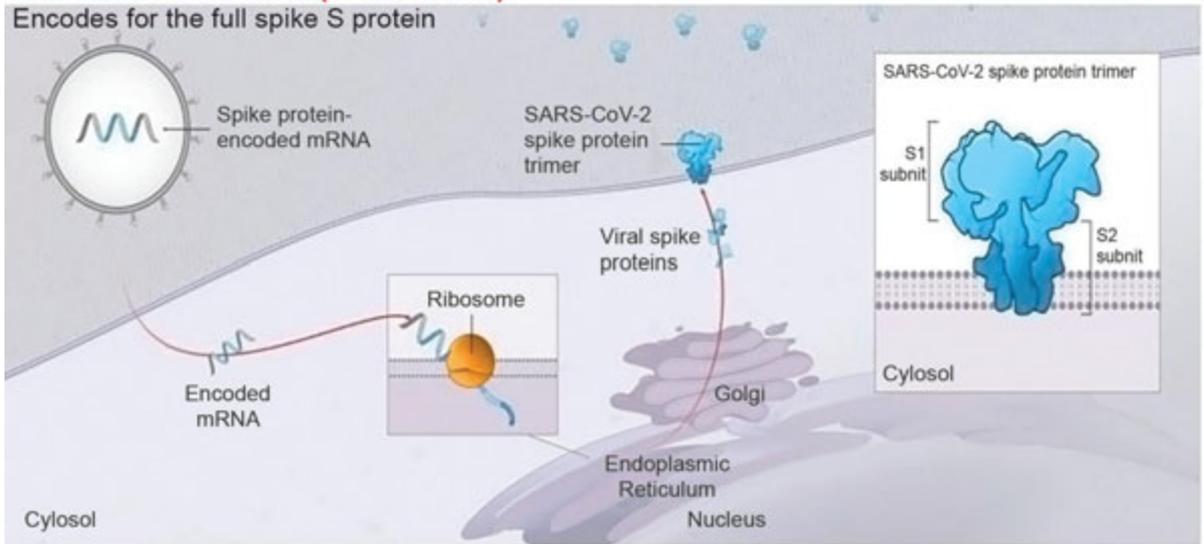
Because Pfizer-BioNTech has used similar technology in its vaccine, the phase 1/2 trial results of this U.S.-German vaccine almost mirror those of the Moderna-NIAID vaccine described above and have invariably invited comparisons.

On July 1, Pfizer-BioNTech announced the results of the phase 1/2 trials of its vaccine called BNT 162b1 in the U.S., which were conducted between May 4 and June 19.

FIGURE 2

SARS-CoV-2 vaccine (mRNA-1273)

Encodes for the full spike S protein



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The trial assessed safety, reactogenicity and immunogenicity, with the last parameter being assessed only in terms of antibody (IgG) titre measurement. Concurrent trials with similar cohorts were carried out in Germany between April 23 and May 22 but with broader immunogenicity measures that included T-cell responses as well.

While Moderna did not use placebo controls in this study, both the U.S. and German trials were placebo-controlled, single (observer)-blind studies to evaluate safety, tolerability and immunogenicity with increasing dose levels of the vaccine. The results of both have been posted on *medRxiv*, the U.S. trial results on July 1 and the German trial results on July 20. BNT162b1 is the most advanced of the four mRNA vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 that the Pfizer-BioNTech collaboration is studying under a programme called “Project Lightspeed”. Like the Moderna-NIAID vaccine, BNT162b1 too is a modified lipid-nanoparticle-encapsulated mRNA candidate that encodes an optimised RBD antigen only. The Moderna vaccine coded for the entire S protein. According to the U.S. trial results, the doses administered were well tolerated and generated dose-dependent immunogenicity as measured by RBD-binding and virus-neutralising antibody titres.

The U.S. study had 45 healthy subjects (18-55 years of age), 24 of whom received two injections 21 days apart of 10 micrograms or 30 micrograms (12+12), 12 received a single dose of 100 micrograms and the remaining 9 received two doses of a placebo also 21 days apart. In all the 24 subjects, because of the strong booster effect, dose-dependent increase of RBD-binding IgG antibody concentration was observed seven days after the second dose. The (geometric) mean concentrations of the two doses were found to be respectively 8 and 46.3 times the value of the (geometric) mean concentration of 38 convalescent serum samples. Similarly, the highest neutralising antibody titres for the two doses were seen seven days after the second dose, which were respectively 1.8

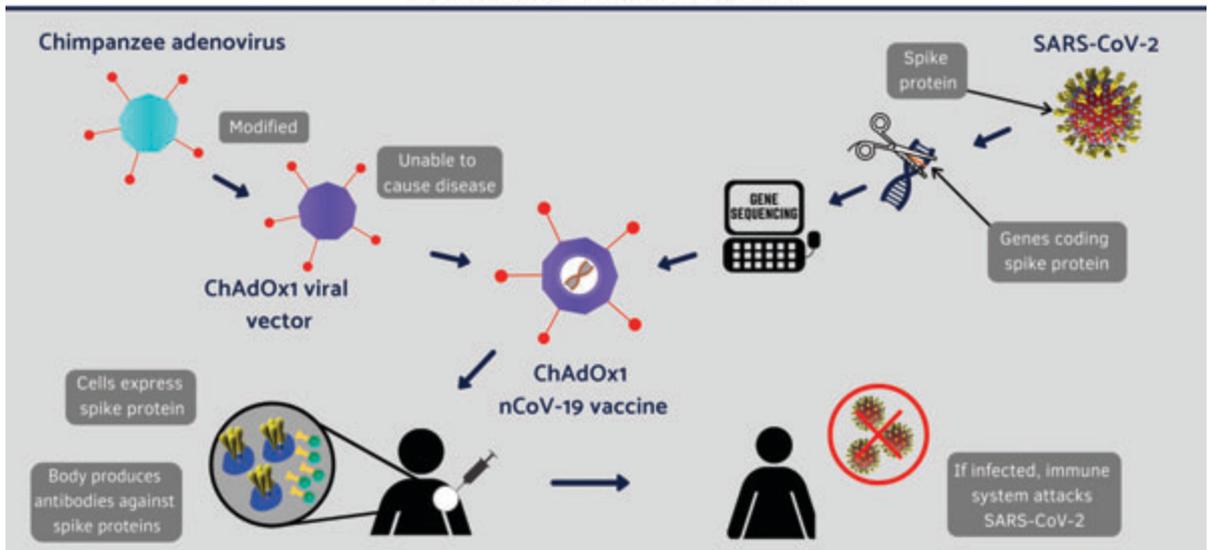
and 2.8 times the values in the serum samples. As regards the antibody responses in the single-dose 100 microgram group, the IgG concentrations and neutralising antibody titres were respectively 3 and 0.35 times the corresponding mean values of serum samples.

According to the study, at the 10 microgram or 30 microgram dose levels, adverse reactions, including low grade fever, were more common after the second dose than after the first. Local reactions and systemic events after injection were dose-dependent, generally mild to moderate and transient, and no serious adverse events were reported. The trial did not give the 100 microgram group a second dose because of the greater number of local reactions and systemic events after a single dose itself and also because 100 micrograms did not show any significant increase in immunogenicity compared with the 30 microgram dose. The German trial was evaluated with 60 healthy volunteers (18-55 years) with a two-dose vaccination at 1 microgram, 10 micrograms, 30 micrograms and 50 micrograms dose levels given on day 1 and day 22. The remaining 12 received a single dose of 60 micrograms. According to the trial’s preliminary results, the vaccine elicited high, dose-dependent virus-neutralising titers and RBD-binding IgG concentrations after the second dose. Measured on day 43, the neutralising antibody titres were 0.7 (1 microgram) to 3.5 (50 micrograms) times compared with the mean value of a panel of convalescent sera. On the basis of the reactogenicity at the 50 microgram level, the 60 microgram group was not administered a second dose. Significantly, the sera of vaccinated subjects were also found to broadly neutralise in pseudovirus assays across 16 SARS-CoV-2 RBD variants publicly documented and against the dominant D614G strain (see “Vaccine scenarios”, *Frontline*, July 3).

The German trial also assessed the T-cell responses in the participants. The observed responses, according to the published results, demonstrated a high level of CD4 and CD8 T-cell responses against the virus. Although the

FIGURE 3

COVID-19 Oxford Vaccine Trial



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strength of T-cell responses varied between subjects, there was no clear dose-dependence from 1 microgram to 50 micrograms, which indicates that even low mRNA dose vaccination could elicit significant RBD-specific CD4 and CD8 T-cell responses. This contrasts with the Moderna trials, which saw only a low level CD8 T-cell response at lower doses. The other significant difference between Moderna-NIAID’s mRNA-1273 vaccine and Pfizer-BioNTech’s BNT162b1 vaccine is that the latter induced significant immunogenicity at comparatively lower dose levels. However, as Dr Fauci remarked to the online publication “STAT” when asked to compare the two: “I don’t think you could say anything about one being better than the other. They both induce good responses. Let’s see what happens in the real world.”

The two companies will use the preliminary data from both the German and U.S. phase 1/2 studies to determine a dose level to progress to a large, global phase 2b/3 safety and efficacy trial. “That trial may involve up to 30,000 healthy participants and is anticipated to begin in late July 2020,” BioNTech stated in a July 20 press release.

OXFORD-ASTRAZENECA’S VACCINE

Of the four vaccines being discussed here, the results of the Oxford vaccine trials seem to have been the most awaited in the media, though the reasons for that are not clear. Sarah Gilbert, a professor of vaccinology at Oxford University who leads the OVG, had recently developed a simian adenovirus-based recombinant viral vector vaccine for the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), which is caused by another coronavirus. In fact, trials with the MERS vaccine had shown that a single dose of an adenovirus-vectored vaccine, which encodes the S protein of MERS-CoV, protected non-human primates against MERS. Given that experience, Sarah Gilbert began working on a vaccine against COVID-19 in January (when the virus was called nCoV-19) on a non-replicating simian adenovirus vector vaccine that would

express SARS-CoV-2’s S protein and named it ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 (Figure 3). The code for the complete S protein is integrated into the vector genome.

With the vaccine’s phase 1/2 trials showing promising results, which were published in *The Lancet* on July 20, the OVG is already conducting one part of its phase 3 trials in Brazil, South Africa and the U.K. Although the Oxford vaccine trials began a little late, it is the first vaccine to have already begun its phase 3 trials. The larger phase 3 trial, with 30,000 volunteers, will begin soon in the U.S. The phase 1/2 results showed that there were no safety concerns and that the vaccine induced significant cell-mediated and humoral (antibody) immune responses. The vaccine elicited T-cell activity within 14 days and an antibody response within 28 days of vaccination. These responses were strongest after a booster dose, with all the participants having virus-neutralising activity. Before the phase 1/2 trials, the OVG had found in preclinical studies in rhesus macaques that a single vaccination with the vaccine elicited antibodies and a cellular immune response. Protection against lower respiratory tract infection was also observed in vaccinated non-human primates after a high-dose SARS-CoV-2 challenge.

The U.K. phase1/2 trials were conducted between April 23 and May 21 at five sites in the U.K. This randomised single-blind placebo-controlled trial with the ChAdOx vaccine nCoV-19 (also christened AZD1222) had 1,077 recruits. Of them, 10 were assigned to a non-randomised, unblended vaccine prime-boost group. The rest of the participants were randomly assigned in a 1:1 (vaccine/placebo) ratio and either received ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 at a dose of 50 billion (5×10^{10}) viral particles or the placebo, which was the meningococcal conjugate vaccine (MenACWY). (The dose was decided on the basis of OVG’s experience with its ChAdOx MERS vaccine.) Both the vaccine and the placebo were given as a single intramuscular injection. The prime-boost group received a two-dose schedule, with the booster-dose given 28 days

after the first vaccination. The protocol also included giving a paracetamol to the participants as a prophylactic to prevent post-vaccination fever.

According to the study, post-vaccination, while local and systemic reactions (pain, feeling feverish, and so on) were more in the ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 group than in the placebo vaccine group, no serious adverse reaction event was reported. The results with ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 showed that a single dose of the vaccine elicited an increase in spike-specific (binding) antibodies by day 28, which was boosted with the second dose. Neutralising antibodies were seen in all the participants after a booster dose on day 42 as measured by different assays, including a pseudovirus-based assay. The IgG titres too increased with a two-dose regimen, and the paper says that further work on a two-dose regimen is underway. The trial also showed that ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 resulted in a marked increase in spike-specific T-cell responses (including CD4 and CD8 cells) as early as day 7 with peaking on day 14 and remained elevated up to day 56. "However," the paper says, "a boost in cellular response was not observed following the second dose."

According to the paper, older age groups with comorbidities, health care workers, and those with higher risk for SARS-CoV-2 exposure are being recruited for further ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 trials, given as a single-dose or two-dose regimen, in the U.K. and elsewhere. The study concludes that ChAdOx1 nCoV-19 is safe, tolerated and immunogenic, while reactogenicity is reduced with paracetamol. A single dose elicited both antibodies and cellular responses against SARS-CoV-2, with a booster dose augmenting antibody titres. The preliminary phase 1/2 results supported the ongoing phase 2 and 3 trials.

CANSINO'S VACCINE

In March, a team of scientists from several Chinese institutes carried out a limited phase 1 trial of the recombinant viral-vector vaccine with the genetic sequence of the S protein integrated with the human adenovirus5 (Ad5); this is in contrast to ChAdOx1, which has a chimpanzee adenovirus. The trial was limited in the sense that it was restricted to a single centre and was open-labelled (as against blinded) and non-randomised. It was aimed at studying the safety, tolerability, reactogenicity and immunogenicity profiles at three different doses given to healthy Chinese adults: 50 billion, 100 billion and 150 billion (5×10^{10} , 1×10^{11} and 1.5×10^{11}) viral particles.

The results of this trial, which were reported in May, showed that the vaccine was safe and well tolerated with promising immunogenicity. However, given the risk of severe adverse reactions at the high dose, the highest dose of 1.5×10^{11} was dropped in the phase 2 trial. This study was aimed at further evaluating the immunogenicity and safety in a larger population and to determine the appropriate dose for the phase 3 efficacy study. The phase 2 trial also removed the age limit of 55 years to include older and more susceptible people in the study. The results of this study were published in *The Lancet* in July according to which CanSino's candidate vaccine has

a good safety profile, with only mild, transient adverse events related to vaccination and no serious adverse events, and good immunogenicity.

Between April 11 and 16, 508 volunteers were recruited for the study with a mean age of about 40 years. On the premise that a higher antigenic dose elicits greater immunogenicity, the participants were randomly assigned in the ratio 2:1:1 to receive 1×10^{11} (D1), 5×10^{10} (D2) viral particles and the placebo respectively. The study found that a single injection of the vaccine at doses D1 and D2 induced comparable specific immune responses to the spike glycoprotein at day 28, with no significant differences noted between the two groups. Seroconversion of neutralising antibodies was observed in 59 per cent and 47 per cent of the participants, and that of binding antibodies in 96 per cent and 97 per cent of the participants in the D1 and D2 groups respectively. Positive specific T-cell responses measured by a suitable assay were found in 90 per cent and 88 per cent of the participants in the D1 and D2 groups respectively. At day 28 post-vaccination, 95 per cent and 91 per cent of the participants in the D1 and D2 groups respectively showed either a cellular or antibody response.

A limitation of this study is that all the recruits for the trial were from Wuhan. More importantly, as pointed out earlier in the article and as the authors themselves note, pre-existing immunity to the Ad5 vector and increasing age could significantly reduce the immune responses, particularly humoral, to the vaccine. So, they have argued that, for participants with high pre-existing anti-Ad5 immunity one injection of the vaccine might be inadequate to elicit a high level of antibodies, particularly for people 55 years or older because they are likely to have higher baseline levels of anti-Ad5 neutralizing antibodies. This, the authors say, indicates that this population might be more tolerant of higher dose or a booster dose regimen of the vaccine than those who are young and naive to Ad5. On the basis of their previous experience with the Ad5-viral-vector Ebola vaccine, the authors say that a flexible additional dose (between three and six months) might be a potential solution to provide enhancement of immune responses. On the basis of the conclusion drawn from the above results of the phase 2 trials that a single-dose immunisation schedule of CanSino's vaccine at 5×10^{10} viral particles is an appropriate regimen for healthy adults, the promoters plan to start an international multi-centre, randomised, double-blind, controlled phase 3 efficacy trial with that regimen soon.

As none of the above vaccines has been tested for more than few weeks, their durability is yet to be determined. More importantly, controlled laboratory studies on immune responses do not guarantee protection against COVID-19. It is also impossible to compare the performances of the four vaccines on the basis of the above results alone because of the different trial protocols and the different formats of data presentation. Phase 3 trials with thousands of participants take a long time. Realistically, therefore, none of the above front runners is likely to bring a vaccine for public use before early to mid 2021. □

Wilful denial

The daily number of COVID-19 cases and deaths hit new highs in July but the government continues to **remain in self-congratulatory mode**, blind to the possibility of community transmission. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

ON JULY 23, THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND Family Welfare issued a press release celebrating the fact that for the second consecutive day, “recoveries in a single day continued to post a significant rise”. The release also said that in the previous 24 hours, 30,000 persons had recovered, which was the highest number in a single day recorded until then. There was an appreciable growth in the recovery rate (63.18 per cent), reflective of the increasing gap between the number of active and recovered patients, it added. “This accomplishment can be attributed to the Union Government-led COVID-19 management strategies,” it claimed.

However, the note glossed over the fact that the country had also recorded the largest single-day spike in deaths (1,129) and the number of confirmed cases (45,720) over the previous 24 hours.

The number of confirmed cases reported every day steadily rose from below 20,000 in the beginning of July to more than double the number by the third week of the month. The note also glossed over the detail that many State governments were implementing “weekend lockdowns” or 15-day lockdowns following a spurt in cases.

There was no cogent explanation for either the acceleration in the growth of fresh cases in States other than those that had contributed to the maximum caseload or the spurt in newer areas within States. Whilst the note presented a glowing picture of the current situation, the fact remains that the pandemic is far from being contained.

GOVERNMENT ASSERTIONS

According to what was said at an earlier media briefing, 86 per cent of the active cases were in 10 States, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu together accounting for 50 per cent and Karnataka, Delhi, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, West Bengal and Gujarat for the rest. “It was not growing at the same pace everywhere,” a senior Health Ministry official said at the briefing. While

THE ISOLATION FACILITY at the Commonwealth Games Village sports complex, which has been converted into a COVID-19 Care Centre, in New Delhi on July 14.

this was true, it was also true that infections had now spread to the rest of the country.

On that day, some 29,000 fresh infections were reported from across the country, but Health Ministry officials suggested that one ought not to “just look at absolute numbers”. A senior official said that there was a “progressive decline in the daily growth of numbers”.

On the criticism that the government was not testing enough people, a panel of health experts and Health Ministry officials told the media on July 21 that the “test, track and treat” strategy “led by the Centre” and followed by the States and Union Territories (UTs) had ensured that the national average testing rate had gone up to 180 tests a day per million population.

This was more than the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) recommended rate of an average of 140 tests a day per million population, they added. The officials also said 19 States/UTs were testing more than the WHO standard, with Goa topping the list with 1,333 tests a day per million. The Health Ministry officials referred to a WHO document titled “Public Health Criteria to Adjust Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) in the context of COVID-19”, which was an interim guidance meas-

ure issued on April 16 when the pandemic was at a much earlier stage of development. A series of annexes were subsequently issued to help countries with their public health and social measures and to manage the risk of resurgence of cases. An annex dated May 12 was specifically prepared for countries where large-scale public health and social measures had been introduced, India being one of them.

It mentioned various measures relating to epidemiology, health system and surveillance based on which the public health and social measures could be adjusted.

For instance, if the effective Reproduction Number was less than one for at least two weeks (R one, the effective number of secondary cases per infectious case in a population) and where less than 5 per cent of samples test positive for COVID-19, it would indicate that the epidemic was under control. At present India’s positive rate was 8.07 per cent, according to the Ministry officials.

The officials also said that there were 30 States with positivity rates less than the national average. A graphic prepared by the Ministry and shared with the media listed only eight States that had low positive confirmation rates. Among these States, fresh cases have actually seen big spikes in July in at least three: Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Some of them have also been compelled to introduce partial to full lockdowns to check the transmission.

The percentage of positive samples, according to the WHO’s guidance measure, could be “interpreted only with comprehensive surveillance and testing of suspect cases in the order of one per thousand population per week”. If 80 per cent of cases were from contact lists and could be linked to known clusters, it indicated that transmission chains had been identified. A decline in the number of deaths over the past three weeks, a decline in hospitalisations and ICU admissions over the last two weeks, and so on also indicated that the epidemic was under control.

In one of its earliest bulletins, the WHO noted that large-scale testing was one of the reasons for the flatten-



K. MURALI KUMAR

AT AN electric crematorium in Bengaluru on July 18. With a spike in the number of COVID-19 deaths, people are forced to wait for long hours to perform the last rites of victims.

ing of the epidemic curve of new infections based on the experience of the Italian town of Vo, and countries such as South Korea, Iceland and Norway.

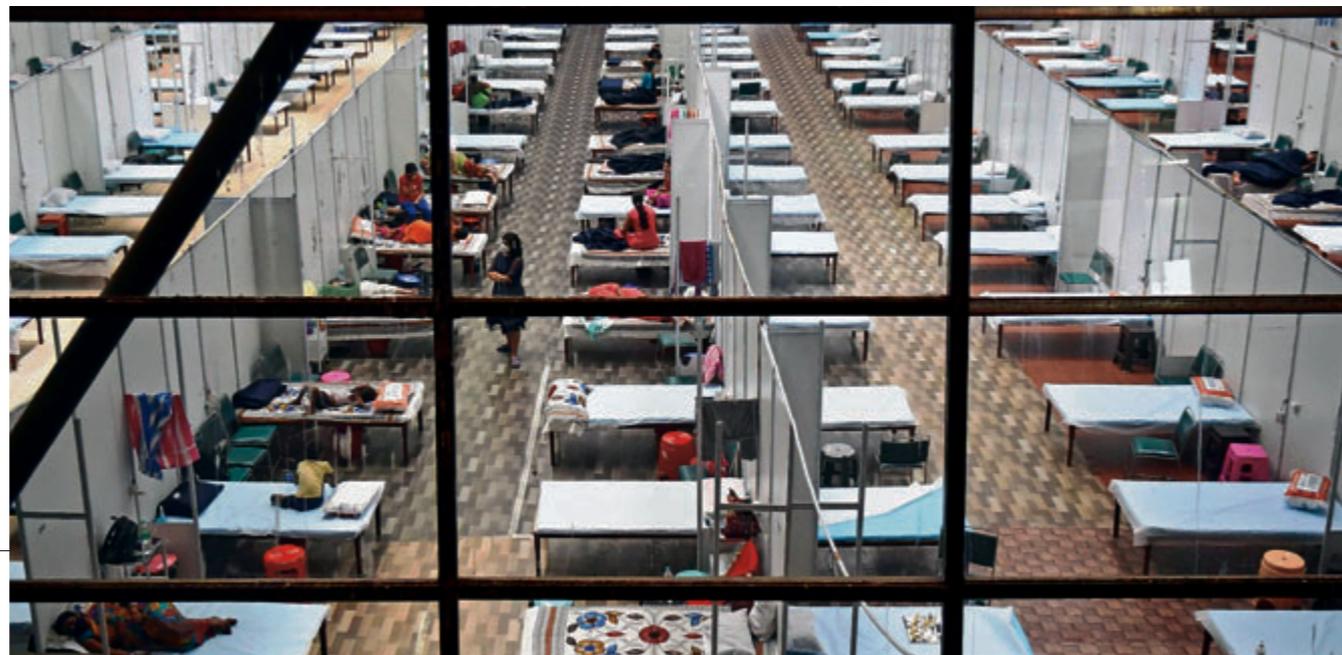
According to Statista.com, India stood 25th among the 30 most impacted countries ranked according to their level of testing per million population. Countries with a higher level of testing include Brazil, the United States, South Africa, Iran, China, Spain, Russia, Qatar, Kazakhstan and all major West European nations.

Considering that India is now in the third place among all countries after the U.S. and Brazil in the number of confirmed cases, the testing rate is clearly lower than required. The significance of the test positivity rate is that it indicates how successful a country has been in using testing to reduce the chain of further transmission. A high positive rate would indicate that a country was not testing enough for that purpose. A low positive rate, on the other hand, would indicate that a country had tested, treated and isolated infected persons efficiently.

Even though India’s testing had gone up in recent weeks, the positive ratio of 8-10 per cent in July indicated that there was a long way to go before the positive ratio came down to one, as was the case in Australia, South Korea and Uruguay. The WHO said a positive rate of 3-12 per cent was the general benchmark of adequate testing. At a level of almost 13 per cent on July 23, India’s daily positive rate was at the higher end of the benchmark.

According to ourworldindata.org, a portal tracking testing rates globally, India tested fewer than seven persons per thousand population for most of June. This went up to 10.42 tests per thousand on July 21 or 10,421 per million. Even Brazil was testing more than India, while countries such as Russia (176.14), the U.S. (142.67), Australia (136.33) and Colombia (24) were far ahead.

The WHO identified four transmission scenarios in the third week of March. The first one was where there were “No Cases”; the second was “Sporadic Cases” where one or more cases were detected, either imported or local; the third included countries where clusters were detected; and the fourth was a scenario of community transmission where larger outbreaks were detected or there was sustained and pervasive local transmission.



MONEY SHARMA/AFP



A MOBILE TEAM to measure blood oxygen saturation levels to determine COVID positive cases, in Madurai on July 18.

Despite the emergence of fresh cases on a daily basis and a steadily rising daily toll, the government claims that there is no community transmission in the country.

The rate at which the total number of confirmed cases were rising daily in India, averaging around 3.5 per cent throughout July, was significantly higher than that of the U.S. (1.9) or Brazil (2.1) or the world average of 1.7 per cent. Despite these trends, the government justifies its denial of community transmission by arguing that the WHO had allowed governments the freedom to use such nomenclature depending on their individual situations. Therefore, the only reason why India does not have community transmission is because the Central government says so.

According to ourworldindata.org, the high positive rate of tests indicates that the true number of infections might be much more than the number of confirmed cases. The data portal said that while the WHO had suggested a positive rate below 10 per cent as a benchmark of adequate testing, the ideal rate was below 3 per cent. A handful of countries had achieved successes in bending the curve in this way. Data for Thailand, Germany, Slovakia, New Zealand and South Korea showed that they monitored the outbreak and caught up with it, as a result of which they were able to get ahead of the infection and effectively contain its spread.

These countries brought down the daily number of positive cases by rapidly increasing the number of tests relative to the number of confirmed cases. On the other hand, countries such as India, Brazil, the U.S., Mexico, Panama, Nigeria, Pakistan and South Africa were not able to achieve such a rise in testing even as daily case counts spiralled.

Thus, starting from a similar place, some countries caught up with the virus with their testing and got ahead of the infection, while others increased testing only in the process of chasing a growing spread.

At a July 14 briefing, Health Ministry officials maintained that if the country was testing 140 persons a day per million population, that could be described as “comprehensive.” There are more than 1,400 laboratories in the country where tests are done using either the gold

standard “reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction” technique or the rapid antigen method. For a population of 1.3 billion, the number of laboratories is woefully low.

COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION

The persistent denial that India was in the community transmission stage has been part of the officialese put out on a regular basis. The Indian Medical Association (IMA) was even reportedly forced to retract the statement by the Chairman of the IMA’s Hospital Board to a leading news agency that India was in the stage of community transmission. Within two days of that observation, the IMA issued a clarification on its stand on community transmission.

The text of the clarification itself showed that there was some pressure to issue such a statement. Curiously titled “IMA’s stand on Community Transmission of COVID”, the note stated that “the purported statement” was not from the IMA headquarters.

The note issued by Rajan Sharma, the IMA’s national president, and R.V. Asokan, general secretary, clarified that “it was for the official agencies to ascertain this stage in the natural history of the epidemic; crowdsourcing data cannot replace authentic data. All presumptions in this regard should be considered a matter of personal opinion.” The IMA officials stated that the IMA was confident that the public health authorities and the medical fraternity were fully engaged in and prepared for containing the fallout. According to them, data showed that “the clusters are in urban metros and not in the countryside where open spaces are the rule”. This brief statement was shared with the media by Health Ministry officials. The observations aimed at discrediting crowdsourced data were strange, given that data aggregator sources, nationally and globally, rely on data issued by Central and State governments. Also, data from crowdsourcing agencies have not been significantly different from data put out by government sources.

The data thrown up by the recently conducted sero-surveillance in Delhi showed that nearly 24 per cent of the population in Delhi had been exposed to the infection at some point, much higher than the all-India prevalence of 0.73 per cent that the previous national sero survey in 22 districts had shown.

The study was conducted during the June 27-July 10 period by the National Centre for Disease Control in collaboration with the Delhi government using the antibody test method, or the Enzyme Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) method.

The method basically shows past infection due to SARS CoV-2 in individuals who tested positive. A total of 21,387 samples were collected, and, on an average, antibodies were found in 23.48 per cent of the persons tested.

This meant that one in every four persons in Delhi, or almost five million people, were infected. Such a high proportion of infections is likely to have been also reflected in several parts of the country that are recording a large number of confirmed cases. □

‘We didn’t bleed him enough’

COVID-19 and the world of **the new normal**. BY P. SAINATH

BLOODLETTING WAS A COMMON MEDICAL treatment for nearly 3,000 years. It developed around an idea, originating with Hippocrates and later becoming wildly popular in Europe in the Middle Ages: that an imbalance of the four humours of the body—blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile—caused illness. Around 500 years after Hippocrates, Galen declared blood to be the most important humour. These and other ideas driven by surgical experimentation and, often, superstition led to bleeding the body, ridding it of bad blood if you like, to save the patient.

Leeches were used for bloodletting, including the medicinal leech *Hirudo medicinalis*. We will never know how many people lost their lives across 3,000 years to this treatment, how many humans turned corpses, bled to death by the medico-ideological delusions of their doctors. We do know that King Charles II of England had some 24 ounces of blood taken from him before he died. George Washington’s three doctors drained him of copious amounts of blood (on his own request) to cure him of a throat infection—he died soon after.

AUTOPSY OF CAPITALISM

COVID-19 has given us a brilliant, thorough autopsy of neoliberalism, indeed of capitalism itself. The corpse is on the table, in glaring light, every vein, artery, organ and bone staring us in the face.

You can see all the leeches—privatisation, corporate globalism, extreme concentration of wealth, levels of inequality unseen in living memory. The bloodletting approach to social and economic ills that has seen societies drain working people of the basics of decent and dignified human existence.

The 3,000-year-old medical practice reached its peak in Europe in the 19th century. Its discrediting came only with the late 19th and 20th centuries, but the doctrine and practice are still dominant in the disciplines of economics, philosophy, business and society.

Some of the most powerful social and economic doctors around the corpse before us analyse it much the way doctors in say, medieval Europe, did. As Alexander Cockburn once said, when the Middle Ages medicos lost their patient, they probably shook their heads sadly and said: “We didn’t bleed him enough.” Precisely as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have whined for decades that the horrific damage of their shock and awe treatment, of sometimes near genocidal structural adjustment, was not because their ‘reforms’ went too far, but because their reforms, alas, did not go far enough, indeed were not allowed to, by the rowdy and great unwashed.

Inequality, the ideologically insane argued, was not



IN GUWAHATI on April 22, during the lockdown, a physically challenged woman and her son, accompanied by a relative, in search of a free food distribution centre.

The 'normal' was an India where full-time farmers fell out of that status at the rate of 2,000 every 24 hours, for 20 years between 1991 and 2011.

such a dreadful thing. It promoted competitiveness and individual initiative. And we needed more of those.

Inequality is now central to any debate we have on the future of humanity. The rulers know this.

For 20 years now, they have been savaging the suggestion that inequality has anything to do with humanity's problems. Early this millennium, the Brookings Institute warned against this debilitating discussion on inequality. Less than 90 days before COVID-19 swept the world, *The Economist* magazine, neoliberalism's Oracle of Delphi, read the chicken entrails before it and ran a bitter cover story:

Inequality illusions

Why wealth and income gaps are not what they appear

Could turn out to be the most famous last words since Tarzan's—"who greased the grapevine?"

It then goes on to blast the numbers relating to income and wealth, attempts to discredit the sources of those numbers, and says these ridiculous beliefs persist "even in the world of polarisation, fake news and social media".

COVID-19 has given us an authentic autopsy, debunking the witch doctors of neoliberalism—yet their thinking dominates say, the corporate media, which are busy finding ways not to link the destruction of the past three months in any way to capitalism.

'NORMAL' IS THE PROBLEM

How ready we are to discuss pandemics and the possible end of humanity. How reluctant we are to discuss the end of neoliberalism and capitalism.

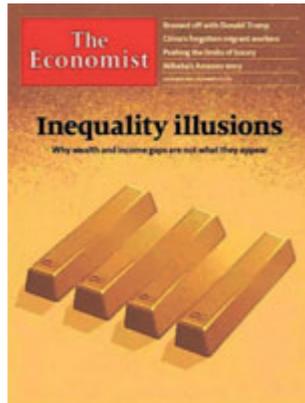
The search is on for: how quickly can we overcome the problem and "return to normal". But the problem was not about returning to normal.

The 'normal' was the problem. (The cagier of the ruling elites have been bandying about the phrase 'the new normal'.)

The pre-COVID normal: In January 2020, we learned from OXFAM that the 22 richest men in the world had more wealth than all the women in Africa.

That the world's 2,153 billionaires held more wealth than 60 per cent of the planet's population.

The new normal: American billionaires, the Institute of Policy Studies tells us, added more wealth in just three



weeks of the pandemic—\$282 billion—than the total wealth they held in 1990 (\$240 billion).

A normal where billions lived in hunger in a world bursting with food. In India as of July 22, we had over 91 million tonnes of foodgrain 'surplus', or buffer stocks, lying with the government—and the highest numbers of the world's hungry. The new normal? The government distributes very little of that grain free but sanctions the conversion of huge stocks of rice into ethanol—to make hand sanitiser.

The old normal, back when we had nearly 50 million tonnes of 'surplus' grain lying in the godowns, was neatly summed up by Prof. Jean Dreze in 2001: if all our foodgrain sacks "were lined up in a row, they would stretch for a million kilometres—more than twice the distance from the earth to the moon".

The new normal—that figure reached 104 million tonnes in early June. Two roads to the moon? One a superhighway for the super-rich, another a dirt track service lane for the migrants who will trudge there to serve them.

The 'normal' was an India where full-time farmers fell out of that status at the rate of 2,000 every 24 hours, for 20 years between 1991 and 2011. In other words, the population of full-time farmers in the country fell by 15 million in that period.

Also: 3,15,000 farmers took their own lives between 1995 and 2018, as the numbers (huge underestimates) of the National Crime Records Bureau show. Millions either became agricultural labourers or migrated out of their villages—since many allied occupations had also died—in search of jobs.

The new normal: tens of millions of migrants returning to their villages from the cities and towns following a Prime Minister giving a nation of 1.3 billion four hours' notice to total lockdown. Some have walked over a thousand kilometres to reach their villages where they had correctly calculated their best chances of survival lay. They have trudged in temperatures in May of 43-47 degrees Celsius.

The new normal is the many millions marching back in search of those livelihoods that we destroyed these past three decades.

Close to 10 million went by trains in the month of May alone—trains organised with the greatest governmental reluctance and only well after a month into the lockdown.

The returning migrants, already destitute and starving, were made to pay full fare to the government-owned Railways.

Normal was an overwhelmingly private health care sector, so expensive that for years, the largest number of individual bankruptcies in the United States came from health expenditure. In India, 55 million human beings fell below the poverty line due to health spending in a single year in this decade.

The new normal: Even greater corporate control over health care. And profiteering by private hospitals in countries like India. That includes, among many things, making money off COVID tests. That drive towards greater private control—even as a few capitalist nations like Spain and Ireland nationalised all private health facilities. Like Sweden nationalised banks in the early 1990s, only to nurse and nourish them back to health with public resources and return them to private ownership. Spain and Ireland will most likely do the same with the health sector.

Normal was that indebtedness, of individuals and nations, grew and grew. Guess what the new normal will be?

In many ways, the new normal in India is rather like the old normal. In daily practice, we continue to function as if it is the poor who are the source and the carriers of the virus, not the flying classes who pioneered the globalisation of communicable disease two decades ago.

Domestic violence was always 'normal' in tens of millions of Indian households.

The new normal? Even male police chiefs in some States are expressing fears of domestic violence having risen but being even more severely under-reported than earlier, because the "perpetrator is now [more] at home" due to the lockdown.

POLLUTION

The normal for New Delhi was that it long ago beat Beijing in the race to be the most polluted capital city in the world. The one pleasant fallout of our present crisis is that the skies over Delhi are cleaner than they have been in decades, with the most dirty and hazardous industrial activity coming to a halt.

The new normal: cut the clean air cacophony. One of the most major moves of our government in the midst of the pandemic was to auction and privatise coal blocks in the country to push for a massive rise in the production of that good.

It was always normal that the words climate change were largely absent in public, or political, discourse. Though human agency-led climate change has long devastated Indian agriculture. The new normal is too often the old normal on steroids.

LABOUR

In State after Indian State, labour laws have been suspended or simply violated. The gold standard of labour law—the eight-hour day—has been scrapped in States, which have made it a 12-hour day. In some States, that addi-

tional four hours comes without overtime. The State of Uttar Pradesh has also suspended 38 existing labour laws to strangle any possibility of either organised or individual protest.

Henry Ford was one of the earliest capitalists to adopt the eight-hour day in 1914. The Ford Motor Co. saw profits almost double in the next two years. The smart set had figured out that beyond those eight hours, productivity drops off sharply. The new normal: Indian capitalists who essentially seek what amounts to a proclamation of bonded labour by ordinance. Cheered on by calls from prominent media editors urging us never to "waste a good crisis". After all, we have got those scumbag workers on their knees, they reason. Let loose the leeches. It is madness to lose this opportunity to ram through 'labour reforms'.

AGRICULTURE

In agriculture, there is a scary situation developing. Remember that millions of small and marginal farmers across the Third World shifted to cash crops over the past three-four decades, coaxed, coerced, goaded into doing so by typical Bank-Fund formulations: cash crops go in exports, are paid for in hard currency, dollars come into your country and liberate you from poverty.

We know how well that went. Small cash crop farmers, especially those in cotton, are the largest single group among farmers suicides. A most highly indebted group too.

Now it gets worse. Much of what we call the rabi crop—harvested normally around March-April—is either lying unsold or, if perishable, has died in the fields due to the lockdown. Millions of quintals of cash crops, including hundreds of thousands of quintals or pounds of cotton, sugarcane, etc., have piled up to the roofs of farmer homes (in cotton at least).

The old normal: deadly fluctuations in prices crippled small cash crop farmers in India and across the Third World. The new normal: Who will buy their crops of the ongoing season when those are harvested months from now?

In the words of United Nations General Secretary Antonio Guterres, "We face the deepest global recession since World War II, and the broadest collapse in incomes since 1870." The worldwide crash in income and consumption does not exempt India and will very likely devastate cash crop farmers here. Last year, our greatest export market for cotton was China. Today, relations with China are at their worst in decades and both countries are in trouble. Who will buy the gigantic amounts of cotton, sugarcane, vanilla, and other cash crops piling up across many countries, including India? At what prices?

And with all that land committed to cash crop, and with raging unemployment, what happens if you run short of food? Guterres warns: "...We could see famines of historic proportions."

There's another thing that Guterres said of COVID-19: "It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver health care

for all; the fiction that unpaid care work is not work.”

Normal: Indian elites cannot stop bragging about their prowess on the Internet, our ascendancy as a software superpower, their foresight and brilliance in creating the world's second super Silicon Valley in Bengaluru, Karnataka. (And besides, it was anyway Indians powering all progress in Silicon Valley I.) This narcissism has been the normal about 30 years.

Step outside Bengaluru into rural Karnataka and see the realities recorded by the National Sample Survey: Just 2 per cent of households in rural Karnataka had computers in 2018. (In the much-derided State of Uttar Pradesh, that figure was 4 per cent.) A mere 8.3 per cent of rural Karnataka households had any Internet facility. And rural Karnataka is home to 37.4 million human beings, or 61 per cent of the State's population. Bengaluru, Silicon Valley 2, accounts for about 14 per cent.

‘ONLINE EDUCATION’

The new normal is that corporations pushing for ‘online education’ stand to make billions. They already were earning big bucks but now will double their value very easily. The gigantic exclusion of the marginalised, enforced by society, caste, class, gender and region, is now legitimised by the pandemic (can't stop the kids learning, right?).

Stop anywhere in the Indian countryside, including the richest State of Maharashtra, and see how many children own smartphones on which they can download their pdf ‘lessons’. How many actually have access to the Net or when they have last used it?

Also consider: how many girl children are dropping out of school because their bankrupted, newly unemployed parents are unable to pay their fees? It was the old normal, too, to pull girls out of school during a financial crunch, a process now severely accelerated under the lockdown.

The pre-pandemic normal was an India run by an alliance of socio-religious fundamentalists and economic market fundamentalists, happily married partners cohabiting a bed called the corporate media. Many leaders were ideologically comfortable in both camps.

The normal was a Rs.2 trillion media (and entertainment) industry that for decades did not give a damn for the migrants whose movements they were mesmerised and mystified by after March 25.

No ‘national’ newspaper or channel had a full-time labour correspondent, nor a full-time farming correspondent (as against the laughably termed ‘agriculture correspondent’ whose job is to cover the Agriculture Ministry and, increasingly, agri-business). The beats—fulltime—did not exist. In other words, 75 per cent of the population did not make news.

For weeks after March 25, anchors and editors who would not know a migrant if he or she kicked them in the teeth, held forth knowledgeably on the subject. A few ruefully conceded that we in the media needed to try and tell their stories better. At precisely the same time, cor-



porate owners laid off over a thousand journalists and media workers, extinguishing any chance of covering the migrants at all with any depth and consistency. Many of these layoffs were planned for long before the pandemic and the worst offenders are amongst the most profitable media companies anywhere and have huge cash reserves.

The normal by any other name stinks just the same.

‘A TV REALITY SHOW’

Now one man runs the country on a sporadic TV reality show. Every other channel in existence runs this syndicated self-adulation mostly at prime time. Cabinet, government, Parliament, the courts, legislative Assemblies, opposition parties, count for nothing. Our tech wizard status has not enabled us to hold a single day of a single session of Parliament. No. No virtual, online, televised Parliament—125 days into the lockdown. Other nations without an iota of our fabled tech brain power have done so, effortlessly.

It may be that in some European nations, governments are trying to revive elements of a welfare state hesitantly or partially they had spent four decades dismantling. In India, it is the medieval bloodletting approach of our market medics that prevails. The leeches are out on a loot and grab sortie. They have not bled the poor enough. Parasitic worms must do what they evolved to.

What do progressive movements do? They have never accepted the old normal. But they do have something to go back to that is older—the struggles for justice, equal-

AT A GODOWN of the Food Corporation of India in Jammu on April 16. In India as of July 22, there was 91 million tonnes of foodgrain “surplus”, or buffer stocks, lying with the government—and the highest numbers of the world's hungry.

ity, and the right to lives of dignity while preserving the planet. ‘Inclusive development’ is a dead leech you do not want to revive. The framework is justice, the goal is ending inequality. The process—a variety of routes some already there, some unexplored, some abandoned—is what we will all agonise over.

Movements of farmers and farm labourers, for instance, are headed for serious trouble if they do not factor in the problems of climate change (which have already devastated agriculture in India); if they do not locate themselves in and link their battles to an agroecological approach. Labour movements need to not just fight for a bigger slice of the cake, but pursue an older abnormal quest, for ownership of the bakery.

Some goals are clear. The cancellation of Third World debt. In India, for ending the indebtedness of our own Fourth World.

Dismantle corporate monopolies. Start by evicting them entirely from health, food and agriculture, and education.

Movements to force states to a radical redistribution of resources; taxing wealth, even if only of the top 1 per cent for starters. Taxing multinational corporations that get away with paying almost no taxes. Also by restoring

and improving taxation systems that so many countries have steadily dismantled for decades now.

Only mass movements can compel countries to build nationwide universal systems in health and education. We need peoples’ movements around health justice, food justice, and more—some inspiring ones already exist but are marginalised in corporate media coverage.

We also need, here and worldwide, to focus on those rights in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that corporate media have simply expunged from public discourse. Articles 23-28, which include ‘the right to form and join trade unions’, the right to work and equal pay for equal work, remuneration that ensures an existence worthy of human dignity, health, and a lot more.

In our country, we need to propagate the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution and make some of those—right to work, right to education, to food, and more—justiciable and enforceable. Those are the soul of a Constitution that came out of India's freedom struggle. More than one ruling of the Supreme Court these past 30-40 years has held that the directive principles are as important as the fundamental rights.

People are more likely to rally around their Constitution and its freedom struggle legacy than around individual manifestos.

For the past 30 years, every Indian government has violated those principles and rights every single day—with the imposition of the Market and the erasure of the Moral. The entire path of ‘development’ was based on exclusions: of people, their involvement, participation and control.

You cannot fight the present pandemic—let alone those to come—without people's participation. Kerala's success in combating the coronavirus is based precisely on the involvement of its people in local committees, in building networks of kitchens supplying people with cheap food; contact tracing, isolating and control—these worked better in that State because of people's participation. There are huge lessons there that go beyond facing up to the perils of this pandemic.

At the heart of any progressive movement is the belief in justice and equality. In the Indian Constitution, ‘Justice, social, economic and political...’ to which, in our times, we must add gender justice as well, and climate justice. The Constitution recognised who the driving force for that justice and equality would be. Not markets, not corporations, but “We the People.”

But in all progressive movements there is also an overarching belief in the world not as a finished product but as a work in progress—with many setbacks and huge unfinished agendas.

As the legendary freedom fighter Captain Bha—who turned 97 this June—once told me, “We fought for Independence and Freedom. We achieved Independence.”

As we approach the 73rd anniversary of that Independence, it is worth fighting for that unfinished agenda of freedom. □

Saffron scissors

Educationists see a **Hindutva hand** in the Central Board of Secondary Education's decision to selectively reduce the syllabi for Classes 9 to 12 this year citing the COVID-19 pandemic. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

IN VIEW OF THE “BURDEN” ON STUDENTS amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has selectively removed portions from the textbooks of Classes 9 to 12, effecting a 30 per cent reduction in as many as 190 subjects for the academic year 2020-21.

Academics feel that the portions removed suggest that this seemingly innocuous exercise is, in fact, a continuation of the Sangh Parivar's machination to control the metanarrative on nationalism and inculcate a Hindu majoritarian world view among students.

DELETIONS

Chapters on federalism, citizenship, nationalism and secularism have been “completely deleted” from the Class 11 Political Science syllabus. Portions pertaining to business ethics, the Planning Commission and Five-Year Plans, demonetisation, goods and services tax (GST) and consumer protection have been removed from Business Studies. Chapters on Indian democracy, social structure, stratification and social processes have been removed from Sociology. Entire chapters on early societies, nomadic cultures and confrontation of cultures have been removed from World History. Portions about peasants, zamindars and the state and understanding Partition have been axed from Indian History. Issues pertaining to gender, caste and social movements have also been removed.

“As a scholar of movements, it pains me to see that chapters on social movements and regionalism have been completely removed from the CBSE textbooks,” Dr Gaurav J. Pathania, Adjunct Sociology Professor, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., told *Frontline*. He added: “Social movements change the course of history by questioning the authorities (we have seen the JP movement, anti-Emergency movements, anti-corruption movement, anti-rape agitations) and if we don't tell the story of a movement then we will end up misunderstanding the root cause of our historical problems. My own research on regional movements highlights that the separate Telangana movement has unfolded many his-



UNION MINISTER for Human Resource Development, Dr Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank'.

torical realities that were not known to the masses. Movements produce new knowledge, literature, leaders, music, arts that challenge the existing belief system. Omitting historical facts or banning literature sets us on a dangerous path that cannot lead to scientific knowledge production.”

Comparing the CBSE case to the California textbook controversy where a section of Hindu fundamentalist scholars had removed the word “caste” from South Asian history, Dr Pathania said that in reality, Hindu life could not be imagined without caste.

In a statement, the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE) said: “The democratic theory of the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers of the state, and the federal structure of the Indian state, strengthened by institutionalisation of local self-governance, is unacceptable to the RSS- [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh]-BJP which believes in complete centralisation and concentration of power in a Supreme Leader—an idea that the RSS, drawing inspiration from Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, has propagated since the early 1930s. In opposi-

tion to the Constitution, their goal is ‘One leader, one nation, one state’.”

Education has always been a priority area of intervention for the RSS which runs organisations such as the Seva Bharati, the Saraswati Shishu Mandir and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. While its network of schools under the Vidya Bharati are affiliated to the CBSE and follow the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) syllabus, they continue to teach a version of history that blames the Mughals for internal issues, vilifies Indian Christians as colonialists, stereotypes Muslims, hero-worships RSS ideologues and imparts Sanskrit and Vedic moral education. While it might be too soon for the BJP to replicate this model of education in other CBSE schools, teachers feel that the slow corrosion of secular principles by changes in the syllabi is a steady move in that direction.

Echoing this sentiment, the AIFRTE said: “The deletions in the syllabus are aimed at clearing the ground for advocating the Hindutva concept of the Hindu Rashtra for which the present regime is aggressively working. If this concept of a Hindu supremacy, veneration of the state and unchallenged adulation and obedience to a supreme leader is to be successfully promoted then it is essential that the Indian people and in particular the children and youth be indoctrinated in a narrative that is completely different from the actual experience and history of the people's struggles that have contributed to the making of contemporary Indian nationhood and citizenship.”

Professor Kumkum Roy, who teaches history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, told *Frontline*: “I think what we are witnessing in terms of the suggested deletions/omissions is far more wide-ranging than what we have seen in earlier instances/decades. While saffronisation would suggest an emphasis on a communal agenda, ignoring the diverse religious traditions as well as secular and agnostic traditions that have been part of our heritage, it probably does not capture the logic behind the other omissions that have been suggested—including themes like evolution, environment, ecology, citizenship, nationalism, federalism, issues of gender and caste, mathematical reasoning, and popular movements. The attempt seems to be to discourage or marginalise an engagement with a range of crucial themes, across disciplines, that provide an opportunity for critical thinking. Also, once certain themes/ topics are identified as unimportant, it is extremely difficult to reinstate them within syllabi, as teachers/ examiners/ parents and learners are encouraged to concentrate on whatever would be identified as more immediately relevant in terms of examination and evaluation.”

Not just in social sciences, certain key chapters on mathematical reasoning also faced the syllabus cut, leading to apprehensions that it might affect entrance examinations such as the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET).

Another major area of study to be removed was Environment and Natural Resources. Food security, repro-

duction, conservation and judicious use of natural resources, forest and wildlife, coal and petroleum conservation, examples of people's participation for conservation of natural resources, big dams and their advantages and limitations, water harvesting and sustainability of natural resources, have all been axed.

An online petition signed by over 800 students, teachers and concerned citizens was sent to the Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister. It reasoned that “avoiding formal and academic engagement” with the deleted issues would mean “depriving future young citizens of the resources to develop critical thinking and a scientific temper, the basic equipment required for citizens in a rapidly changing world. We urge that these themes be restored immediately, and, if required, certain details/ examples be pruned from chapters, after due consultation with the teams that had developed these syllabi and curricula. Hasty and arbitrary actions are best avoided, for these will have serious long-term repercussions.”

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee tweeted: “Shocked to know that the Central Govt has dropped topics like Citizenship, Federalism, Secularism & Partition in the name of reducing CBSE course during #COVIDCrisis.”

Dr Pathania said: “The ruling government's agenda is to present history through their lens. In the time of globalisation and digital archives, it is not possible to hide history from the present generation. If the government is removing these chapters to ease the course load for students, then it should promise that in a post-corona world, these chapters should be added back to the textbook.”

CBSE CLARIFIES

Facing a backlash from several quarters, the CBSE issued a statement on July 17, clarifying its decision. The HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank tweeted: “There has been a lot of uninformed commentary on the exclusion of



THE CBSE HEADQUARTERS at Shiksha Sadan in New Delhi.

Tampering with and saffronising education have been recurrent charges against the BJP regime since 2014. The lockdown has not altered that perception.

some topics from #CBSEsyllabus. The problem with these comments is that they resort to sensationalism by connecting topics selectively to portray a false narrative.”

He said, “The exclusions are merely a one-time measure for exams, due to the #COVID19 pandemic. The only aim is to relax the stress on students by reducing the syllabus by 30 per cent. This exercise has been carried out following the advice and recommendations of various experts and considering the suggestions received from educationists through our #SyllabusForStudents2020 campaign.”

CBSE Secretary Anurag Tripathi reiterated that the topics mentioned as dropped were either being covered by the rationalised syllabus or in the Alternative Academic Calendar of the NCERT.

Appealing to detractors “to leave politics out of education”, the HRD Minister added that schools were welcome to use these themes for internal assessment in case they had already taught them. Professor Kumkum Roy, who mooted the online petition, said that this was not viable “because the academic session has just begun, and most schools have probably not reached these chapters. Secondly most schools choose themes for internal assessment that are considered ‘relevant’ for examinations. Therefore, it is unlikely that these themes will receive serious attention.”

Terming the Minister’s claim that 1,500 suggestions had been sought for the “rationalisation” of the syllabus from educationists as “surprising”, the AIFRTE pointed out that the entire process had remained impervious to sharp public critique by educationists, activists and political leaders and groups. It said, “Their diverse and well-informed opinions were obviously not regarded as being worthwhile enough to be taken into account. The pattern of the exclusions makes it only too evident why this has been the case. India’s national movement, the struggle against colonial oppression, the tragedy of Partition, not only of the Punjab and Bengal but also of Assam and the other States of the North-East which still continue to resonate in popular consciousness, have been ignored possibly because of the ideological bias of the present regime towards a unitarian Akhand Bharat.”

Tampering with and saffronising education have been recurrent charges against the BJP regime since 2014. The lockdown has not altered that perception. On

the contrary, the BJP is using the lockdown to further its agenda, said Professor Madhu Prasad, who formerly taught at the Department of Philosophy in Zakir Husain College, Delhi University, and is a presidium member of the AIFRTE. “This is a typical fascist way of functioning. You make life so difficult for people that they start to think that it is enough for them to simply survive.” She said that the current controversy was far more sinister than saffronisation of education: “It is an attempt to create a whole new narrative and making the structure of our state fascist by changing the principles on which it is based. It is a far bigger attack than just saffronisation.”

On June 24, the government handed over to the World Bank the job of designing the structure, training and governance of the entire system of school education from early childhood care and education (ECCE) to Class XII. According to the AIFRTE, this was done “to facilitate its conversion into a privatised, commercialised and corporatised system instead of strengthening it as a free and compulsory system of public education as required by the Constitution”.

Dinanath Batra, a former general secretary of the Vidya Bharati who heads the RSS-affiliated Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas, recently sought the removal from NCERT textbooks a poem by the revolutionary poet Pash; a couplet by Mirza Ghalib; the thoughts of Rabindranath Tagore; extracts from painter M.F. Husain’s autobiography; references to the Mughal emperors as benevolent, to the BJP as a “Hindu” party, to the National Conference as “secular”, to an apology tendered by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh over the 1984 riots; and a sentence that said “nearly 2,000 Muslims were killed in Gujarat in 2002”. In a five-page note sent to the NCERT, the Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas objected to a paragraph that stated that the Ram temple movement was “linked with the growth of BJP and politics of Hindutva” and the sentence “Babri mosque was built by Mir Baqi... Some Hindus believe that it was built at the birthplace of Ram by destroying a Ram temple.” The Nyas wants Hindi textbooks to mention that the medieval Sufi mystic Amir Khusrau “increased the rift between Hindus and Muslims”.

Earlier, Batra had campaigned for the removal of A.K. Ramanujan’s essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” from Delhi University’s undergraduate syllabus and gone to court for the withdrawal of Wendy Doniger’s book *The Hindus: An Alternative History*.

As the AIFRTE concludes: “To make us ‘unlearn’ our actual contemporary history and to accept an alternative that runs counter to it—that is the agenda behind the GOI’s manoeuvres to indoctrinate through the education system, and to utilise the COVID-19 crisis to consolidate its political programme of communalising Indian society and the state, and of homogenising a richly plural and diverse population which, on gaining independence from British colonialism, committed itself to becoming a modern democratic republic and not an authoritarian theological Hindu Rashtra.” □

Testing times

State governments and the teaching community are opposed to the UGC’s July 6 directive, which insists that final year students have to write final term examinations if they want to get their degrees.

BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ACROSS THE country have been closed since March, and when they will reopen remains under a cloud of uncertainty as COVID-19 cases continue to surge. Against this background, the revised guidelines the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued on July 6 directing universities to conduct final year examinations by September end raises pertinent questions. The guidelines are in direct conflict with the decision made by several higher education institutions, including the Indian Institutes of Technology, and State governments such as Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Odisha, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry to cancel examinations in view of the pandemic. The UGC “revised” its guidelines as the ones it issued on April 29 had not accounted for the pandemic lasting as long as it has. However, they are applicable only to the terminal year or semester examinations; the previous guidelines have been retained for other examinations. Further, while the earlier guidelines were “advisory” in nature, the tone of the revised ones have an element of coercion and compulsion.

The new directives seem to have the go-ahead of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). A press release the MHA issued on July 6 and an Office Memorandum the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) issued on the same day had identical interpretations of the UGC guidelines. The MHA’s press release stated: “The final term examinations are to be compulsorily conducted as per the UGC guidelines and academic calendar for the universities and as per the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) approved by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.”

OBJECTIONS FROM STATES

At least four State governments, national teacher associations and their federations and student bodies have objected to this given the rise in COVID-19 cases. On July 11, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal wrote to the Prime Minister saying that the State government had, after consulting all stakeholders and vice

chancellors, issued an advisory on June 26 to all State-aided universities and colleges asking them to provide “due weightage to the internal assessment and the performance of the candidate in the previous semesters in order to ensure transparency”. This advisory, she wrote, was “issued in the interest, health, safety and future of the students”. The State’s colleges and universities were also advised to hold special examinations after the situation became normal for those students who wished to appear in a formal examination instead of an alternative evaluation method. State-aided institutions had already taken the steps as per the advisory, which, Mamata Banerjee wrote, was “overwhelmingly appreciated” by “students, parents and other stakeholders” as evidenced by the “hundreds of emails” sent by students and the teaching community. The Prime Minister was urged to “get the matter re-examined immediately and restore the earlier advisory of the UGC” to protect the interests of students.

Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami of Tamil Nadu expressed similar concerns. He wrote to Union HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal reminding him that the UGC had in its April 29 guidelines given universities and colleges “flexibility” to conduct examinations without any restrictions, guidelines or directions from the appropriate government or authority. The new guidelines had many constraints, Palaniswami wrote, arguing that it would be difficult for some students to reach examination centres. Online examinations, he said, were equally infeasible as there were “various issues relating to digital access”. He pointed out that many government and private educational institutions were being used as COVID-19 care centres where asymptomatic people who had tested positive for the disease were being quarantined and that this was likely to continue for some time. Requesting that States be given the freedom to work out their “own assessment methods, without compromising on the quality and academic credibility”, the Chief Minister wrote that apex authorities such as the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education could be directed to “endorse the respective decisions of

the State governments which would be based on the local prevailing COVID-19 conditions". The Delhi government decided to cancel all Delhi State university examinations, including the finals. It declared that final year students would be awarded degrees on the basis of previous assessments while intermediary semester students would be promoted to the next semester on the basis of internal assessments.

'SHAM OF AN EXAM'

The Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA) described the UGC's move as forcing a "sham of an exam" on students by legitimising the Amazon-run DU-Open Book Exam method of examinations, which teachers had been opposing. According to the DUTA, even the Union HRD Minister had, via a tweet on April 26, expressed reservations about the open book examination and had asked the UGC to reconsider it. The DUTA felt that it defied logic to insist on examinations for final semester students while allowing first year and second year students to be assessed on the basis of internal assessments. It pointed out that final year students had been completely assessed in previous semesters and internally assessed for the current semester and could easily be awarded degrees on the basis of this if first and second year students could be "passed" with a much more limited assessment and without an examination. The insistence on using the barometer of a single "examination" as a tool to award the final degree defies the purpose of a holistic education.

The Federation of Central Universities' Teachers' Associations (FEDCUTA) slammed the UGC guidelines for being self-contradictory, echoing the DUTA's arguments by highlighting the fact that the guidelines were applicable only to final year students "who had gone through several rounds of formal evaluation and assessments while pursuing their courses" and not to "students at the earlier and more foundational stages of courses [who] were evaluated to a much lesser extent". The FEDCUTA argued that for final year students "only a small part of the total evaluation" was pending when colleges and universities were shut down. Yet, according to the UGC, they could not be promoted without examinations but the intermediate semester students could be. This would also mean that the date of completion of the year/semester for final year students would be stretched beyond September, whereas other students would finish their term in mid August. The final year students, however, have a greater need to complete early as delaying the process until September 30 or later could deprive them of the chance of taking up job opportunities, one of the reasons the UGC/MHRD/MHA cited as the justification for insisting that examinations be completed by September 30.

The FEDCUTA argued that a "combination of their [the students'] past assessment and internal assessment" was more likely to serve as an "accurate index of their overall learning and performance" and therefore provided a sounder basis for the award of degrees than

examinations in the current extraordinary conditions posed by the pandemic. The conduct of examinations with pen and paper in an offline mode being impossible for most universities, the insistence on examinations, the FEDCUTA said, was because the UGC and the government wanted to promote online examinations. Online examinations, the FEDCUTA argued, can "never match up to the standards of regular examinations in terms of the evaluation process and preserving its integrity". It was pointed out that teachers and students have opposed it as they felt that it was "discriminatory" and promoted "dishonesty" and would lead to a distorted assessment that would be skewed against honest students and those from underprivileged backgrounds. Such examinations also would have no provisions for keeping out unfair means and malpractice like cheating, thereby undermining the credibility of the degree being awarded, the FEDCUTA said. Teachers also asked why there was an emphasis on examinations rather than on learning as part of the education process, which stands completely disrupted given the severe limitations of online education.

Education is one of the areas badly hit by the continuous lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational institutions were the first to be shut down when the disease began to spread. It was in this context that the UGC issued its guidelines in April acknowledging that most universities would not be able to conduct examinations online. The situation, the FEDCUTA argued, "could not have changed so dramatically between April and July as to render that assessment invalid". Teachers attribute this shift in the UGC's position to pressure from the government and commercial interests that hoped to make money from the examination process and see this as being in tune with the thrust on privatisation in the 2019 National Policy on Education.

The All India Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations (AIFUCTO), which represents teachers in State universities and colleges, has also slammed the guidelines, stating that the UGC "has not taken into consideration the COVID-19 situation in various parts of the country". Conducting end semester examinations even by September 30 would be extremely dangerous in its view. The AIFUCTO argued that continuous evaluation offered a far more credible system than one end-semester evaluation. It pointed out that several universities abroad had decided to cancel examinations and award grades on the basis of internal evaluations. Many students who had got campus placements would suffer if their pass certificates were delayed because they had to write examinations.

Professor S. Subburaju, national secretary of the AIFUCTO, told *Frontline* that in April the UGC issued guidelines allowing universities to assess students in the manner they deemed fit but inexplicably revised this position in July. "In Tamil Nadu, the [COVID-19] situation is very bad. The UGC has itself maintained that the semester system as a method of continuous evaluation is best, and in Tamil Nadu, we have a system where 25 per



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

OUTSIDE THE MINISTRY of Human Resource Development in New Delhi on July 2, supporters of the National Students' Union of India demanding the cancellation of final year examinations.

cent of evaluation is based on internal assessment and 75 per cent evaluation is based on examination. There are ways of dealing with the new situation that COVID-19 has posed," he said. A combination of marks scored in internal assessment, marks allotted for attendance and the previous semesters' average can be used to evaluate final semester students without compelling them to write examinations to get a degree, he argued. "The government wants to push online courses. The UGC has very cleverly given the option of offline or online exams fully aware that offline will not be possible under the circumstances. Online exams are also not possible as more than 70 per cent of campuses do not have Wi-Fi facilities. Many students from rural backgrounds also do not have Internet access in their homes," he said. It would be "absurd", he said, to promote online education for students in regular courses when faculty resources were available. Information communication technology could only be a supplement to teaching; it should never replace the existing form of teaching and learning, which was more interactive, he added. There were federal concerns also, he said.

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led government in Tamil Nadu, Subburaju said, which was normally inclined to listen to the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre, had also conveyed its misgivings about the UGC directive. "The public is against it as the COVID situation is bad in Tamil Nadu. And online exams can bring a new host of problems like cheating and other frauds. There is also no justification to make students wait till the situation normalises. We can easily assess the end semester students on the basis of other parameters without insisting on an examination," he said.

Completely disregarding these concerns, the UGC issued a press note on July 18 arguing that examinations were an integral part of the education system and a measure of students' learning, skills, knowledge and other competencies. It cited the example of a few countries that had conducted examinations or were conducting them with an option of online, offline or a blended form of examinations. The press release made it abundantly clear that the UGC had issued its revised guidelines on July 6 as per the directions of the MHA, the MHRD and the report of an expert committee. Interestingly, the guidelines have come at a time when the daily spike in the cases has been in the range of 30,000-40,000 and is showing an upward trend. According to the UGC, however, of the 945 universities in the country, 755 had responded and informed it of the status of the conduct of examinations. The UGC claimed that 194 had already conducted examinations and 366 were planning to conduct them in August/September. The UGC statement, however, did not reveal which universities had responded nor other specifics such as how many of the examinations conducted or to be conducted were in the online mode. The statement also did not reflect the opinions of the State governments concerned or of teachers and students in these universities.

Meanwhile, 31 students from 13 States have petitioned the Supreme Court to quash the UGC's July 6 circular in view of the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the country, pleading that the results of the final year students should be calculated on the basis of the performance of past semesters. This is the second such petition to be filed: the Yuva Sena, the youth wing of the Shiv Sena, had also petitioned the Supreme Court on similar grounds. The Yuva Sena is headed by Aaditya Thackeray, who is a Cabinet Minister in the Shiv Sena-led coalition government in Maharashtra. Thackeray has also written to the UGC and the MHRD on two occasions requesting them to call off the final year examinations given the spread of the pandemic.

HOME MINISTRY'S ROLE

The deep involvement of the MHA in deciding on the necessity of final semester examinations, even as its own national COVID-19 management guidelines and directives do not yet allow the reopening of educational institutions for face-to-face teaching and learning, raises intriguing questions about the intent behind the UGC directive. The contention that academic standards have to be upheld does not quite hold water given the inconsistencies within the guidelines. Any end semester examination only evaluates students on what they learnt in the courses prescribed for that particular semester. If a degree is likely to be significantly devalued by the elimination of one among several end semester examinations taken over a course of study, how does it matter whether it is an intermediate or a final semester examination that is dropped? This is the kind of question that neither the UGC nor the Central government seems willing to answer. □

Records of heroism

SWAN, a network of volunteers who banded together to help thousands of migrant workers in distress, has released reports that could prove valuable in shaping labour policies. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

SUJIT KUMAR, A WORKER FROM BIHAR stranded in Bathinda, Punjab, had not eaten in four days when a volunteer from Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) spoke with him on April 3.

Two tribal women from Jharkhand had been told they would be paid Rs.9,000 a month to work in an incense factory in Bengaluru. They were beaten up, paid Rs.200 and made to work for 15 hours a day. One woman was even raped inside the factory premises twice. Civil groups managed to rescue and secure their passage home.

Sanoj was part of a group of 15 people who had been living on the pavement post-lockdown. They had difficulty accessing food and received no help from the police in finding shelter. Fortunately, a SWAN volunteer chanced upon the group and helped it.

Several such stories of suffering and rescue have been chronicled by SWAN, a network of volunteers who banded together very quickly in the early days of the lockdown to help thousands of migrant workers in distress. The network has released reports with information and data that could prove valuable in shaping labour policies.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a “janata curfew” on March 22 in a bid to curb the spread of COVID-19 infections, there was a hint that the country would soon have to enter a complete lockdown. However, the announcement shockingly came just three days later and the authorities gave a four-hour deadline to begin a complete shutdown.

UNFOLDING TRAGEDY

It is well documented that millions of people were left confused. The working class was, and continues to be, among those worst affected by the lockdown. The country was witness to heart-wrenching images of men, women and children walking long distances to reach their villages, seeking food and shelter, with some dying en route.

At the time, the unfolding migrant worker tragedy had no impact on the Centre or the State governments. Until early May, little help was given. The failure of the state was so glaring that it was left to civil society organ-

isations, trade unions and ordinary citizens to provide immediate help, even if it was something as minimal as giving just Rs.200 to buy groceries.

On March 27, under the banner of SWAN, a group of academics, social workers, students, union members and concerned citizens spread across the country and began helping workers from various States who were stranded, hungry and shelterless and in need of money to return to their villages.

Over two months, SWAN used an extensive web of humanitarian organisations, trade unions and social workers to help 35,000 migrant workers reach home. This was a drop in the ocean no doubt, given that lakhs of migrant workers were stranded all over the country.

But the point is not about numbers and how many

lives were saved but how a group of empathetic and knowledgeable people came together to deploy an effective solution at a time when the government, with all its resources, did not get its act together and even refused to acknowledge the existence of such a crisis.

Furthermore, SWAN's efforts were not limited to helping the migrant workers reach home. The data collected and analysed by a division of volunteers have been published as three comprehensive reports, which were released at intervals during the lockdown.

Each one is a substantial resource that provides moving accounts by migrants, insights into the crisis, and statistical and data analysis. The reports also include recommendations on handling such a crisis.

A disclaimer says that the exercise was never meant to be a research project but was only aimed at providing immediate help to those badly in need of it.

Yet, because the scale of the tragedy was staggering, the report's findings went a step beyond being just a record of the initial days of the lockdown.

The reports were deliberately published during the lockdown so that policy makers could take cognisance of the plight of migrant workers. Unfortunately, they were not given much consideration.

DISTRESS CALLS

Speaking to *Frontline* about SWAN's genesis and its future plans, Bengaluru-based Rajendran Narayanan, one of the main convenors of SWAN and assistant professor at Azim Premji University, said that the entire operation was a collaborative effort by several organisations, collectives, students and even a few committed

bureaucrats. According to him, SWAN as an entity grew organically for a specific purpose for a specific period of time. Its journey began when Sanjay Sahni, a social worker with the Samaj Parivartan Shakti Sangathan (SPSS) in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, received distress calls during the early days of the lockdown from a group of 50 migrant workers from Bihar who were stranded in Mangaluru, Karnataka.

Sahni, who had worked with Narayanan, contacted him and sought his help.

“A few well-wishers sent money to the workers so they could just subsist—buy food, medicines, recharge phones, etc. Word probably got around and soon calls were coming from various sources in different States. Sahni realised the scale was huge and very quickly a group of us realised we had to put together a system to address the crisis,” said Narayanan.

According to him, the system was built on the concept of providing assistance by primarily linking stranded workers with local organisations. Volunteers set up a helpline that took details of the caller's problems. These would be verified by the local link, which would then provide help such as food and government facilities for shelter and later, journey home.

Each caller's information was put on a spread sheet so that the network could track the person and ensure they were safe. “By March 30-April 1 we had a system in place. A team was looking into finances, another manning helplines, teams [were looking] into verification of information, logistics, technology, social media, etc. Volunteers worked on a shift system so that someone was available at all hours. It was a mind-numbing and emotional experience,” said Narayanan.

He added: “All of it was done purely on a voluntary basis. I tapped into the Azim Premji University alumni [network] for help and the response was amazing.” SWAN had approximately 120 volunteers during the peak of the crisis.

CASH ASSISTANCE

Explaining the operation, Narayanan said that there were people working with SWAN in every troubled State. As the crisis grew, teams were responsible for zones across the country.

“Yet, the reality was that cash in hand was the need of the hour. Reaching out to friends, work associates, anyone who would help, SWAN was able to collect funds that were distributed among stranded migrant workers,” he said.

Responding to word-of-mouth appeals, people donated small and large amounts. The finance team provided directions to the donor on where to send the money; most of the time it was directly to the person in distress.

There were cases where the bank would charge a penalty as the account did not have the minimum balance; to reactivate it, an automatic debit would take place.

“Over two months, we disbursed approximately



MIGRANT WORKERS wait for food packets being offered by a non-governmental organisation in Vijayawada on July 24.

K.V.S. GIRI

Rs.50 lakh, which is a reasonable amount,” said Narayanan.

SWAN’s reports include several letters to the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State governments of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, indicating its efforts to bring the crisis to the notice of the authorities. “Other than Karnataka, the response from the States was poor. In fact, the Maharashtra government was particularly hostile,” said Narayanan.

Narayanan, who is actively involved in the Right to Food and Right to Work campaigns, said that the lack of social protection measures and safety nets was glaring.

Interestingly, he said, poorer States such as Bihar and Odisha helped their people, while richer States such as Maharashtra and Gujarat shut their doors on those who kept their economies alive.

There are an estimated 10 crore migrant workers in the country, according to available data, although migrant workers do not enjoy formal recognition.

Also, the warehouses of the Food Corporation of India now have 2.5 times the buffer stock norms, and there is no reason why rations should not be universalised, Narayanan said.

According to him, it was a good time to empower the panchayat and form a federation at that level. “They are the only ones who know how many members of the village have left and where the workers have gone. Unfortunately, the Central government has reduced federalism to monopolising decisions and socialising losses.”

Anoushka Kale, a graduate from Azim Premji University and SWAN volunteer based in Pune, said that the experience was an eye-opener. She was fielding 30-40 calls a day in the early days of the crisis. “The conversations were mostly about securing food. But I felt speaking to a person in distress humanised them. They may have been desperate but they spoke with dignity and respect.”

VALUABLE DATA

The SWAN reports are small repositories of data and a documentation of the migrant crisis. Each one also provides a set of recommendations, including creating a safety net for migrant workers and specifics such as depositing Rs.7,000 into each worker’s accounts until they gain employment again.

The network released its first report, titled “21 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India”, on April 15.

In the introduction, the report said: “The first three weeks of the lockdown have been utterly distressing for stranded workers and goes far beyond mere ‘pareshaani’ as the PM put it. Despite the immense hardships that millions of stranded workers continue to endure, there was still no announcement on economic relief measures for them. Unless a combination of universal rations and money transfers are implemented in letter and spirit, India is staring at alarming levels of destitution and despair.”

The first report deals largely with immediate problems such food and starvation issues. Here are some glimpses of data tabulated from the distress calls in the first report: 50 per cent of workers had rations left for less than one day; 96 per cent had not received rations from the government and 70 per cent had not received any cooked food; and 89 per cent had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown.

“The numbers are alarming both in absolute and in relative terms. Half of those who have reached us would not be able to eat the next day without immediate intervention,” the report said.

“With 78 million tonnes of grains in FCI warehouses, it’s a now-or-never situation. Governments have had two weeks to ensure a robust ration supply network, doorstep delivery, etc., to reduce hunger. However, figures indicate very few have benefited even in the third week of lockdown.”

The second report, titled “32 days and counting”, is an extension of the first and was released on May 1. By then, SWAN had helped 16,863 people. The report describes the various appeals made to the establishment to release support, including a petition filed by SWAN in the Supreme Court. The petition was dismissed on the grounds that the Central government’s programmes were adequately covering migrant distress.

The chapters titled “Rate of hunger and distress exceeding the rate of Relief—Overview” and “Neither one nation nor one ration card, migrants fall between” contain relevant and topical matter within the pandemic context.

Statistics in the second report showed that 32 days after the lockdown began, four out of five workers who reached out did not have access to government rations while 68 per cent did not have access to cooked food.

With no cash relief, 64 per cent of the migrant workers had less than Rs.100 left with them. “With no change since April 14, about 78 per cent of people have Rs.300 or less left with them. As on April 26, only about 6 per cent of all those who have reached out to us have received their full wages during the lockdown. About 78 per cent have not been paid at all. More than 99 per cent of the self-employed have had no earnings during this period. These include street vendors and rickshaw pullers.”

The third report, titled “To leave or not to leave? Lockdown, migrant workers and their journeys home”, looks at the fourth phase of the lockdown and gives detailed accounts of workers trying to get home.

The report said that 67 per cent (of 1,963) migrants were still in the same place when the lockdown was announced; only 33 per cent had left. Some 44 per cent of those who left took buses and 39 per cent managed to get on a Shramik Special train. About 11 per cent travelled by trucks, lorries and other such modes of transport, while 6 per cent made the perilous journey on foot.

The first-person accounts and case studies in this report are gripping. The stories speak of starvation, police brutality, physical abuse and government apathy, revealing the colossal tragedy of the migrant exodus. □

No room for complacency

Morale is low and migrants suffer due to official apathy in the National Capital Region, whose residents remain vigilant despite the government's claim that the situation is under control. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

ON JULY 20, THE DELHI GOVERNMENT reported 954 COVID-19 cases for the day—the number was below the 1,000-mark for the first time since May—end when the pandemic spiralled out of hand.

If this trend continues, it could mean that Delhi's coronavirus curve is finally flattening, according to Dr Randeep Guleria, Director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has maintained that the daily case count in July has reduced as a result of increased testing and said that the situation in Delhi was under control.

But new cases continue to crop up in Delhi's neighbourhoods; as of July 20, the total number of cases in the capital had touched 1,23,747. Hence, the residents of Delhi and frontline workers are not complacent and continue to remain vigilant.

Residents of Bhogal in Central Delhi said that the pandemic had become unmanageable. The locality has five containment zones within a radius of 1 square kilometre. But the neighbourhood market selling everything from groceries to garments to electronics is bustling with activity.

Despite clear signs of the pandemic raging through the neighbourhood, people are out on the streets for two reasons. One is to resume economic activity and the other is to overcome the “lockdown fatigue” arising out of staying indoors for months together.

“What can we do? We have suffered massive losses during the three-month lockdown. *Dimaag pe asar hua hai* (it has taken a toll on our mental health). Now we have no option but to step out for our survival,” said a shopkeeper.

Some residents, however, are practicing self-contain-



SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

WAITING FOR RAPID ANTIGEN TESTING in Adarsh Nagar, New Delhi, on July 12.



KAMAL NARANG

A LOCALITY IN CENTRAL DELHI that has been declared a red zone, on July 17.

ment and have not stepped out. “Without proper social distancing, the market is a death trap,” said a resident. She orders essentials through home delivery apps or steps out in the wee hours of the day when the streets are empty.

LOW MORALE

Business morale continues to remain low in Delhi. Footfalls in malls and retail sales are abysmally low and several businesses have shut down, especially in upmarket areas such as Khan Market where rentals are steep.

Contrary to expectations, the situation of migrant workers has not improved after the lockdown was lifted, especially because the government has closed the hunger relief centres that were providing cooked meals to the needy. The sudden closure of these centres without any alternative arrangement has left daily wagers, migrants and the marginalised in the lurch.

Further, the Delhi government has discontinued the distribution of foodgrains to people without ration cards. Earlier, it had supplied rations to around 54 lakh people for two months through an e-coupons system.

Shourya Roy of Janman, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), said that the situation was dire for daily wagers across sectors and localities—from workers at a Public Works Department’s construction site near Old Delhi railway station to security guards outside call centres in Gurgaon, and residents of Sanjay Camp to Grameen Seva drivers.

He told *Frontline*: “The workers are not being paid wages even though the lockdown has been lifted. NGOs and individuals have been helping migrants and others. But with the media not reporting on their plight any more, our donations are drying up. We don’t know for how long we can keep going like this. Unless the government steps in to provide a robust intervention, no solution can be found.”

Janman completed 100 days of COVID relief work on July 10. Roy said that there was no systematic testing of migrants in Delhi, leading to a risky situation for both migrants and relief volunteers.

Further, the migrants’ trust of the police and the

medical system is at an all-time low. They fear the police because of their high-handedness; and they prefer going to a local quack rather than be shunted around in government hospitals, Roy added.

Sharing his experience of supplying food and water in Shramik Special trains, he said that the police tried to chase the volunteers away and obstructed their relief measures at every given opportunity.

“The system has assumed that the migrants’ comfort level is low. From the police to the medical fraternity to the state, no one thought it was wrong to make them stand in queues for several hours without food, water or access to a toilet,” he said.

On July 16, an NGO named Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan (DRRAA) moved an application before the Delhi High Court highlighting the discontinuation of food security schemes by the Delhi government “despite the national disaster declaration still being in force and despite no measure of normalcy having returned in the country or the State”.

Even as the Central and State governments extended food security schemes to ration card holders until November, they have ignored those without ration cards. DRRAA said this was a violation of the right to food and the right to life of lakhs of people resident in the city.

It said: “This demonstrates that both the Central and the Delhi government are well aware of the fact that people, especially those in the informal sector, daily wagers, migrant labourers and marginalised require continued assistance to survive and have two square meals a day. In such a scenario, not providing rations to other people in a similar predicament, merely on the basis that they do not possess a ration card on account of the system of having upper limit on the number of ration card holders, is arbitrary, and is in violation of the fundamental right to food of people as protected under Article 21 of the Constitution and also a gross violation of Article 14.”

TABLIGHI JAMAAT

Meanwhile, Delhi courts have granted bail to hundreds of Tablighi Jamaat members who were charged under various sections of the Disaster Management Act, the Epidemic Diseases Act, the Indian Penal Code, the Foreigners Act and prohibitory orders of the Criminal Procedure Code.

They include 682 foreign nationals from 35 different countries who had been charge sheeted for attending the congregation in Nizamuddin Markaz allegedly in violation of visa norms.

Among them, 82 were from Bangladesh, 122 from Malaysia, 150 from Indonesia, 75 from Thailand and Nepal, and others from Djibouti, Mali, Kenya, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

The Central government has cancelled their visas and blacklisted them.

In June, the police had filed 59 charge sheets against 956 foreigners belonging to 36 different countries in the case. □

Price of apathy

The government's indifference to containment measures and to the urgent need to **strengthen the public health infrastructure** results in a rise in COVID-19 cases in Bihar. Jharkhand is hurriedly readying its district hospitals to deal with the crisis. BY **PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI**

BIHAR AND JHARKHAND SEEM TO HAVE failed to use the two-month-long complete lockdown to upgrade their public health infrastructure. As a result, when the two States started seeing a spike in COVID-19 cases, they were unprepared for the load. Patients were turned away as hospitals had no beds; some patients, according to social media posts from Bihar, lost their lives while waiting outside hospitals; hospitals struggled to cope with the caseload in the absence of adequate resources and staff; and doctors and other health care workers themselves were afflicted by the virus.

Bihar, which has a population of 13 crore, has only one designated COVID hospital, the Nalanda Medical College and Hospital (NMCH), and a makeshift hospital at the Patliputra Indoor stadium in Patna for the general public. The government has reserved its best hospital, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in Patna, to treat VIPs cases. Seven other government

hospitals in various parts of Bihar, in collaboration with district hospitals, are now being readied for COVID treatment, but it is still a work in progress. "These hospitals are still being furnished," said a senior Janata Dal (United) leader from Bihar.

On an average, Bihar is witnessing the addition of over 1,000 cases a day. On July 13, there were 1,432 new positive cases with Patna alone accounting for 228. On July 19, the State recorded 1,412 cases, taking the total number of positive cases to 26,379 and the cumulative death toll to 179, including two doctors. The government ordered a one-week lockdown from July 10 in Patna, which continued to be a coronavirus hotspot with 90 containment zones. But following the surge in cases in other districts, too, the government extended the lockdown across the State until July 31.

Dr Sunil Kumar Singh, senior Janata Dal (U) leader and medical practitioner, said: "Once un-lockdown began, people became careless. They did not take precautions and did not pay heed to safety measures such as wearing masks and physical distancing. It was life as usual. This led to a spurt in the number of cases. Complete lockdown is a harsh measure no doubt, but what can we do? We have to speak to them in the language they understand."

But it is not the general public alone that showed a callous disregard for guidelines on preventive measures; even people in high office seem to have thrown caution to the winds. Chief Minister and Janata Dal(U) chief Nitish Kumar's official residence turned into a hotspot after 60 people, including some of his close family members, tested positive on July 8. The Chief Minister tested negative.

The BJP office in Patna was declared a containment zone after 75 leaders, including State party chief Sanjay Jaiswal, general secretary (organisation) Nagendra Nath, general secretary Devesh Kumar, and vice presidents Radha Mohan Sharma and Rajesh Verma, tested positive on July 14. Jaiswal's wife and mother have also tested positive.



PTI

PEOPLE FLOUTING physical distancing norms as they wait for COVID-19 tests, during the total lockdown, in Patna on July 15.



PTI

NURSING STAFF of Patna Medical College and Hospital stage a protest in front of Bihar Health Minister Mangal Pandey demanding overtime salary, in Patna on July 24.

The office began to bustle with activity after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah flagged off virtual meetings in June, which were seen as a bugle call for the forthcoming Assembly elections. On any given day, not fewer than 400 people gathered at the BJP office for some meeting or the other. Ashok Bhatt, the party's State media incharge, said: "We were apprehensive, but our senior leaders apparently did not realise the gravity of the situation. Otherwise, where was the need for holding the district-level office-bearers' meeting?"

Senior BJP and Janata Dal (U) leaders, who did not want to be named, questioned the need for starting the virtual election process. "They [the National Democratic Alliance leaders] seem to be in a hurry," they said. (The BJP, Janata Dal (U) and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) are the three NDA partners in Bihar.)

The opposition could not agree more. Manoj Kumar Jha, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) spokesman and Rajya Sabha member, said: "At a time when the entire effort should be directed towards managing the COVID situation, they have focussed their attention on election preparations. Corona cannot be fought with diverted or deflected attention. We beg the government to take everyone on board and unitedly fight the pandemic, instead of wasting time and resources on election preparations." RJD supremo Laloo Prasad, who is lodged in a hospital in Ranchi, Jharkhand, tweeted about the Bihar situation turning explosive.

Incidentally, Nitish Kumar has been singularly indifferent to the pandemic. For the first 80 days of the lockdown, he was not visible at all. He did not show up even once. He emerged from his house only after Amit Shah's virtual rally and, thereafter, he busied himself with virtual meetings with his party workers. Management of COVID-19 was nowhere on the agenda. The RJD, no doubt, kept attacking the NDA government for its lax handling of the pandemic, but to no avail.

Manoj Kumar Jha said: "This has been the style of Nitish Kumar since he joined hands with BJP in this stint. Any disaster, whether it is floods or drought or now the pandemic, he thinks it will go away on its own. All his plans remain confined to files only, and once the disaster

recedes, the files also go back into the cupboards. Nothing worth speaking happens for the people who have to suffer the brunt of the crises. He was under the belief that the virus will die on its own, without his government doing anything. Bihar has to suffer the consequences of his foolhardy approach which is basically no approach."

Jharkhand, with a population of little over three crore, has just one hospital, the 991-bed Rajendra Institute of Medical Science (RIMS), to treat COVID patients. The State is slightly better off because it is not election-bound unlike its parent State. But with the preparedness to deal with the pandemic woefully inadequate and with just one COVID designated hospital, it is now becoming difficult to manage the crisis. With no beds available in the RIMS now, the government is hurriedly readying its dilapidated district hospitals to handle COVID cases, and is trying to coax private hospitals into admitting COVID patients.

Fortunately, the situation here has not gone completely out of control, but more than 100 cases are being reported every day across the State. On July 14, Jharkhand had 3,963 cumulative cases, but on July 19, the figure rose to 5,399, of which 2,656 were cured. A total of 48 people have lost their lives so far. What is worrying is that COVID warriors like doctors, nurses and policemen, are now contracting the virus. In all 66 policemen have tested positive. Another worrying fact for Jharkhand is that the recovery rate, which was more than 70 per cent in early July, dropped to 48.95 per cent in mid July.

REVERSE MIGRATION

What is disconcerting is that in Bihar and Jharkhand, political masters have taken the masses for a ride with empty rhetoric. The promises made when the pandemic began and when migrant workers started returning home have remained just empty words. A reverse migration has begun with workers starting to go back to work in other States in order to feed their families. The saving grace, however, is that, although it is merely out of compulsion, those needing their services, such as factory owners, rich farmers and builders, have become more generous in their offers and are promising some semblance of security to them as well. Bihar and Jharkhand had talked about creating employment for those returning home, but except for daily wage work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, nothing else is available.

Lal Kishore Nath Shahdeo, Jharkhand Congress spokesman, said: "We have provided employment to eight lakh workers under MGNREGA, but for skilled workers we have nothing yet. They need work and are going back because their employers [in other States] are now more generous and forthcoming with offers of air tickets, social security, better facilities, and advance payments, among other things." The Congress is a constituent of the State's ruling alliance.

In Bihar, too, reverse migration to Punjab, Gujarat and Delhi/Gurgaon has started, for work in paddy fields, brick kilns, textile units and the construction industry. □

Plunging to new depths

The people of Uttar Pradesh, especially the poor and marginalised, are facing a grim future as **the deteriorating law and order situation** compounds their economic hardship and the State's COVID-19 crisis.

BY VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN

FROM COVID-19 RELIEF MANAGEMENT TO the law and order situation to the economic hardship of the common people, Uttar Pradesh has plunged to new depths in June and July. Week after week, the figures put out by the Yogi Adityanath-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the State, and the manifold agencies working under its ambit, have by themselves underscored the plight of the country's most populous State. July was marked by some woeful statistics.

On July 20, the State crossed the 50,000 mark in terms of COVID-19 positive cases and also had its highest number of deaths in a single day, with 46 people succumbing to the virus. These figures in comparison to those released barely 15 days ago pointed to the speed at which the pandemic was spreading in the State. On July 5, the official tabulation of COVID-19 cases stood at 27,707 with 785 deaths. These were the cumulative figures for a period of approximately three months. However, in a matter of just two weeks, the number of cases almost doubled, to a total of 50,000, with deaths reaching 1,192. In other words, on each day after July 5, the State was witnessing an average addition of 1,592 cases and 29 deaths. On July 20, the highest number of cases, at 282, was recorded in Lucknow, the capital, and the highest number of deaths, at 10, was in Kanpur, the State's largest industrial centre. In fact, the steep rise in the number of cases in urban centres has been a phenomenon since the second week of June.

On July 20, the Yogi Adityanath government announced that it planned to implement home isolation for asymptomatic patients. "Of course, this would be executed with certain riders," said Uttar Pradesh Additional Chief Secretary (Home) Awanish Kumar Awasthi to mediapersons. According to Health Minister Jai Pratap Singh, his department's assessment was that 85 per cent of the patients in Uttar Pradesh were asymptomatic.

Both of them contended that confining patients at home would reduce pressure on hospitals.

The "home isolation" decision marks an important shift in the government's strategy since the Chief Minister had repeatedly asserted that Uttar Pradesh was capable of taking care of every person who tested positive for COVID-19 in institutional facilities provided or supported by the State government. According to several officials in the State Health and Home Departments, the rapid downside in the management of the COVID situation over June and July seems to have forced Yogi Adityanath to adopt a more realistic approach.

Has this realisation come too late? Akhilesh Yadav, former Chief Minister and president of the Samajwadi Party, thinks so. Talking to *Frontline*, he stated that the Yogi Adityanath government had turned out to be an abject example of "botched-up governance". "It is not just in the case of COVID relief that one has witnessed this steady fall. This has been a repetitive phenomenon over the last three years. What the COVID crisis has done is make these failures stark and conspicuous. Plunging from one pathetic depth to another, this government has pushed Uttar Pradesh to an unprecedented social, economic and public health disaster. This is true for both general governance as a whole as well the many composite parts of administrative practice, such as crisis management, maintaining law and order and addressing the economic hardship of the people. Take any one of these parameters and study how things were over the past six months and you will see failure written in all caps over and over again."

Akhilesh Yadav added: "The first [thing] is, of course, the economy, and the hardship being faced by the people, particularly in rural areas, are mounting day by day. The second area is law and order. Go to any part of Uttar Pradesh, and you will see the utter breakdown of admin-

istrative and security systems. The things that are happening in both the urban and rural segments of the State are testimony to the atrocious situation.” This view has many takers across political and ideological divides, including the BJP and other outfits of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh-led Sangh Parivar.

CELEBRATION OF EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS

Frontline's interactions with a wide cross section of political and social activists on specific questions relating to law and order showed that the issues primarily revolved around two points. First, the prevalence and acceptance of extrajudicial manoeuvres in the State's security and police administration in Yogi Adityanath's government. In its early days, the Chief Minister had openly announced that he and the Home Department under him would not hesitate to use extrajudicial methods to tackle crime and the mafia. In December 2019, the State police tweeted exultantly that it had engineered “5,178 encounters since 2017, killing 103 and injuring 1,859” alleged criminals.

Vibhuti Narain Rai, former Additional Director General of Police, Uttar Pradesh, said that such a blatant celebration of extrajudicial killing had led to a situation where civic norms and rules and values of criminal jurisprudence were seen as having no relevance. “The entire sequence of events in the extrajudicial police encounter of the gangster Vikas Dubey on July 10 and the cold-blooded murder of the journalist Vikram Joshi... is testimony to the... pervasiveness of this reprehensible social and security climate,” Rai said. The terrible domination of this culture gets revealed if one studies the sequence of events in both these cases. When proceedings were initiated against Dubey in early July to arrest him on the basis of a woman's complaint regarding land encroachment, the gangster literally threatened a police inspector on the phone saying that he would engineer such a “*dhamaka*” (blast) that would make the authorities shiver. And, it is exactly this unlawful *dhamaka* that he engineered through the killing of eight policemen when they went to arrest him. Later, the Uttar Pradesh Police, too, exhibited the same abominable culture when they caught hold of Dubey at Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh on July 9 and killed him in an alleged encounter on July 10 on the way to Kanpur.

On July 16, Vikram Joshi, a Ghaziabad-based journalist with the local daily *Jan Sagar Today*, lodged a complaint at the local Vijay Nagar police post against some people for harassing his niece. On July 20, he was shot in front of his two daughters; he died two days later. The nine people arrested for the crime are reportedly anti-social elements who were perpetrating their own “law and order excesses” in the region. Joshi's family members pointed out that the police did not investigate the initial harassment complaint. Leaders of various opposition parties, including Akhilesh Yadav and Priyanka Gandhi of the Congress, have criticised the extrajudicial happenings relating to the killing of Dubey and Joshi, but that does not seem to have had any impact on the govern-

ment. Akhilesh Yadav said: “At a time when the systems of governance should rally around to support people and restore their economic well-being, what people are seeing is the rampant promotion of lawlessness by the government and its agencies. Clearly, people are being pushed into a state of hopelessness.”

An extensive field survey report put together by the Lucknow-based social activists Sandeep Pandey and Arundhati Dhuru along with Vishal Kumar, Shivi Piplani and Rakesh underscores Akhilesh Yadav's point. The report was the result of widespread interactions with over 200 migrant workers across the districts of Unnao, Sitapur, Varanasi, Lucknow, Kushinagar and Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh. It showed that the Yogi Adityanath government has repeatedly failed to live up to its promises. One of its big announcements was that needy people would get rations even without a ration card. But the survey found that “the returnee migrant labourers who do not have ration cards or their names have been struck off from ration cards because they were not staying in their village are neither getting the regular quota of ration nor the free quota made available during the coronavirus crisis period. Only a little more than 50 per cent of the migrant workers who have returned get their quota of ration.”

Another promise was the setting up of a commission to create new employment opportunities for the returnee migrant labourers. The Chief Minister had stated that the commission would conduct skill mapping of migrant workers and provide them jobs and social security. The survey found that “[n]ot one of the workers surveyed in these districts had been approached by the government for skill mapping or for providing them guidance for any kind of livelihood options in their home State.... The situation with work under MGNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] is worse. Less than a third of the people who have returned got work from one to 20 days. But only about a third of them had received payments.”

The survey found that about half of the respondents had been provided with the 35-kg ration kit, a benefit promised to all the returning workers. However, only one of the respondents to the survey had received the two-time monetary support of Rs.1,000 each promised by the government. Only those who had used state-owned transport could avail themselves of this cash benefit. The survey showed that less than 10 per cent of the returnee migrants got to travel free on government transport. “Most of them spent their own money to travel by various kinds of private vehicles, on buses and autorickshaws,” said Arundhati Dhuru, who added that returnee migrant labourers were consumed by the stark realisation that in the coming year, and possibly even the next one, there would be no work for them at the places they had left in desperation. “Hardly anybody got paid for the period of lockdown at their original places of work despite the appeals made by Prime Minister Modi on television.”

Obviously, Uttar Pradesh is hurtling towards a social-economic-health catastrophe. □

Unchecked spread

Haryana's **strict lockdown measures** do not seem to have succeeded in containing the spread of the coronavirus. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

IN THE THIRD WEEK OF JULY, THE administration of the Union Territory of Chandigarh proposed a weekend lockdown to the governments of Haryana and Punjab following a surge in COVID-19 cases. This was on the presumption that cases were coming into Chandigarh from the two States. Both the State governments were reluctant to go in for a weekend lockdown.

The situation in Haryana is more serious than the one in Punjab. On July 21, fresh cases were reported from Gurugram, Faridabad, Sonipat, Rewari, Ambala, Palwal, Panipat, Fatehabad, Panchkula, Hisar and Mahendar-garh districts. Three fatalities were reported from Sonipat and one each from Jhajjar, Hisar and Nuh, all of

which are located quite far from one another geographically. The spread of cases beyond the handful of districts that were described as COVID epicentres in the State is in line with what is being observed in the rest of the country, indicating a wider reach of the infection.

Anil Vij, who holds the twin portfolios of Home and Health in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in the State, tweeted recently that the government could consider sealing Gurgaon, Faridabad, Sonipat and Jhajjar. A decision on this has not yet been taken. The spike in cases in these districts is at least partially owing to their geographical proximity to the National Capital Region and the movement of people in these areas. Had



YOGENDRA KUMAR/PTI

AT A COVID-19 testing camp in a containment zone in Gurugram on July 18.



T. NARAYAN/BLOOMBERG

LAB TECHNICIANS seal bagged boxes of COVID-19 diagnostic kits at the Newtech Medical Devices facility in Faridabad on July 15.



PTI

SWAB SAMPLES collected for testing at a primary health centre in Gurugram on July 17.

the government sealed off these districts early on, a spillover of the infection to other parts of the State might have been avoided. Each of the 22 districts in Haryana now has confirmed COVID cases.

Faridabad, Gurgaon, Sonipat, Rewari and Rohtak districts account for 63.05 per cent of the State's case-load. Faridabad has the largest number of active cases followed by Gurgaon and Rewari. (In March, Gurugram reported the largest number of active cases.) A closer look at the trajectory of the disease in some districts shows that in the past one month alone there has been an almost threefold increase in confirmed cases.

The pattern holds across the State. In Rohtak, considered Haryana's political capital, the contagion picked up momentum in June. On June 21, there were only 427

cases reported in Rohtak, but on July 21 there were 1,178 cases. In Faridabad, 2,237 cases were reported as of June 21, but the number went up to 6,679 by July 21. In Rewari, which had reported a mere 148 cases until June 21, there were 1,108 cases within a month—a ninefold increase. Spikes were observed in Nuh, Ambala and Jhajjar (fourfold), Rewari (ninefold), Mahendargarh (fivefold), Hisar and Sonipat (threefold) and in Gurugram, where the increase was almost double. In fact, from mid July onwards, that is, roughly a fortnight after the “unlock” phase began, no fewer than 650 new cases have been reported every day on an average. In the intervening period between July 16 and 17, as many as 795 cases were reported in a single day.

Barring Panchkula and Kaithal, COVID-related deaths have been reported from all other districts. According to the State COVID Bulletin, as of July 21, 355 people had died (260 men and 95 women). In the 20-odd dedicated COVID hospitals, 165 COVID patients were in critical care: 133 on oxygen support and 32 on ventilators. The COVID-19 positive rate was 5.96 per cent; the recovery rate, 75.31 per cent; the fatality rate, 1.32 per cent; and the doubling rate, 22 days. There were 957.8 confirmed cases per million of the population against the national average of 894.4. By June 20, 2,12,430 people had been tested; the number rose to 4,57,319 by July 20.

Among the COVID-affected States, Haryana has more or less stayed in the 12th position from the top since the pandemic began. Crucially, it lost the opportunity to contain the infection notwithstanding some of the harshest lockdown measures that it adopted. There were strict instructions to the police to nab anyone found “jaywalking”. Even workers who came out to demand rations in Sonipat were lathi charged. There were reports of women health workers being beaten up by the police in the initial days of the lockdown. □

Late surge

There seems to be a sudden spread of the virus in Punjab as people shake off precautionary measures with the easing of lockdown restrictions. BY ZIYA US SALAM

AS THE NUMBER OF CORONAVIRUS CASES surged across the country, particularly in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and lately Bihar and Karnataka, Punjab seemed to have a better grip on the situation. Slowly, rather disconcertingly, this seems to be changing. After the spread of the dreaded disease beyond the major cities of Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Amritsar to the relatively less-tapped areas of Sangrur, Patiala, Gurdaspur, Tarn Taran, Fatehgarh Sahib and Mogaover in the last fortnight, the State is now looking at a late surge of the disease. By July 20, the caseload had gone up to 10,510 with 411 fresh cases recorded over the past 24 hours. Worse, the number of mortalities rose by eight, taking the toll to 262.

While the highest numbers continued to be reported from Ludhiana, which brought up more than 18 per cent of the caseload, the figures notched up by places like Patiala and Sangrur caused greater concern. The two cities' reported numbers were on the lower side until the last week of June. But there was a surge in cases, coinciding with the early arrival of the monsoon. Data released by the State's health department showed 921 confirmed cases from Patiala and another 733 from Sangrur; cases in Patiala had doubled in a week.

Dr Rajesh Ghumman, who is based in Patiala, said: "I have been observing from the early days of the pandemic that people here seem to be driven by economic factors. For the purpose of business, people are travelling between cities and rural areas and not maintaining physical distancing when away from police watch. Recently, a 62-year-old man from Amritsar passed away after coming back from Gurdaspur where he had gone for business purposes. So, the cases are piling up in parts where hitherto we had very few cases. Now, in a place like Patiala, and even other cities like Jalandhar and Ludhiana, there is a real prospect of hospitals running out of beds. I am afraid that in the days to come, if the trend of a surge continues, the State will have no option but to insist on home isolation for those with mild symptoms or asymptomatic patients."

The surge has indeed forced the State authorities to impose quarantine measures. Unsurprisingly, the

highest number of quarantine cases were reported from Patiala with nearly 30,000 patients under quarantine in the district. This was more than the combined figures of Ludhiana and Jalandhar at 13,463 and 10,959 respectively.

Dr Ghumman said: "The quarantine can work only if the people cooperate. At the moment, people are living under the illusion of things being normal merely because the lockdown is lifted. It is practically impossible for the state to provide 24-hour medical support. The initiative has to come from the private sector."

The sudden surge is attributed to increased intra-State travel following the easing of lockdown restrictions. Punjab has just turned down a proposal for a 56-hour weekend curfew in cities, beginning on Friday at 10 p.m. and ending on Monday at 6 a.m. Equally critically, people have been lax about following safety measures such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing.



NARINDER NANU/AFP

A GATHERING at a community hall to celebrate the Sawan (rain) festival in Amritsar on July 18. Physical distancing norms and protective measures such as wearing masks seem to be largely discarded with the easing of lockdown.



P.TI

A YOUNG MAN receiving groceries at a containment zone in Patiala on July 17.

Last week, local newspapers from Mohali reported a wedding in a micro-containment zone which was attended by over 100 guests in Patiala; very few of those attending it wore masks or maintained physical distancing. Similar pictures have hit the social media about the streets in Amritsar, Ludhiana and Patiala with people going about their business as usual without observing safety regulations. This has forced the State to form technical committees with representatives of the World Health Organisation (WHO) on each committee.

Not much seems to be changing on the ground, though. Professor Rajesh Gill, a sociologist from Panjab University, advocates strict government supervision in the fight against COVID-19.

She said: “People are not observing social distancing norms or wearing masks here. After the easing of the lockdown restrictions, they have started believing everything is normal. So, they are moving around without any precautions. Punjabi culture is such that people are in close proximity with each other all the time. They sit close to each other, they eat together. It is the same across the State, whether one is in a big city or in a smaller town. Recently, we had a marriage where 200 guests were invited. As there is a restriction allowing only 50 guests, the host booked four halls for his guests and organised a lavish wedding. We see even on morning walks people wear perfume but no mask! In smaller places, they have their *baithaks* in the evening with men sitting together.”

Things were different when the lockdown was first

imposed in March. In the first few weeks, not many cases of COVID norms being flouted were reported from Punjab. Prof. Gill said: “It was because the government was very strict at that time. The media also played their part. People were given physical punishment for defying lockdown rules. People stayed indoors. Now, after being indoors for three months or so, people want to live it up. They are not too concerned about even the possible risk to life. It is not just the poor or people from the lower-income groups. You can see prosperous people, the well-educated segment, defying COVID norms, not wearing masks on the road, in the market. The government will have to instil a sense of fear again.”

The government, on its part, has again started a campaign to click pictures of those out walking in the morning without masks. They are also charged a fine of Rs.500. Prof. Gill said: “The fine is not a deterrent for many. But the photographs are printed in newspapers and circulated on social media. That is an embarrassment.”

The measure, however effective, may not be enough in the current situation. Prof. Chaman Lal, a seasoned academic who has been virtually quarantined in Patiala over the past four months, said: “There are academics raising their voice for observing protocol on university campuses. The senior citizens listen to them. But much more needs to be done. My daughter insists I work from home, do webinars, etc. But not everybody lives on the campus. And people need to abide by norms everywhere, on the road, at home or in their offices.” □

New hotbeds & old political games

A fresh spurt in cases in 13 districts in July points to a wider **geographic spread of the pandemic** in the State, and the ongoing political turmoil could only weaken the fight against it. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

THE ONGOING POLITICAL TUSSLE IN THE Congress-led government in the State has grabbed the headlines, diverting attention from the rising graph of fresh COVID-19 infections.

On July 22, a fresh spurt in infections was reported from 13 districts across the State: Jodhpur, Jhunjhunu, Jaipur, Banswara, Alwar, Bharatpur, Ajmer, Hanu-

mangarh, Baran, Kota, Dausa, Bundi and Ganganagar. The total number of confirmed cases rose to 31,599, with 581 fatalities so far.

From mid-May to June-end, the daily rise in the number of cases was in the 300-400 range with no trend of increase over time.

However, a sharp increase from early July disrupted



AT A CONTAINMENT ZONE in Bikaner in Rajasthan on July 20. Bikaner is one of many districts where a fresh spurt in the number of COVID-19 cases was reported in July.



ROHIT JAIN PARAS

A WORKER SANITISING the basement of Gaurav Tower shopping mall in Jaipur on June 7, a day before it was scheduled to reopen.

this relative stability of the situation. By the third week of July, the number of fresh cases reported every day crossed 900. A similar pattern was observed in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh too.

A gradual shift of the epicentre of confirmed cases has been one of the distinctive features of the COVID-19 trajectory in Rajasthan, particularly in July. From the very first case that was reported on March 3, with Jaipur as the epicentre, which later shifted to Bhilwara, the infections spread from a handful of districts to most parts of the State.

The bulk of the caseload was initially was in Jaipur, Jodhpur and Bikaner districts, but now cases in Alwar and Pali have added to the growing numbers significantly.

WIDESPREAD SPIKE

On July 1, Jaipur district alone had more than 400 active cases. Seven other districts also reported a rather high number of active cases around the same time. Now, Jodhpur has taken the top spot in the number of confirmed cases, followed by Alwar, Jaipur, Bikaner, Pali and Ajmer.

These six districts account for more than 63 per cent of the cases in the State.

Until June 20, there were 14,537 confirmed cases, which doubled within a month.

A closer look at the rising graph in June and July showed that from June 20 to July 1, the daily spike in cases was in the range of 300. Between July 1 and July 5, the daily number of cases began increasing and crossed 600 on July 5.

By the end of the first 15 days of July, the daily spike was 800-plus cases, with a new record of 934 cases

reported on July 19, followed by 956 cases on July 20 and 983 on July 21.

The figures indicated that it was only a matter of time before the daily number of cases crossed 1,000. In fact, of the 33 districts in the State, Jodhpur and Alwar alone now account for 2,378 cases of the total number of 8,129 active cases. While Jodhpur had the largest number of confirmed cases, Jaipur still accounted for the highest number of deaths at 179, followed by double-digit fatalities in Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Kota, Ajmer, Bikaner, Nagaur, Pali, Dholpur, Udaipur and Sirohi. In 19 other districts, the number of deaths was still below 10.

LOW MORTALITY RATE

Despite the sharp spike in the daily number of positive cases, Rajasthan's mortality rate of 1.84 per cent has been low, when compared with Uttar Pradesh (2.31 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (3.14 per cent), Karnataka (2.07 per cent) and Gujarat (4.36).

Similarly, it recorded a high rate of recovery and a relatively low percentage of currently infected persons when compared with some of the other States.

For instance, the percentage of currently infected persons in Rajasthan was 26 per cent, compared with 37.91 per cent in Uttar Pradesh; 29.39 per cent in Madhya Pradesh and 62.1 per cent in Karnataka.

The percentage of active cases in Haryana and Gujarat was marginally less than Rajasthan. However, Rajasthan's testing rate was higher than that of some of its neighboring States and even a notch higher than that of Karnataka, which was emerging as a new epicentre of infections in the country.

Rajasthan had conducted 16,442 tests per million population, compared with Haryana's 16,313, 7,674 in Madhya Pradesh, 8,283 in Gujarat and 16,182 in Karnataka.

Concerned over the spike in cases, the Directorate of Medical and Health Services issued a notification on July 15 directing dedicated COVID-19 hospitals in districts to submit daily reports by 11 a.m.

The Health Department was also instructed to follow up on testing, assess the district-wise positive cases and submit daily reports.

In the first week of July itself, the government cancelled all under-graduate and post-graduate exams given the spread in infections.

Aware of the possibility of water-borne diseases and other seasonal outbreaks such as dengue, malaria, chikungunya, swine flu and scrub typhus, the Health Department on July 14 issued an advisory to all department heads directing that 24/7 control rooms and rapid response teams be constituted.

The sharp spike in the number of new cases recorded every day is a matter of concern as it indicates a weakening of control over the epidemic, which can get out of hand.

The current political impasse in the State is yet to be fully resolved and in such a situation, things may get worse on the COVID-19 control front. □

Shift in focus

As the **rise in infections seems to have plateaued in Mumbai**, the Maharashtra government turns its attention to the rest of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and districts where the virus is active. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

AFTER ALMOST FOUR MONTHS OF WHAT HE describes as “mind-numbing, heart-rending” work, a senior Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) official, who requested anonymity, says he has a flicker of hope. “No one can say that the end is near. We may have to live with this virus for years. After more than three months of tackling it and working closely with doctors, there is no longer any shame or sense of failure in admitting that we really don’t know what’s happening. It has been a constant learning and unlearning process for us,” says the official. But what does seem to be clear, though this too he states with caution, is that “the rise in infections seems to have plateaued in Mumbai around early to mid July”.

Despite this note of optimism, Mumbai continues to

be the worst affected Indian city, with 1,00,350 cases and 5,650 deaths as of July 18. The optimism stems from the fact that there has been a drop in the number of new cases in the city, from 1,400 a day in late June to 1,200 in mid July. The recovery rate has also increased from 50 per cent on June 22 to 70 per cent on July 18. The official says, “We see sudden surges and now realise that these will keep happening because people are dropping their caution. After the lockdown was eased there was a surge. Then people were reminded of the seriousness of the situation and things calmed down a bit. But this will keep happening. No one will stay indoors all the time. On the whole, barring a few pockets, Mumbaikars acted responsibly during the worst days. We’re just asking that the basics of hygiene and physical distancing be main-



VIVEK BENDRE

AT A COVID-19 TESTING CAMP organised by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation in Dadar on July 18.

The test positivity rate of 21.7 per cent in Mumbai is still too high given the WHO standard of 5 per cent.

tained.” Another official who commented on the situation says, “It’s time for citizens to realise that this is everyone’s battle. If you don’t exercise caution you’re likely to get infected.”

Dr Jawahar Mukhtiyar, a well-known physician, agrees with it, saying the spread of the virus is a “self-inflicted problem”. The city continues to have containment zones, and a large number of them are in the economically privileged areas. Take the example of the BMC’s most privileged A Ward in south Mumbai. Within A Ward is the Churchgate-Marine Drive area, a prime locality with homes of the well-heeled, senior bureaucrats, Ministers and old-timers in the city. Yet this area has more than 40 per cent of the cases in A Ward.

Dr Mukhtiyar, who lives and practices in the area, says people have behaved in an “undisciplined and irresponsible manner. They think they are invincible and that bad things only happen to others.” He recounts instances of people celebrating weddings and birthdays and an entire family using one member’s essential services pass to move around the city. “The domestic help is made to sleep in common passages and use common toilets. There is no social distancing whatsoever when they sleep on the landings.”

Rohini Char, a Churchgate resident, bemoans the “stupidity of people who have been holding card parties and calling relatives home thinking that just because they are family they are safe.” Though the BMC has sealed the buildings with positive cases, Dr Mukhtiyar says, “The BMC can seal a building but we need common sense and that’s in short supply.”

MUMBAI METROPOLITAN REGION

While areas of Mumbai continue to see increases in the number of cases, the government’s focus has shifted to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Nashik, Aurangabad, Solapur, Jalgaon and Akola. All these areas have shown a spike in cases, and this is being attributed to the lifting of travel restrictions.

As of July 20, the eight civic bodies that make up the MMR—Thane, Kalyan-Dombivli, Bhiwandi-Nizampur, Mira-Bhayandar, Vasai-Virar, Navi Mumbai, Panvel and Ulhasnagar—contributed 30 per cent of the total cases in the State. Over the last four weeks, these areas have seen a threefold rise in the number of cases. Poor medical infrastructure has resulted in high mortality and poor control of the virus. After Mumbai, it is Pune that has about

1,000 new cases a day and then comes Kalyan-Dombivli with 470 cases a day. There are fears that with the upcoming Ganpati festival, the virus will spread to the Konkan region. Every year a few lakh people return home to the Konkan for the festival. This year will probably be no exception though strict guidelines have been issued by the government for the festivities.

On July 17, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray held a video conference with the Collectors of Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg and Raigad districts and told them to restrict the celebrations and follow the guidelines of Mumbai’s Ganesh mandals. A maximum height of four feet has been set for statues of the deity and only one public idol per municipal ward will be permitted, that too with stringent instructions about physical distancing. There will be no processions and the idols will have to be immersed in ponds created at the respective sites.

The government’s thrust on testing continues. The BMC official says, “Mumbai is a good example that ramped-up testing works. Dharavi’s ‘chase the virus’ strategy worked well. But we have to remember that there was great support from the people. Apply the same strategy across the State and a semblance of control will be established. It is important to have this sense [of control]. It gives confidence to everyone.”

The number of daily tests in Mumbai has increased from 4,408 in June to 5,326 until July 18. But it is considered inadequate since the test positivity rate (TPR) of 21.7 per cent is still too high given the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) standard of 5 per cent. At present, for every 100 people tested 21 are positive. But there has been a slight improvement from June when the TPR was 28 per cent.

If the TPR is over 5 per cent, it could be an indicator of community spread and of the inadequacy of the testing being done. To lower the TPR, the testing rate needs to be increased. But the BMC says it is close to saturation point and needs private laboratories to take on more of the burden.

Without actually saying it, the BMC wants everyone to have themselves tested. While this is probably an effective control measure, the biggest hurdle is the cost, Rs.2,800 per test, something people will not consider spending on until they show symptoms. In any case, for this to be a solution, a large majority will have to opt for testing. And even if people are willing to have themselves tested, there are only 48 laboratories in the State that are accredited with the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories. There is a move to widen this and allow laboratories that have doctors with MD in Pathology and 10 years’ experience to also carry out the tests. If this comes through then the number of laboratories in Mumbai alone will jump from 17 to 2,000.

To some extent the delay in allowing private laboratories to test has contributed to the spread. It was only on July 7 that the BMC did away with the insistence on a doctor’s prescription. Until then even high-risk contacts of positive patients were tested only after nine days of quarantine. □

Power games amid pandemic

Even as the number of COVID-19 cases in the State spirals out of control and farmers suffer on account of unpaid MSP, the BJP's focus is on **poaching MLAs and winning** the upcoming byelections.

BY **ANANDO BHAKTO** IN NEW DELHI

POLITICS HAS TAKEN CENTRE STAGE IN Madhya Pradesh, with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) eyeing legislators from the opposition camp even as the total number of COVID-19 cases in the State crossed 20,000.

On July 11, a Congress Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) resigned and joined the BJP, while on July 17, another Congress MLA put in his papers, reportedly at the behest of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's aides.

The Congress alleged that the BJP's lust for power was weakening the State's fight against the pandemic. As of July 20, the total number of cases in Madhya Pradesh was 23,310 and the death toll had touched 738.

POLICE ATROCITY

The Chouhan regime's mishandling of the economic and social challenges thrown up by COVID-19 became apparent in July when news of police excesses against disadvantaged people went viral on social media.

On July 14, a Dalit farmer couple attempted to commit suicide by consuming pesticide in the presence of the police in Guna district. The police forcibly evicted them from land they had illegally occupied and allegedly destroyed their crops.

A video showing policemen kicking the couple and beating them with sticks went viral on social media. The police, however, said that they lathicharged not the couple in question but those who tried to prevent the police from taking them to hospital. However, there were few takers for the police's version.

Former Chief Minister Kamal Nath came down heavily on the administration and demanded strict action against the officers. There was also a hashtag campaign on Twitter on that day demanding Chouhan's resigna-



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

THE POLICE beat a Dalit couple in Guna while evicting them from the land they had occupied illegally.

tion. Chouhan ordered the transfer of Guna's District Collector and Superintendent of Police and said a fair investigation would be initiated into the issue. BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia, who hails from the Gwalior-Guna belt and was the Guna Member of Parliament from 2004 to 2019, also said a probe would be ordered.

The eviction happened in spite of the government's much-publicised "Swamitva scheme" that promises to accord land rights to people on the basis of a survey of the entire rural population.

Chouhan has claimed on several occasions that a rights record would be prepared and rural people given ownership rights over their plots accordingly.

FARMERS' WOES

Farmers have been badly hit by the lockdown and the decline in business activities. They complain that they are not getting the minimum support prices (MSP) for



PTI

CONGRESS MLA Pradyuman Singh Lodhi joining the BJP in the presence of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and BJP State president V.D. Sharma, in Bhopal on July 12.



PTI

PROTEM SPEAKER Rameshwar Sharma, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Leader of the Opposition Kamal Nath and other legislators at a meeting ahead of the monsoon session of the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, in Bhopal on July 17.

wheat, moong bean and black gram, among other crops, and that the MSP centres were working in cahoots with private players to exploit them.

Some farmers also told *Frontline* that there was no sign of the bonus of Rs.160 per quintal on wheat and Rs.500 per quintal on soybean over and above the MSP, which the government promised them. However, Chouhan has claimed to have transferred an insurance amount totalling Rs.2,990 crore into farmers' accounts.

HOLLOW CLAIMS ON COVID-19

The Chief Minister has also been claiming success in containing the spread of the pandemic, although the

spiralling numbers indicate otherwise. On July 16, he lauded his government's "Kill Corona" campaign, saying that door-to-door testing had brought down the mortality rate.

According to him, the government has completed a health survey covering 95 per cent of the people in the State, in which 1,00,679 samples were tested for COVID-19. Out of these, 1,831 people tested positive.

However, the rapid worsening of the COVID-19 situation belies his claims. Between July 1 and 15, the period in which the "Kill Corona" campaign was conducted, the number of COVID-19 cases increased by 200 per cent. In this fortnight, as many as 6,050 new patients were identified across the State and 110 patients died.

Health department officials said that 6,785 cases were reported in the first 16 days of July, putting the average case per day at 424. This is a significant climb from the daily average of about 139 cases between March 24, when the lockdown began, and June 30.

Congress spokesperson Abbas Hafeez Khan told *Frontline* that the BJP was "still busy poaching Congress MLAs rather than any constructive work related to COVID-19 control".

He added: "The numbers are increasing day by day. In the first 30 days of COVID-19 the State did not have any Health Minister, and now the Health Minister [Prabhuram Choudhary] is not even an MLA and his sole focus is on winning the upcoming by-election. The BJP's actions demonstrate that its only priority is the by-elections; public health is secondary."

Prabhuram Choudhary was one of the MLAs who resigned in March, which led to the collapse of the Kamal Nath government.

BYELECTION DELAY

In view of the prevailing situation, the government postponed the five-day monsoon session of the State Assembly scheduled to commence on July 20. The decision was made on July 17 following an all-party meeting convened by Protem Speaker Rameshwar Sharma during which it was also decided that legislative business, if any, would be conducted through the ordinance route.

The Congress, however, is getting impatient at the indefinite delay of the by-elections as poaching of its members continues. After Congress MLA from Bada Malhera seat, Pradumn Singh Lodhi, defected to the BJP on July 11, another Congress MLA, Sumitra Devi Kasdekar, resigned from her Nepanagar (Scheduled Tribe) seat. Although Sumitra Devi has not cited any reason for her decision, it is widely speculated that she would be joining the BJP.

The BJP appointed Lodhi chairman of the MP Civil Supplies Corporation with a Cabinet rank.

On July 15, the Congress described the BJP's machinations as a "political coronavirus" and urged the Election Commission to hold the by-elections at the earliest.

By-elections are due in 26 Assembly seats vacated by 24 Congress MLAs, including Jyotiraditya Scindia, and owing to the death of an MLA each from both parties. □

Out of control

As COVID cases soar in West Bengal, the State government admits that there has been **community spread** in several parts and experts stress the need for decentralised testing. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

WITH THE COVID-19 SITUATION THREATENING to spiral out of control in West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress government faces an uphill task. While Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee continues to fall back on her rhetoric of Bengal's COVID management being among the best in the country and blames the Centre for its lack of cooperation, the State government has admitted that community spread has begun in certain areas. It has also announced complete lockdown across the State for two days every week. The government will announce in advance which two days those will be, perhaps on a weekly basis. As the numbers increase, repeated incidents of medical negligence and helplessness of the common people in the face of the pandemic have brought to the fore glaring lapses in the State's health-care system. The State government finds itself in a situation where it must contend with not only political agitations but also increasing public dissatisfaction.

The State witnessed an uncontrollable acceleration in the contagion from the beginning of July. In the first three weeks of the month, the caseload increased by more than 26,000 and the number of deaths by almost 500. On June 30, the total number of cases was 18,559 and the number of deaths 683. By July 20, the total number of cases had increased to 44,769 (including 2,282 new cases in 24 hours), of which 17,916 were active, and the total number of deaths stood at 1,182 (including 35 on July 20).

West Bengal's relatively high rate of discharge was a point of pride with the State government for quite some time. With positive cases increasing rapidly, however, it dipped drastically, from 65.35 per cent on July 1 to 59 per cent by July 20. The daily rate of testing, which had begun to pick up in June (it crossed the 10,000-mark on June 19), remained stagnant for nearly four weeks, hovering between 10,300 and 11,500. Only from July 16 was there a perceptible increase in testing, with more than 13,000 tests taking place every day. As of July 20, the State had tested 7,16,365 samples (including 13,081 on July 20), with the rate of testing per million standing at a mere 7,960.

On July 20, the State government announced for the



DEBASISH BHADURI

FUMIGATION under way in a containment zone in south Kolkata.

first time that community transmission had started. Home Secretary Alapan Bandopadhyay told the media: "After consulting with several scientists, experts and those related with the matter, we feel that community transmission has been taking place in certain areas." He also announced the move to impose lockdown for two days a week. Lockdowns in various "containment zones" are already in place. Earlier, the State had embargoed flights coming in from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and Pune until July 19; the ban has been extended to July 31.

DECENTRALISED TESTING

Some virologists and medical practitioners are sceptical about the State government's measures. Partho Sarothi Ray, eminent virologist and molecular scientist and Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Kolkata, told *Frontline*: "People were given the impression that the lockdown would make the epidemic go away, but that can never happen. What we are seeing is that during the lockdown, the infection got incubated. People stayed indoors and the

infection spread among those in close contact, and now with the unlocking, it has started spreading everywhere, and it will continue to spread in an accelerated way... The only way to deal with the situation is what was being advocated all through—to test, trace and isolate.” He felt that the Central and State governments seemed to be dealing with the situation as though it were a law and order problem. He said it was a public health and scientific problem that should be dealt with scientifically and epidemiologically. According to Ray, both the Centre and the State government had been just “fighting with a shadow” and the present situation was a result of the lack of planning by the government.



SWAPAN MAHAPATRA/FPTI

PASSENGERS who arrived by long distance trains waiting for transport outside the Howrah railway station during a complete lockdown in West Bengal on July 23.

Ray said “decentralised” testing was essential right now and pointed out that testing capacity in the State had been enhanced in a “delayed and half-hearted manner”. “I am involved with the testing in Nadia district. Here we are planning and focussing on areas from where infections are coming, and how testing can be geared up to isolate people fast as soon as there is an infection arising in an area. But in almost every State all the samples are going to a few laboratories in the capital and everything is getting mixed up. As a result, there is no understanding of the dynamics of how the infection is spreading locally. By the time the results come in, clusters of infection spread. Testing locally should have been established much earlier,” he said. He believes that antigen testing should begin immediately in the cities.

GOVERNMENT UNDER FIRE

Notwithstanding Mamata Banerjee’s claim that “Bengal is the best” in health and hospital infrastructure, repeated incidents of patients struggling with lack of infrastructure and of deaths caused by alleged negligence have given opposition parties a handle to attack the State government with.

The recent death of 18-year-old Subhrajit Chatterjee, who was allegedly refused treatment in several hospit-

als—including a government hospital—sent shockwaves across the State. A private hospital allegedly proclaimed Subhrajit, who was having breathing difficulties, COVID-positive on a hand-written note and asked his parents to take him to a government hospital. After more than 12 hours of suffering and shuttling from one place to another, the boy was finally admitted to Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata, but only after his mother threatened to commit suicide on the premises. That very night the boy passed away. His father, Biswajit Chatterjee, was quoted in the media as having said: “The medical college too had refused us initially, saying there weren’t beds available. Then when my wife threatened to commit suicide, they took him in. We shifted him to the isolation ward and saw there were three empty beds.”

The boy’s parents claimed they had appealed to the police and the administration for help in their moment of anguish, but to no avail. The Calcutta High Court ordered a post-mortem after they moved court. “I still do not know what killed my son, the COVID virus or medical negligence,” said Shrabani, the boy’s mother. Though Subhrajit’s case was not an isolated one and complaints by patients were almost a daily occurrence, it sparked off strong reactions in social and political circles.

Mamata Banerjee responded with boasts about the State’s infrastructure in the health sector. “We have invested so much money in the health sector and created so much new infrastructure that I can proudly claim that Bengal’s health system is the best and that can be gauged by the occupancy rate in the government hospitals,” she said. Yet, on July 20, out of the 11,239 COVID beds in government establishments, 7,071 were unoccupied, whereas, according to a highly placed source in the private medical sector, the occupancy rate in private COVID hospitals was around 97 per cent. According to the State government’s own figures, the overall occupancy of COVID beds in the State was a mere 37.09 per cent as of July 20. Addressing the media on July 16, Mamata Banerjee said steps were being taken to add another 3,500 to 4,000 COVID beds.

A doctor explained to *Frontline*: “The unfortunate fact is that even those who cannot afford treatment in a private hospital would rather not go to a government one. We also see many people not coming forward to get their tests done, hoping to recover at home.”

Under pressure from all quarters, Mamata Banerjee appealed to the media to “show the positive news”. Chief Secretary Rajiva Sinha assured the people that there was no reason for panic: “Look at both the macro and micro pictures instead of just the numbers. As of today [July 18], out of 14,709 active cases in Bengal, only 662 patients are in the serious category, while 1,250 are in the moderate category. That means only 1,912 patients need to be in hospital. The remaining 12,796 are asymptomatic...Is it a big number?”

However, according to an eminent doctor, in the present situation “it would be pernicious for the government to be complacent as it would give the public a false sense of security.” □

Unlockdown impact

Gujarat is again showing a surge after **businesses and factories start operating** as part of the unlocking process and people move across

districts. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

GUJARAT HAS SLIPPED FROM THE FOURTH position to the fifth among the States most affected by COVID-19. However, this happened not because of an actual improvement in the situation but because a surge in Karnataka put the southern State ahead of it. New cases and COVID deaths are being reported in Gujarat at a rate that has been alarming enough for a Central team to make a second trip to Ahmedabad and Surat in mid July to guide the administration in managing the crisis and to provide direction on treatment methods. A study done by the Population Council says Gujarat is among the nine most vulnerable States.

On July 21, Gujarat's caseload hit the 50,000-mark, and the highest ever single-day spike with 993 cases was recorded on that day. The State Ministry of Health and

Family Welfare data indicate the disease is rapidly spreading to the districts. Some of the tribal pockets that had remained unaffected until a week earlier are now reporting cases. A look at the districts that show a spike reveals a pattern. Apart from the cities, high incidence is noticed around industrial hubs and special economic zones, indicating that Gujarat is paying the price for trying to revive its economy. Factories and businesses had begun functioning with the easing of lockdown restrictions as people started braving the prospect of an infection in order to get back to work.

In mid July, Chief Minister Vijay Rupani issued an official statement saying businesses and industries had picked up pace after Unlock 1 owing to the cooperation of citizens, and factories had started operating. Large in-



SAM PANTHAKY/AFP

THE POLICE trying to disperse devotees gathered to participate in religious rituals on the first day of the Dashama Vrat near the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad on July 20.



VUJAY/SONEJI

A TEMPLE PRIEST offers a mask as “prasada” to a devotee on the first day of the Hindu holy month of Shravan, in Ahmedabad on July 21.

dustrial and MSME (Medium, Small and Micro Enterprise) units started operating despite a massive labour shortage caused by the migrant exodus.

Sources connected to labour unions in Ahmedabad, however, said industry and business were unlikely to get back to functioning to full capacity unless the migrant workers returned. One activist said that the only thing that was visibly back to normal was public works and infrastructure projects.

NUMBERS TELL A DISMAL TALE

On July 21, State Ministry of Health and Family Welfare data clocked the death toll at 2,162 and the total number of positive cases, including successful discharges, at 47,191. The death (mortality) rate is pegged at 4.5 per cent against the national average of 2.5 per cent. Additionally, the Case Fatality Ratio (CFR) at 4.48 per cent remains higher than the national average of 1.78 and Maharashtra’s 3.85 per cent. (CFR is the number of people who die for every 100 people who test positive.) A doctor who treats COVID-19 patients in Ahmedabad said the CFR was high because patients waited too long to seek treatment.

Gujarat is still struggling to cope with the pressure on its health-care infrastructure, but there has been an improvement since the early days of the pandemic. The State authorities had been rebuked by the Gujarat High Court, and also apparently pulled up by the Centre, for their shoddy management of the disease. The State government has since increased the number of dedicated COVID hospitals across districts. Private laboratories are allowed to test samples. Recent news reports said final year medical students would be trained to treat patients.

“MORE TESTING NEEDED”

According to State government data, 5,36,620 people were tested until July 21. Following the Centre’s instructions on increased testing, daily tests have doubled from an average of 5,300 in June to 11,000-12,000 in mid July. However, the Ahmedabad Medical Association (AMA), which represents close to 9,000 doctors in the State, says

even this is not enough. The AMA filed an appeal in the High Court asking for a rate of testing commensurate with the State’s population size. Dr Mona Desai, who heads the association, told the media that other States as big as Gujarat were conducting 30,000 tests a day.

Gujarat’s Total Positivity Ratio (TPR) stands at 8.6 per cent. (TPR is the percentage of tests that return positive results.) A high rate means a good percentage of people being tested are turning out positive, which indicates that only the sickest are going for testing. Doctors believe an increase in testing will reveal a better picture.

Reinforcing the AMA’s stand, the Central government team, which comprised Dr Randeep Guleria, Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, and Dr Balram Bhargava, Director General, Indian Council for Medical Research, asked the State to increase testing for a clearer understanding of the larger picture. The team was in the State to look into the high fatality rate and advise the medical community on treatment protocols. Dr Guleria supported the use of oxygen therapy and cautioned doctors on the use of Tocilizumab, which he said must be used only in severe cases.

A recent study titled “A vulnerability index for the management and response to the COVID-19 epidemic in India: an ecological study,” published by *The Lancet*, a medical journal in the United Kingdom, said Gujarat was among the nine most vulnerable States in India. The computation locates Gujarat at 0.77 on a zero to one scale (1.0 is the most vulnerable and 0.0 the least). The study says “it computed a composite index of vulnerability at the State and district levels based on 15 indicators across the following five domains: socioeconomic, demographic, housing and hygiene, epidemiological, and health system. We used a percentile ranking method to compute both domain-specific and overall vulnerability and presented results spatially with number of positive COVID-19 cases in districts.”

Researchers Rajjib Acharya and Akash Porwal from the Population Council, New Delhi, write in the introduction to their report: “The main value of our study is the State and district ranking provided to policymakers to prioritise resource allocation and devise effective mitigation and reconstruction strategies for affected populations. Additionally, vulnerability in the era of COVID-19 is more than the risk of contracting the disease. A person or group might not be vulnerable at the beginning of the pandemic, but could subsequently become vulnerable depending on government response.”

In the early days of the pandemic, Ahmedabad was the hardest hit in Gujarat. It was not unexpected that once the State started unlocking the disease should start spreading to the districts, riding on the back of inter-district movement. Surat has been declared a hotspot after reporting 9,709 cases and 269 deaths. The districts showing high incidence are Vadodara (3,610 cases), Rajkot (1,017), Mehsana (580), Bharuch (590), Bhavnagar (487), Amreli (230) and Dahod (251). Of the two predominantly tribal districts, the Dangs, which earlier had no cases, now reports eight, and Chota Udaipur has 98. □

Financial crunch and fatigue

The State grapples with a **lack of finances and the fatigue** of front-line workers in the battle against the pandemic, even as the people struggle to make ends meet amid economic decline. BY **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

ON JULY 16, CHIEF MINISTER EDAPPADI K. Palaniswami told the media that the State's COVID-19 case count was likely to reduce in 10 days. On that day, the number of fresh cases was 4,549. After a slight fall to 4,538 on July 17, COVID-19 infections kept rising, clocking 4,807 cases on July 18, 4,979 on July 19 and 4,985 on July 20.

The total number of COVID-19 infections had crossed 1.75 lakh as of July 20. In mid-April, the Chief Minister had said the infection would be controlled in just three days. Then too, the number of COVID-19 cases soared. Among the infected are high-profile persons such as 16 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Coimbatore Collector K. Rajamani and Kancheepuram Collector P. Ponnaiah, and four Ministers, two of whom have recovered.

The latest high-profile case is that of the family of Health Secretary J. Radhakrishnan.

By July 20, the number of deaths totalled 2,551. Ministers have been pointing out that the death rate was relatively low in the State. But the worrying fact is that the the total number of deaths was only 1,201 until the end of June. The number of deaths zoomed in the first 20 days of July after several fatalities were reported from the districts, many of which do not have tertiary care facilities.

LACK OF FINANCES

Bureaucrats and health professionals said that the lack of finances to fight a relentless battle against the disease and the fatigue of the frontline workers were major issues facing the State. Political parties and professional organisations said that the continuing restrictions on economic activity were taking a huge toll on daily wagers and those who had lost their jobs.

On June 26, the Chief Minister said that Tamil Nadu's fiscal deficit could touch Rs.85,000 crore this year



S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

NURSES attached to the Omandurar government hospital in Chennai taking a break on July 16. Over 1,500 government and private nurses are involved in the fight against COVID-19 in Chennai.

owing to the pandemic if the existing trend of revenue shortfall continued.

“There is literally zero coming in by way of GST [goods and services tax] for about five months,” said an official. “On petrol, even before State governments could react, the Centre hiked its excise rate, leaving us no room for any manoeuvrability at all,” he added.

Palaniswami had written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi several times on making more funds available to the State to fight the pandemic. Representatives of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have said that the Centre has made available Rs.25,000 crore to Tamil Nadu, but representatives of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the ruling party, have maintained that even the GST arrears have not been paid in full.



R. RAGU

A WORKER DISINFECTING autorickshaws at Egmore in Chennai on July 8.



S. R. RAGHUNATHAN

STREET HAWKERS in Chennai on July 22. The lockdown has wreaked havoc on the livelihoods of low-wage earners and their families.

The State had resorted to market borrowings and has already tapped into most other available sources. In the first four months of the pandemic, Tamil Nadu has already spent over Rs.12,000 crore on fighting COVID-19, said an official involved in tackling the pandemic.

“Almost all State governments are in the same boat, with minor variations,” said an official who worked for almost a decade with the State Finance Department.

BURDEN ON PEOPLE

The State’s financial problems have affected different sections in different ways. At a meeting on July 21, conservancy staff of the Chennai Corporation demanded a raise in wages, on par with COVID-19 staff. “We do the most difficult job of all. We are paid only Rs.10,000 [per month] while the COVID staff, who go from house to house, are paid much more,” said a temporary conservancy worker.

Opposition parties claimed that a majority of the workforce has been out of work for nearly five months. The government has given ration card holders cash assistance of Rs.1,000 each twice and also provides free rations, but many said this was inadequate. “I am a bus

driver. How long do I have to stay without a job? I am not looking for doles. I want work. What work can I do? I have tried a few things such as selling vegetables,” said a driver in the Anna Nagar locality in Chennai.

Most autorickshaw drivers and a host of people from other trades have turned to selling fruits and vegetables because most jobs and trades were not permitted during the initial months of the lockdown as they were not considered essential services.

After restrictions were lifted, the autorickshaw drivers have resumed plying their vehicles but complain that there are fewer fares.

“I used to make Rs.700-1,000 per day. Now, if I get Rs.100 over and above my expenses, I should be happy,” said an autorickshaw driver in the Mogappair neighbourhood in Chennai.

Unorganised workers have been the worst hit during the lockdown and after restrictions were lifted. Opposition parties alleged that the welfare measures announced by the government had not reached those badly affected. On July 21, tailors affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) protested across the State claiming that they had not received the welfare amounts promised.

ELECTRICITY BILLS

Apart from these issues, electricity bills came as a shock to many people. The Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) workers did not take the bi-monthly reading in June and the EB decided to take the average of the previous four months to calculate the rate.

The opposition DMK staged protests across the State on July 21, demanding that the State government stop fleecing the public. In his reply to the DMK, Electricity Minister P. Thangamani said that because the bi-monthly meter reading was not taken, the units consumed for four months were considered and the average for the bi-monthly rate calculated. Of this, 100 units were free.

In a case related to this issue, the government informed the High Court that some 93 per cent of the people had paid their bills.

“If I use 420 units in this period, the government will divide it as 210 units each as the bimonthly consumption,” said K. Kanagaraj of the Tamil Nadu unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

“For this, the EB cost will be Rs.520. But if this is divided as 200 units and 220 units, the total outgo from a consumer will be Rs.460. Because the government divides it equally, a consumer is forced to shell out Rs.60 more for no fault of his. If the consumption is 1,020 units and divided equally, instead of dividing it as 500 and 520 units, the consumer loses about Rs.600. Is this fair? It is not the consumer’s fault that the government did not take the reading. This happens at a time when people are really struggling,” he added.

The government has also ordered that cooperative banks should not extend gold loans, even though people across sections are in deep distress and there is no relief in sight. □

Late lessons

After initial hesitation, **Telangana begins testing on a large scale by involving the private sector** as the disease, earlier confined to Hyderabad, spreads to rural areas. BY **RAVI SHARMA**

WITH THE FEVER REFUSING TO SUBSIDE even after three days and the visit to a local *hakim* proving to be of little help, Zakhira, 43, a single mother of three, who works as a domestic help in an apartment complex located in the vicinity of Hyderabad's Seven Tombs Road, was on the verge of a mental and physical breakdown. She was told to get herself admitted to Osmania General Hospital (OGH), Hyderabad's oldest hospital. She did so on July 10. Doctors there duly recommended that she be tested for COVID-19. While the test results were awaited, she was placed in isolation and assigned a bed in the outpatient building of the dilapidated OGH. On July 13, her test results confirmed that she had been infected. Even as she was informed that she needed to get herself admitted to Gandhi Hospital, a designated COVID-19 facility, rainwater and sewage flooded most parts of the OGH, throwing her final consultation and time-consuming discharge protocol into disarray.

Zakhira's is not an isolated case. Many other patients have suffered a similar fate.

The Telangana government headed by Kalvakuntla Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) has appeared clueless in its fight to contain the pandemic. As on July 20, the State had 46,274 positive cases, more than 32,000 of which were reported from the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation, a COVID hotspot. By July, other districts started recording large numbers of positive cases. About 422 people have succumbed to the virus in the State.

A recent report titled "A vulnerability index for the management of and response to the COVID-19 epidemic in India: An ecological study", published in *The Lancet*, which assessed the vulnerabilities of Indian States to the coronavirus infection, ranked Telangana as the third most vulnerable State to the effects of the pandemic. Measured on a scale of zero to one across five domains—socio-economic, demographic, housing and hygiene, epi-



RAINWATER AND SEWAGE in the inpatient ward of Osmania General Hospital in Hyderabad on July 15.

demological, and health—the study defines “vulnerability” as the risk and consequences of infection, including its spread, morbidity, mortality, and social and economic effects. Telangana scores 0.943 in “overall vulnerability”, with only Bihar (0.971) and Madhya Pradesh (1.000) being more vulnerable. (With a score of zero, Sikkim was assessed as the least vulnerable.)

Statistics on the ground seek to reinforce the findings of the study. Telangana, which until the middle of June refused to acknowledge that testing was the key to tracing, treating and isolating COVID-19 positive patients, is faced with major challenges, which include enforcement of physical distancing norms, especially in the densely populated urban areas where a large percentage of the population lives below the poverty line; a huge number of people with comorbidities; and the return of a large number of migrant workers from other States.



G. N. RAO

HEALTH DEPARTMENT staff putting up “home quarantine” poster outside a house at Gandhi chowk in Khammam on July 22.

However, Telangana has reversed its policy on testing. It roped in the private sector to ramp up the testing process from June 16. While the number of tests done between March and June was a mere 53,757, as many as 211,462 tests were done between June 21 and July 20. The Telangana High Court had intervened in the matter and upbraided the government for not conducting enough tests. Commenting on the State’s changed outlook towards testing, Minister for Medical, Health and Family Welfare Etela Rajender placed the blame on the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). He said: “Earlier both these organisations had issued guidelines that did not call for a rigorous testing schedule. They later changed their norms and guidelines, increasing the severity of the virus. Thereafter, we tailored our response and started testing on a large scale.”

Several pathologists working in private laboratories, contacted by *Frontline*, welcomed the government’s decision to involve them in the testing process, but main-

tained that there were several constraints in scaling up testing. Said a senior doctor: “There are huge issues in capacity building, procuring the reagents, getting the right technicians. Only virologists and serologists can undertake these tests. And many front-line technicians are not reporting to work, fearing they might contract the disease. The government must initiate more confidence-building measures among front-line staff and hospitals treating COVID-19 patients. The virus has played havoc with the financial models of hospitals. Today, hospitals are able to generate only 20 per cent of the budgeted revenue.”

As per the ICMR protocol, test results are uploaded to the Telangana government, the ICMR and the jurisdictional deputy health officer. The current test rate stands at 7,421 per million population. With single-day spikes happening frequently, Telangana’s confirmed per million (CPM) stands at 1,243.26 (the all-India average being 866.47 CPM), which means 1,243 out of every one million people in Telangana have tested positive for the virus.

Although the unlocking of the State’s borders, the return of migrants and the opening up of most of the sectors were seen as the reasons for the sudden jump in the number of cases, officials told *Frontline* that the virus had begun to spread within the community. “Effective contact tracing requires us to investigate and trace at least 20 primary and secondary contacts of the patient. But given the rapid spread and the fact that test results take at least 48 hours to come, this has become almost impossible.” Telangana claims a mortality rate of 0.91 per cent – in other words for every 100 confirmed cases, one individual has died from the virus. But there are allegations that several COVID-related mortalities have gone unreported.

Speaking to *Frontline*, Rajender readily agreed that the virus, which hitherto was confined to urban and semi-urban areas, had begun to spread among the rural masses. He said: “The government had initially planned to confine the coronavirus to urban pockets. But with migrants coming back to their rural homes this has not been possible.” Underlining the seriousness of the situation, he said instilling confidence among the people was one of the biggest challenges faced by the government. “Despite there being adequate testing facilities, including for the rapid antibody-based blood test, and a well-established protocol for home or institutional isolation if a person tests positive, people are panicking. There is the fear of stigmatisation. Patients are rushing to private hospitals. People should not be afraid. Also, the chances of mortality are very low. The government has established a system to take care of those who test positive.”

According to Rajender, Telangana has planned to “test every single patient who exhibits COVID-19 symptoms within a 24-hour window”. The government has decided to “decentralise treatment protocols” and in this respect, it is in the process of authorising 22 medical college hospitals in various parts of the State to treat COVID patients. □

Worrisome clusters

The **rapid spread of community clusters** and the steady rise in cases of infection are putting Kerala's public health system under pressure.

BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR



PTI

THERE WERE AMPLE WARNINGS, BUT FEW IN Kerala seem to have thought that a peak in COVID-19 cases was coming. Now, as infections from fast-spreading COVID-19 clusters begin to rise alarmingly, the State is wondering whether this is the beginning of the peak.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 clusters is unsettling for a State that has so far had an exemplary record in the management of the pandemic. Clearly, the nature of the challenge has changed, not just in terms of the number of people getting infected every day, but also in the way it is threatening to overwhelm the State's decentralised public health system, which is among the best in the country.

The assurance of quality health care for every COVID-19 patient and quarantined person, a promise on which the State was able to deliver in the first five months of the pandemic, suddenly appeared a bit uncertain. Instead, concerns about a possible shortage of hospital

HEALTH WORKERS collect swab samples from corporation employees in Kozhikode on July 21.

beds, respirators, intensive care units (ICU), doctors, nurses and other health workers are already dominating official discussions.

However, in response to some media reports which suggested that "Kerala's COVID success story" has already come "undone", Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said: "The fight against COVID-19 is not like a 100-metre or 200-metre dash that you can win at a stretch. This, like a marathon race, is a long haul. What is being tested is our endurance, not just that of the health system, but of society in general and the people as a whole. Our patience and endurance are being tested. Each of us needs to have this awareness. Only then can we run the race till the end, without falling down."

Kerala had received world attention for limiting the number of cases to just over 5,000 and deaths to 27 in the first five months. But from the second week of July the State saw a sudden spurt in COVID-19 clusters everywhere.

As on July 21, Kerala recorded 13,994 confirmed cases, 8,056 active cases, and 44 deaths. The capital district of Thiruvananthapuram had the highest number of active cases at 2,179, and the highest number of deaths, nine. The daily caseload rose steadily from 435 on July 12 to 821 on July 19, which was the highest single-day rise till then.

The steady increase in COVID cases with unknown sources of infection was evident by the end of June. But the majority of the cases reported at the time were of people who had travelled from other parts of India or abroad. (More than 6.62 lakh people, including 2.3 lakh from abroad, have returned to Kerala so far.) The number of people who had contracted the disease locally was minimal then.

From the first week of July, more than 200 new cases began to be reported every day. Within a fortnight, there were more than 700 new cases a day. This spike in numbers occurred in small and large COVID-19 clusters. As on July 21, there were 101 clusters with 18 of them classified as “large community clusters”. The origin of many of the clusters could be traced invariably to ‘super-spread’ locations, such as fish and vegetable markets, densely populated coastal villages, entrance examination centres, hypermarkets, bus depots, police camps and stations, and invariably, a chain of hospitals across the State.

Paradoxically, on July 17, Kerala also became the first State to announce the community transmission of COVID, in the coastal areas of Poonthura and Pulluvila in Thiruvananthapuram district. Both areas had a common super-spread trigger: a wholesale fish market on the highway to the city.

Although the two areas were shut down completely, the number of infections kept rising there. The infection spread rapidly along the coast and into the urban and suburban regions of Thiruvananthapuram. Within two days, Thiruvananthapuram had 2,179 active cases, followed by the districts of Ernakulam 792, Alappuzha 665, Malappuram 596, Kollam 499 and Pathanamthitta 454.

Clusters have now been reported in almost all the districts along the coast and in inland areas. The most worrisome clusters are in Kollam, Cherthala, Kayamkulam, Changanassery, Pathanamthitta, Adoor, Kumbazha, Chellanam (a locked-down area facing the additional threat of sea erosion), Keezhanaum, Aluva, a Border Security Force camp in Thrissur, and Pattambi.

Many areas of the State are on lockdown and despite the cluster containment/management strategy unrolled by the government, local transmission cases have been rising steadily, making it difficult to identify all infected individuals and their contacts.

In Pattambi, a wholesale fish merchant was found to

have spread the infection to over 100 people, a case described as the “most dreadful” by Minister A.K. Balan. Nearly 90 employees of a hypermarket in Thiruvananthapuram were found to be infected, even as the store, like another one nearby, continued to function normally without adhering to precautionary measures.

Kerala’s biggest worry, however, is elsewhere. By July 21, as many as 136 health care workers in various government and private hospitals tested positive; a large number of them were working in non-COVID wards/hospitals. This led to the closure of several hospitals or wards. The functioning of three major tertiary care COVID hospitals, the medical college hospitals in Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam and Kozhikode, were also affected, with patients or health care workers infecting a sizable number of hospital staff, forcing them to go into quarantine.

An important concern raised by the Indian Medical Association’s (IMA) State unit representatives was whether the ongoing number of tests was sufficient to understand the real nature of the spread and to take informed decisions. The Chief Minister said Kerala was way ahead of other States in this regard. He said: “For one positive case we are conducting 44 tests. In comparison, it is five in Maharashtra, seven in Delhi, 11 in Tamil Nadu, 17 in Karnataka, and 11 in Gujarat. Those who say that Kerala is lagging in this matter are merely looking at the number of tests. That is not the scientific way. What is important is how many tests are being conducted in proportion to the number of positive cases.”

As the number of cases kept rising, Kerala launched its First Line Treatment Centres (FLTCs) under the local bodies, with a proposed total bed capacity of 50,000, to treat asymptomatic patients and those with mild symptoms. The government is also roping in private hospitals for COVID care. The treatment costs and modalities are being finalised.

In the long term, in order to provide treatment to the critically ill without straining the capacity of hospitals, the government may suggest home isolation for asymptomatic patients.

Government doctors, nurses and health care workers say that their biggest concern now is the rising rate of infection among their colleagues, inadequate staff strength, system fatigue and stress and exhaustion from overwork. They have raised several demands, the important ones being recruitment of more trained doctors and health care workers and better remuneration to the new recruits. They say that even if only a small percentage of the new cases require critical care, it may still be large enough to overwhelm the existing hospital facilities.

The Chief Minister, however, said that there was no need for concern that hospitals would be overloaded or that the facilities would be inadequate.

Making predictions about how the pandemic will progress can be hazardous. If in early July the concern was about those who were returning in large numbers to the State, today it is about local transmission. As the government slogan says, “vigil has the value of life”. □

Terrible transition

Karnataka's initial record in restricting the spread of COVID-19 has been upset by an increase in the number of cases across the State, with Bengaluru emerging as a **new national hotspot**. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**



FIRE SERVICES
personnel disinfecting
the KSRTC
Kempegowda bus stand
in Bengaluru on July 19.

K. MURALI KUMAR

LOOKING AT THE HORROR STORY THAT IS unfolding in Bengaluru since the beginning of July, it is hard to believe that just over a month ago the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had lauded Karnataka for its management of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a letter on June 18 to State Health Departments across the country, the Ministry had stated that “two practices followed in the State of Karnataka are worth replicating” and urged other States to “consider these practices for adapting them to their local context”. The practices referred to are “efficient contact tracing” and “comprehensive household survey to detect vulnerable populations”. Karnataka’s early record in restricting the spread of the infection is a shambles now with an alarming increase in the number of new cases across the State and the emergence of Bengaluru, the capital, as the new national hotspot.

The swift deterioration in the management of the situation becomes evident from the State’s COVID-19 dashboard. As on July 20, the cumulative confirmed cases stood at 64,420, active cases at 42,216, and total

deaths at 1,403. With the staggering rise in the caseload, Karnataka has the fourth highest number of cases in the country after Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Delhi. The number of samples being tested has increased substantially with more than 25,000 samples tested every day. Karnataka has tested 10,57,303 samples so far.

Bengaluru has been reporting 1,200 to 2,000 positive cases daily and 50 to 70 deaths. The city has emerged as the epicentre of the pandemic in the State with a total of 33,229 cases, of which 25,574 were active cases on July 20. Considering that there were only around 10,000 cases in the city in the first week of July, the spurt is worrying. The city has recorded 698 deaths cumulatively, of which 550 took place in the first two weeks of July. The infection was restricted to a few corporation wards of the city in June. Now, all the 198 wards have active cases and there are more than 6,000 containment zones. While contact tracing is still yielding results in the districts, health officials of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) have given up tracing the source of the infection for new cases in Bengaluru, imply-



HANDOUT

CHIEF MINISTER B.S. YEDIYURAPPA holding a meeting with Cabinet Ministers on COVID issues at his residence in Bengaluru on July 20.

ing that there is widespread community transmission.

To compound the problem, the standoff between the Health Department and the Private Hospitals and Nursing Homes Association (PHANA) in Bengaluru over how many beds private hospitals can spare for COVID patients has led to a scarcity of beds. The shortage is being addressed by recommending private hospitals “to encourage asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic patients to get admitted in COVID Care Centres (CCC) or be in home isolation as per their eligibility and suitability following triage”. Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa bought himself time to sort out the issues by imposing a lockdown in Bengaluru for a week between July 14 and 21. When demands came from various quarters to extend the lockdown in Bengaluru, he was emphatic that “lockdown is not a solution”.

COVID-19 cases started rising dramatically in the city from the last week of June. This has been attributed to the lifting of restrictions on inter- and intra-State travel earlier in June. Although the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government had ample time in the first three months of the pandemic, when Karnataka had fewer patients compared with other States of its size, to strengthen its public health infrastructure, it did not act. The severe problem in Bengaluru is the result of this inaction.

The government’s apathy became apparent when Health and Family Welfare Minister B. Sriramulu said in a startling statement on July 15: “What can the government do? Only God can save us now.”

He was, however, quick to issue a clarification, but political observers have interpreted this as a sign of the ongoing turf war among senior Ministers. Since the pandemic broke out in March, senior Ministers have been attempting to outsmart one another in hogging the limelight on the management of the situation. Yediyurappa,

who completes one year at the helm of the State on July 26, responded to the crisis by shuffling the responsibilities of Sriramulu, Medical Education Minister Dr K. Sudhakar, Revenue Minister R. Ashok and Deputy Chief Minister C.N. Ashwathnarayan in COVID management. The situation in Bengaluru became so serious that Yediyurappa was forced to appoint eight Ministers to oversee the response to the pandemic, with separate teams headed by senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers.

The turf war is affecting the response to the pandemic, as the transfer of BBMP Commissioner B.H. Anil Kumar on July 18 shows. Considering the exponential rise in COVID-19 cases there was a case for Kumar’s transfer, but the appointment of N. Manjunatha Prasad, who holds the concurrent charge of Principal Secretary in the Revenue Department, in his place is said to have been partly because of petty politics played by the Ministers. Prasad had held the post twice in the past. According to informed sources, Prasad’s choice was influenced by a prominent Minister belonging to the Vokkaliga community who is trying to extend his sway in Bengaluru.

Meanwhile, there have been serious allegations of corruption against the Yediyurappa government. Opposition leader Siddaramaiah launched a campaign on social media with the hashtag #LekkaKodi (Show the Accounts) demanding accountability from the government. He alleged that the quantum of graft ran to more than Rs.2,000 crore and that there were irregularities in the purchase of key equipment such as ventilators and an escalation in the price of food kits supplied to migrant workers and poor families during the lockdown. “While a ventilator has been procured at Rs.4 lakh under the PM Cares Fund, it costs Rs.12-18 lakh a unit in Karnataka. Why is there such a huge difference in the price?” Siddaramaiah asked. □

Walking the extra mile

The State administration is trying to grapple with the situation arising out of the spread of the virus with **proactive measures** such as plasma therapy and incentives for health workers. BY **PRAFULLA DAS**

WITH THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 TO HITHERTO unaffected areas, Odisha is staring at a difficult future. The State administration is grappling with the situation by enforcing lockdowns and shutdowns in the worst-hit areas, ramping up testing, enhancing surveillance and contact-tracing, and revamping the public health infrastructure.

The situation was under control until June-end when lakhs of migrant workers started returning home from other States. But the number of COVID cases detected outside the quarantine centres set up for the returnees kept growing in July. More than one-third of the new positive cases in the State are of local people living outside these centres.

Ganjam district, which saw the return of a large number of migrants, mostly from Gujarat, is the worst affected. Khordha district, in which Bhubaneswar is situated, closely follows it. The number of cases in the capital

increased substantially after many natives of Ganjam walked back when lockdowns were lifted. There has been a substantial rise in the number of cases in the tribal-dominated districts in the State's interior regions too.

By July 20, Ganjam had reported 5,991 cases, followed by Khordha with 2,098 cases when the State's total tally was 18,757. Three other districts where COVID cases have been rising are Cuttack (1,327 cases), Jajpur (1,023 cases) and Sundargarh (828 cases). By July 20, as many as 12,910 persons had recovered in the State, while 133 persons died and 5,714 were under treatment. The State has tested 4,01,644 samples so far.

The government has enforced a 14-day lockdown in Ganjam, Khordha, Cuttack and Jajpur districts and Rourkela city in Sundargarh since July 17 evening. Aggressive surveillance is being conducted in these areas to contain the spread of the disease.

The restrictions in the four districts and Rourkela city

BISWARANJAN ROUT



QUEUING UP outside a public distribution centre in Bhubaneswar for the government's free ration on July 21.



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

CHIEF MINISTER Naveen Patnaik addressing a technical workshop of doctors and health workers through videoconferencing in Bhubaneswar on June 10.

were imposed after these areas accounted for 66 per cent of the total cases in the State. Ninety per cent of the cases in Sundargarh district were from Rourkela.

PLASMA THERAPY

In order to prevent deaths from COVID-19, the State government has scaled up plasma therapy. Odisha is among the few States that have introduced advanced medical procedures for the treatment of seriously ill patients.

On July 15, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik appealed to all eligible donors from among the recovered COVID-19 patients to donate plasma. Apart from the SCB Medical College Hospital at Cuttack, which acts as the nodal centre, plasma therapy has been taken up in several private hospitals at Bhubaneswar, Cuttack and Berhampur in Ganjam.

Many personnel of the Odisha Fire Service and the National Disaster Response Force who had tested positive for coronavirus following their deployment in cyclone-hit West Bengal have come forward to donate plasma after their recovery.

Patnaik has appreciated the role of seven million women’s self-help group members in containing the pandemic.

Patnaik has also included COVID-19 management in the “Mo Sarkar” programme to get feedback from patients and front-line workers with regard to improving the management of the situation.

In addition to the 35 COVID-19 hospitals covering all the 30 districts of the State with a total of 5,577 beds, the State government has set up 178 COVID Care Centres with 21,059 beds and thousands of quarantine centres at the gram panchayat level.

While many of these quarantine centres were closed owing to the decline in the number of returning migrants, the authorities have set up of 6,511 COVID Care Homes (CCHs) at the panchayat level with a total bed strength of 65,019. Each of these CCHs has facilities to accommodate up to 20 persons with symptoms of cold, cough and fever. As many as 1,341 cluster-level temporary medical centres (TMCs) have also been completed with 61,594 beds.

Apart from the existing COVID-19 hospital in Ganjam, a 100-bed new hospital has been set up in the district to cope with the growing number of cases. Two more Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers, 25 Odisha Administrative Service officers, 105 Odisha Revenue Service officers, 30 MBBS doctors, 100 AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy) doctors and 27 laboratory technicians have been sent to the district which accounts for 30 per cent of the total positive cases and 60 per cent of the total deaths in the State.

The State government has also warned private hospitals of serious action following reports that many of them are not admitting patients from districts such as Ganjam, Khordha, Jajpur and Cuttack.

A silver lining is the recovery of a 95-year-old man in Ganjam district on July 18. In May an 85-year-old woman from Jajpur had recovered from COVID. Said Naveen Patnaik in a tweet: “Congratulations to nonagenarian Udayanath Bisoyi from Ganjam district on successfully winning the battle against COVID-19. Your win will inspire others to stay strong as Odisha fights this pandemic.”

Patnaik has announced that doctors, paramedics and other assistants working in COVID-19 hospitals and COVID-19 health centres will get Rs.1,000, Rs.500 and Rs.200 a day respectively as incentive for the number of days they serve the patients. Accredited social health activists (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers engaged in door-to-door surveys will be given Rs.1,000 per month as incentive from July to October.

Patnaik has also lauded officials and policemen who have rejoined duty on recovery from COVID-19 and appreciated the role of seven million women’s self-help group members working at the grass-root level to contain the pandemic.

Odisha recorded its first COVID-19 positive case on March 15 and the total had reached 7,316 by June end. But more than 11,000 cases were added in just 20 days in July. In such a scenario, all those fighting the pandemic have to walk that extra mile. □

Going all out

Andhra Pradesh has increased testing and strengthened its public health **infrastructure and human resource** to tackle the fast-growing COVID numbers as the State fears that the peaking will come before the predicted date. BY RAVI SHARMA

THE SERPENTINE QUEUES OF CUSTOMERS before liquor stores in Anantapur and the unending line of those seeking alms outside the Kanaka Durga temple in Vijayawada, hardly anyone in them wearing a mask or appearing to be concerned about physical distancing norms, describe the nature of public response in Andhra Pradesh as the State battles COVID-19. It is no surprise that a number of hotspots have cropped up in Andhra Pradesh, belying predictions that COVID-19 cases in the State will peak during the second week of August. With 53,724 cases and 696 deaths recorded until July 20 and

single-day figures being surpassed regularly, officials believe the peaking has started at least two weeks early. Districts like East and West Godavari and Chittoor, which exhibit urban features in a rural landscape, have been the worst hit. Kurnool, Guntur and Anantapur are other districts with a large number of positive cases.

'A FREE RUN'

M.T. Krishna Babu, COVID-19 Task Force Committee Chairman, described the spread as "exponentially increasing". He and other officials attribute this, among



PAINTING to raise awareness on the use of masks, on Bandar Road in Vijayawada on July 20.

V. RAJU



V. RAJU

OUTSIDE AN AADHAAR ENROLMENT centre in Vijayawada on July 17, throwing caution to the wind.

other things, to increased testing, the relaxation of the lockdown from July 8, the don't-care attitude of the general populace, and the influx of people post lockdown. Estimates are that 15,000 people have been entering Andhra Pradesh every day, and with isolation protocols no longer in place for domestic travellers, the virus, say officials, "has a free run". With Chief Minister Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy not keen on further lockdown, officials aver that they have a challenging situation on hand.

Andhra Pradesh follows the proven mantra of testing, more testing, and then tracing and isolating, and it had clocked a total of 1,350,000 tests as on July 20. Officials on the ground undertake surveillance testing and have tried to contact-trace at least 20 primary and secondary contacts of anyone who tested positive for the virus. Teams have moved in to contain the situation and break the chain of transmission as soon as possible, thereby avoiding the formation of hotspots.

Testing has been ramped up to around 30,000 a day, with the State also deploying the quicker rapid antigen test in order to test many more people, in addition to the gold standard, the *Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction* (RT-PCR) test. According to Krishna Babu, Andhra Pradesh will soon be conducting 3,000 rapid antigen tests in each of its 13 districts, ramping up the number to 5,000 in districts where the virus is rampant.

The number of cases confirmed per million (CPM) in Andhra Pradesh stands at 1,028.78; in other words 1,029 out of every one million people have tested positive (the all-India CPM is 867.34), while the mortality rate is 1.3 per cent. For every one million people in Andhra Pradesh, 25,835 people have been tested, in stark contrast with neighbouring Telangana where there have been only 7,421 tests per million population. But a worrying

statistic is the spurt in the number of cases, a figure which climbed to around 9 per cent in July from around 3 per cent.

Spelling out Andhra Pradesh's strategy, K.S. Jawahar Reddy, Special Chief Secretary, Health, Medical and Family Welfare, told this correspondent that the main challenge was to prevent deaths. Said Jawahar Reddy: "To achieve this we have to increase, prolong as much as possible the window (number of days) that is available for doctors to treat patients who have tested positive for the virus. We would like a window of at least six days. What is hindering us is the fact that people report to the hospital very late, giving the doctors very little time to treat infected patients effectively. This is where we are losing lives. We are trying to overcome this by employing the rapid antigen tests, results for which are available in 15 to 20 minutes. Using rapid antigen tests also lowers the burden on the number of RT-PCR tests that are needed."

With studies showing that oxygen saturation levels in the blood are a good indication of the patients' condition, field staff have been provided with 18,000 pulse oximeters. Field staff have also been trained to evaluate a COVID-19 symptom by carrying out simple sub-maximal exercises or tests like the six-minute walk test (a test developed by the American Thoracic Society in 2002 and used to assess aerobic capacity and endurance). A person with a blood saturation level below 94 post the test, especially those above 60 or those in the 48-60 age bracket who have high blood pressure and/or high blood sugar, will be immediately tested and sent to hospital or a COVID containment centre. As a follow-up, the patient will undergo chest X-rays and CT scans if necessary.

Officials like Jawahar Reddy say that the ideal situation is one in which the time from the onset of symptoms to detection (by a test) is as short as possible, 24 to 36 hours, while the time from detection to stabilisation of the patient is as long as possible. Officials hope to bring the mortality rate below 1 per cent from the present 1.3 per cent.

SPECIALIST WARRIORS

Besides increased testing, the State has planned to strengthen the infrastructure and human resources. Keeping this in mind, besides the 84 COVID-19 designated hospitals (with a total of 35,000 beds), the State has established COVID Care Centres in all the 13 districts. While patients with severe symptoms will be taken to designated hospitals, those with less severe or moderate symptoms will be admitted to these centres, which, too, have a total bed strength of around 35,000. The idea behind these centres is to ease the pressure on hospitals.

On the human resources front, in addition to the 10,000 posts of doctors/paramedics that have been sanctioned, the government, with the help of the Indian Medical Association (IMA), has formed a pool of 17,000 specialists (mainly doctors) drawn from various parts of the State in order to be prepared for any eventuality. These specialist COVID warriors will be recruited on a temporary basis and paid Rs.1,50,000 a month. □

Rajasthan roller coaster

As Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot takes the battle to the Governor's turf, the State's politics is poised for a crucial turn that could have far-reaching legislative and legal ramifications. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

ON July 24, amid high political drama, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and his team of legislators staged a sit-in protest for almost five hours on the lawns of the Raj Bhavan, urging Governor Kalraj Mishra to convene the Assembly session. The Congress' need to prove a majority arose after an open rebellion by Sachin Pilot and 18 other legislators threatened to reduce the Gehlot government to a minority. Gehlot and his Cabinet sent a written requisition to the Governor on July 23 reportedly after a discussion between the offices of the Chief Minister and the Governor.

In the 200-member Assembly, the undivided Congress has a strength of 107 legislators; the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 72; the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party three; the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) two each; the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) one and 13 independents, 12 of whom supported the Congress in the Rajya Sabha election, along with the BTP and the RLD. If Pilot and 18 others break away, the Congress' effective strength comes down to 89. It would need the support of 12 MLAs to prove a simple majority.

As things stand, Gehlot seems to have the backing of 12 independents, one MLA from the RLD and two legislators each from the BTP and



CHIEF MINISTER ASHOK GEHLOT, flanked by senior Congress leaders Randeep Surjewala (left), Avinash Pandey (second from left) and Ajay Maken, addressing mediapersons in Jaipur on July 24.

the CPI(M). The BJP, along with its ally the RLP, has the support of 75 legislators and one independent, taking its support base in the Assembly to 76.

Kalraj Mishra, a BJP veteran, who had served as Governor of Himachal Pradesh and Cabinet Minister in the first Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, was in no mood to oblige Gehlot immediately.

Addressing mediapersons who had gathered near the Governor's residence, Gehlot made a dramatic

public appeal to the Governor, replete with references to his gubernatorial duties and constitutional "conscience", to convene the Assembly session. He said that this was the first time an incumbent government, and not the opposition, had requested a vote of confidence.

Meanwhile, a section of the media and the State unit of the BJP criticised Gehlot for the protest. However, Gehlot pointed out that even the late Bhairon Singh Shekhawat had used similar political

language and paraded his legislators in front of the then Governor, adding that such peaceful protests were part of political democracy.

Senior Congress leaders came down heavily on the Governor for refusing to act on the State government's advice. The CPI(M) also criticised the Governor's delaying tactics.

As the spotlight shifted to the Governor, Kalraj Mishra's office issued a press note stating that no one was above constitutional norms and "politics of pressure" will not work.

The note blamed the delay in his decision on the letter sent by the Rajasthan Cabinet on July 23 which, it said, was silent on many aspects. For instance, the note said, the letter did not mention the date when the session could be convened and did not specify an agenda, and it had been sent at very short notice even though the notice period for convening an Assembly session was 21 days. It wondered why the Gehlot government needed a trust vote if it had a majority in the Assembly. Sources told *Frontline* that the Cabinet met again on July 24 night and decided to send another letter to the Governor asking him to convene the Assembly.

STATUS QUO TO PREVAIL

The inner-party tussle and political impasse in the Rajasthan Congress took a complicated turn after a Division Bench of the Rajasthan High Court, while hearing a petition by Pilot and his 18 supporters, ruled that *status quo* would prevail on the show-cause notice issued by the Assembly Speaker on July 14 to the rebels.

The disqualification notice invoking the anti-defection clause (Tenth Schedule of the Constitution) was sent to the 19 MLAs after they stayed away from two successive Congress Legislative Party (CLP) meetings on July 13 and 14 called by the party whip to discuss an alleged conspiracy to topple the government. The CLP meeting was also supposed to discuss the issue of the audio clip with recordings of an alleged conversation between a Union Minister, a middleman and a Congress MLA, hinting at deals to

destabilise the government. The Congress moved a resolution to disqualify the 19 MLAs on July 14 on the grounds that they had, by their actions, "given up the membership of the party" and issued notices to them in that context as per the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly (Disqualification) Rules, 1989.

The rebels did not reply to the notices but moved the High Court challenging them and sought a directive from the court to declare them Congress members and members of the Assembly. Pilot had stated that the Congress government had been reduced to a minority and that he had the support of 30 legislators, a claim he has not been able to prove so far.

During the turmoil, the rebel MLAs stayed put at a hotel in Gurugram, Haryana. Since the BJP is in power in Haryana, there was speculation that the party was somehow involved in the entire saga.

The BJP leadership in the State, which has been in a wait-and-watch mode, held a press conference condemning Gehlot for the "language" he used against the Governor, for violating "social distancing" norms and for demanding an Assembly session amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Congress, on its part, argued that if a new government in Madhya Pradesh could be sworn in amid the pandemic, an Assembly session could certainly be convened in Rajasthan.

LEGAL ROUTE

The rebel MLAs were supposed to reply to the show-cause notice by July 17 but they approached the High Court seeking a stay on the notice on the grounds that they could not be disqualified as they had not quit the party or engaged in any anti-party activity.

The petition also raised questions on the constitutionality of the anti-defection law *vis-a-vis* the right to freedom of speech. Its core contention was that political dissent was not akin to anti-party activity.

Meanwhile, the Congress suspended two MLAs in the Pilot camp from the primary membership of the

party. One of them, Vishwendra Singh, was a Cabinet Minister.

Their petition was amended to challenge the constitutional validity of para 2(1)(a) of the Tenth Schedule. The matter was shifted from a single-judge bench to a Division Bench.

The High Court directed Speaker C.P. Joshi to let the rebels reply to the show-cause notice by July 24, by which time it was to have to announce its final verdict. Before the disposal of the petition challenging the Speaker's show-cause notices, Joshi approached the Supreme Court with a Special Leave Petition (SLP) seeking a stay on the High Court's intervention on two issues: one, the Tenth Schedule proceedings, and two, restraining the Speaker at the stage of issuing the notice itself and calling for the replies as well as conducting the disqualification proceedings.

The Speaker's main plea was that his jurisdiction had been violated. The High Court's directive flew in the face of a five-judge Constitution bench order (*Kihoto Hollohan vs Zachillhu & Ors*, 1992), which expressly held that courts could not interdict the Speaker at the "quia timet" stage. (Quia timet is an injunction to restrain wrongful acts that someone threatens to commit or which are imminent.)

Upholding the Speaker's right to issue a notice, the judgment held that "judicial review cannot be available at a stage prior to the making of a decision by the Speaker/Chairman and a quia timet action would not be permissible. Nor would interference be permissible at an interlocutory stage of the proceedings."

It was further argued that the proceedings under the Tenth Schedule before the Speaker were proceedings of the legislature and, therefore, could not be interfered with as per Article 212 and para 6(2) of the Tenth Schedule.

Article 212 prohibits courts from questioning the validity of any proceedings of the legislature on the grounds of any alleged irregularity of procedure. 212(2) is even more explicit in protecting the rights of the of-

ficers or the legislature. It says: "No officer or member of a legislature of a State in whom powers are vested by or under this Constitution for regulating procedure or the conduct of business or for maintaining order, in the legislature shall be subject to the jurisdiction of any court in respect of the exercise by him of those powers."

The article was in tandem with the Tenth Schedule as the latter expressly states that all proceedings relating to the disqualification of a member of a House (Parliament or Assembly) would be deemed to be proceedings in the legislature of a State within the meaning of Article 212. The decision of the Speaker itself was subject to judicial review on limited grounds.

There were enough judicial precedents upholding the rights of the Speaker and the legislature, including one dating as far back as 1959. The SLP before the Supreme Court said that in a matter dealing with the regularity of procedure within the legislature, a seven-judge bench in *Pandit M.S.M. Sharma vs Sri Krishna Sinha* had, in 1959, ruled that the petitioner had no fundamental right as claimed and that the validity of proceedings inside a State legislature could not be called into question on the allegation that the procedure laid down by the law had not been followed strictly.

The judgment also held that even if the legislature had not complied with the requirements of procedural law for conducting its business, it could not be grounds for interference by the court under Article 32 of the Constitution.

KIHOTO JUDGMENT

Referring to the more recent Kihoto judgment, the SLP contended that the judgment had explicitly laid down that "the scope of judicial review under Articles 136, 226, 227 of the Constitution in respect of an order passed by the Speaker/Chairman under Paragraph 6 would be confined to jurisdictional errors only, viz, infirmities based on violation of constitutional mandate, *mala fides*, non-compliance with rules of natural justice and perversity."

Judicial review, therefore, could not be made available at a stage prior to the making of a decision by the Speaker/Chairman, nor would interference be permissible at an interlocutory stage of the proceedings. An exception could be made, wherein either disqualification or suspension was imposed during the pendency of the proceedings.

Kapil Sibal, counsel for the Speaker, argued in the Supreme Court that the notices, sent on July 13 and July 14 as there were two meetings of the CLP, were limited to the narrow objective of inviting comments from the respondents (rebels), that nothing adverse was said in them and that it was not a final determination or decision on disqualification but only the initiation of the proceedings.

Sibal argued that it was not a "whip" but a notice issued by the Chief Whip asking the legislators to attend the meetings. He also pointed out that there was a lot of judicial precedents where High Court and Supreme Court judgments had held that even after a reasoned order was passed by the Speaker, there were limited grounds for judicial interference.

The Supreme Court refused to stay the relief given by the High Court to the rebels until July 24 but ruled that whatever order the High Court passed would be subject to the outcome of the petition in the Supreme Court.

Interestingly, the Supreme Court bench comprising Justices Arun Mishra, B.R. Gavai and Krishna Murari commented that there were "larger questions of democracy involved". Pilot and his rebel team were represented by former Attorney General Mukul Rohtagi and Harish Salve.

HIGH COURT'S QUESTIONS

Interestingly, the High Court also framed as many 13 posers in its order. It asked whether the Kihoto judgment had glossed over intra-party dissent in the context of the Tenth Schedule; whether the anti-defection clause violated the basic structure of the Constitution and

whether there was a possible violation of the fundamental right of freedom of expression, Article 19(1)(a) by Paragraph 2(1)(a) of the Tenth Schedule.

The court also asked whether an expression of dissatisfaction and strongly worded opinions against the party leadership fell within the scope of the Tenth Schedule; whether the facts in the Speaker's notice were constitutionally construed; and whether a differentiation could be made between the manner of exercise of jurisdiction of the Speaker *vis-a-vis* the existence of jurisdiction in the context of commencing with a proceeding against a legislator.

It wanted to know whether the 'whip' applied to actions inside the House; whether the notice issued by the Speaker was violative of the essence of democracy and aimed at throttling dissent against persons in power; and whether the voice of the petitioners seeking a leadership change was being stifled.

The court wondered whether a criticism of the Chief Minister or functioning of the State unit of the party by a legislator was tantamount to "voluntarily giving up membership" under the Tenth Schedule; whether the action of the Speaker taken in haste was not *mala fide* and an abuse of power, in breach of natural justice and betrayed a foregone conclusion; and lastly, whether the judgment in Kihoto's case could bar the High Court from examining these questions.

With the High Court order directing a *status quo*, and the Supreme Court yet to take up the issues raised in the SLP, Gehlot probably decided that politically the next best option was to press for an Assembly session. On the face of it, it appears that Gehlot is in no mood to give in.

He is keen on a trust vote because it would force the rebels to act; either they vote in favour of the government or risk disqualification if they stay away or vote against the government.

Gehlot told mediapersons that apart from the trust vote, the Assembly session was required to discuss the COVID-19 situation and lockdown-related issues. □

Endless agony

The Centre abrogated Articles 370 and 35A supposedly as a cure-all for all Jammu and Kashmir's problems, but a year on, the economy of the region is in the doldrums, while the sense of disillusionment, frustration and alienation among the people is only increasing.

BY ANANDO BHAKTO IN NEW DELHI

A YEAR ago, on August 5, when the Narendra Modi government ended the constitutional privileges guaranteed to Jammu and Kashmir, it floated a commanding national narrative marketing its unilateral action as the cure for militancy and people's alienation in Kashmir. It argued that Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution not only scuppered economic development by preventing private players from investing in the Himalayan valley but also facilitated a monopolistic control of the political structure by the Abdullahs and the Muftis. "Members of the two families are still intoxicated and think that Kashmir is their father's property," Jamyang Tsering Namgyal, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) MP from Ladakh, said in Parliament. He alleged that the National Conference (N.C.) led by Farooq Abdullah and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led by Mehbooba Mufti were milking the special status.

The stress on the economy was deliberate and aimed at generating the false notion that economic frustration was the reason behind the three-decade-long armed resistance in Kashmir. This view, erroneous as it was, represents the reluctance of the Hindu nationalist government led by Narendra Modi to acknowledge that grave human rights violations and a culture of political marginalisation have long festered in

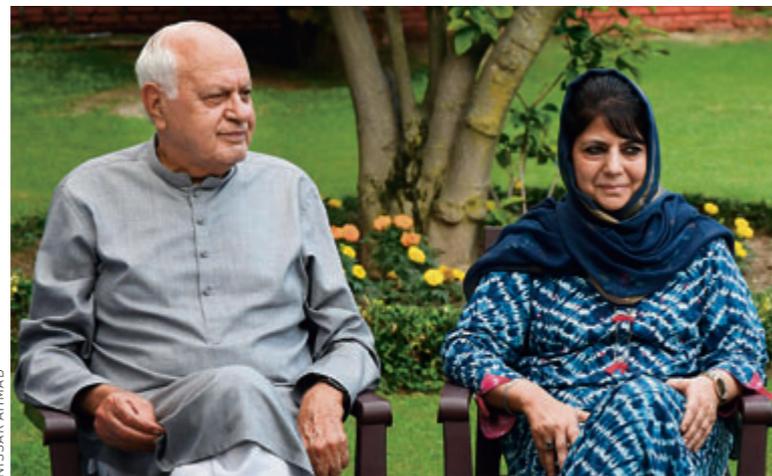
Kashmir; these have been aggravated in recent years by the relaying of communally divisive messages and the deployment of militaristic policies that focus on catching and killing the insurgent without any engagement with the stakeholders in the conflict.

People in India, particularly the animated audience of Modi in the Hindi heartland who constitute his most fierce and unwavering support base, received his message with adulation. This was partly because of its fixation with anything that carries even a hint of bellicose nationalism and partly because a large section of the media showed little enthusiasm to dissect Modi's assertions on Kash-

mir or ask for specifics. Article 370 accorded a semi-autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir, with exclusive rights to local people, or "permanent residents", in terms of employment and ownership of immovable assets.

A year later, there is nothing to suggest a qualitative shift in people's lives. If anything, Kashmir's economy lost a humongous \$2.4 billion between August and December 2019 as people observed a stringent civilian curfew to convey their resentment against New Delhi's political incursion. The much-hyped Global Investors' Summit was postponed in October 2019.

People in Kashmir scoffed at the



FAROOQ ABDULLAH of the N.C. and Mehbooba Mufti of the PDP, during an all-party meeting in Srinagar on August 4, 2019.

Prime Minister's argument that Article 370 impeded the extension of key economic provisions to the State. Businessmen in Srinagar's ritzy Polo View market told this reporter in August 2019 that the goods and services tax was implemented (in the State) despite Article 370 and that big business houses such as Oberoi and Taj forayed into the State without any hassle.

For decades, the core supporters of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and the BJP have endorsed and participated in relentless myth-making, alleging that Hindus are losing out on opportunities because the minority communities were unduly favoured. When Modi returned to power with an inflated majority in May 2019, it became imperative for him to "reclaim Kashmir as a lost Hindu holy land"—as his critics like to frame his manoeuvres in the Valley—and prevent any desertion by a communally charged electorate that expected him to pursue a programme which gave priority to its social and political hegemony.

DISEMPOWERING THE LOCAL PEOPLE

"It is all about electoral politics and implementing the BJP's Hindutva agenda in India's only Muslim-majority State," rued Iltija Mufti, the daughter of former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, who is detained under the Public Safety Act at her Gupkar Road residence in Srinagar. "Where is the question of uplifting the economy when the policies and agendas of the government are very visibly aimed at disempowering the local people?" Iltija said while speaking to this reporter over the phone from Srinagar.

She highlighted some recent actions of the government to support her argument. "Ever since the State lost its special status, there has been a systematic purge of Kashmiri employees from government jobs and administrative postings. Mining contracts are being outsourced to non-locals. The Army can now take possession of land anywhere in Jammu and Kashmir and build infrastructure."



ARMY JAWANS STANDING GUARD near an encounter site in the Nagnad area of Kulgam district, south Kashmir, on July 17, where three Jaish-e-Mohammed militants were killed in a gunbattle with security forces. Three army personnel were also injured in the operation.

Iltija Mufti was referring to the July 17 amendment of the Jammu and Kashmir Development Act that enables the Army to notify "strategic areas" for itself. Regional parties were unanimous in their rejection of this amendment, with the N.C.'s spokesperson Imran Nabi Dar calling it a ploy to "turn the entire region into a military establishment". The armed forces are already in possession of over 21,400 hectares of land in Jammu and Kashmir (on July 19, the Union Territory's administration clarified that there was no decision to "either transfer any new land or declare areas outside cantonments as strategic").

Political leaders aver that people's alienation is at an all-time high in the Kashmir Valley. Ruhul-lah Mehdi, the N.C.'s chief spokesperson, said: "The idea of Indian democracy in Kashmir is hurt to an extent where it cannot be immediately repaired." Mehdi, not unlike the disillusioned and aghast people of Kashmir, saw a parallel between the Modi government's prerogatives in Kashmir and Israel's treatment of

West Bank and Gaza. "From empowering the Army to identify land and build infrastructure to trying to realign the demographics, it seems the Mossad is counselling them."

Mehdi's apprehension is not ill-founded. A new government order recognises anyone as a domicile if he or she has resided in Jammu and Kashmir for a period of 15 years or studied for a period of seven years and appeared for Class 10th/12th examinations in an educational institution there. There is an overwhelming sense that the move is aimed at flooding Kashmir with settlers from outside and depriving the indigenous Muslim population of a political voice of their own.

Certain other actions of the government also suggest that its ultimate goal in Kashmir is the extinction of independent thought by forceful extraction of allegiance. The new media policy in Jammu and Kashmir is an illustration of that. It allows the state to initiate criminal proceedings against journalists, editors, media owners and publishers over any content that it deems "anti-

national”, “plagiarised” or “fake”.

The Jammu and Kashmir administration has ended the official commemoration of Martyrs’ Day (July 13), a seven-decade-old tradition. This decision betrayed its inherent uneasiness with any form of

mobilisation of the Kashmiri emotion. On July 13, 1931, the soldiers of the autocratic Dogra ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, gunned down 22 protesters in Srinagar.

Lieutenant Governor Girish Chandra Murmu, however, main-

tains that he is committed to ushering in an era of economic development in the Union Territory. In November 2015, the Centre approved a reconstruction plan for Jammu and Kashmir involving an outlay of Rs.80,068 crore. In a recent

interview to an English daily, Murmu pointed out that at the end of 2018 only 27 per cent of this money had been recorded as spent, whereas expenditure had now reached the 54 per cent mark. Earlier, he claimed that an industrial promotion policy

with an attractive tax exemption and land policy at its core was in the final stages of preparation.

MILITANCY NOT RECEDING

Few Kashmiris share Murmu’s optimism. They grumble that violence and progress cannot go hand in hand.

Militancy is showing no sign of fatigue. In 2019, at least 119 ‘boys’ took to militancy and 173 terror strikes were reported. In the first seven months of 2020, at least 20 security personnel, including a commanding rank officer, Colonel Ashutosh Sharma in Handwara, perished in anti-militancy operations. The government, however, is emphatic in its proclamations of victory. It points to the elimination of 136 militants this year (up to July 19), including the most-wanted militant commanders Riyaz Naikoo and Junaid Sehrai, which left the home-grown Hizbul Mujahideen leaderless.

But people in Kashmir say the whole assertion of containing militancy is predicated on a lie as it does not take into account the sense of rage among the youths, who have been joining the militant ranks without training or access to arms.

The N.C. and the PDP lament that New Delhi is bent on “dynamiting the foundations of mainstream politics”. Speaking to *Frontline*, Ruhullah Mehdi said that political and electoral processes in Kashmir were sustained at a great personal cost by the votaries of Indian democracy. It was an obvious reference to his party, which has, in the past three decades since militancy erupted, lost more than 5,000 workers, whom insurgents targeted for upholding the tricolour. “Since the BJP came to power, it has destroyed every institution and idea that was not in sync with its agendas in Kashmir. It not only stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its special status but, through its proxies, including a large section of the media, was successful in spreading the lie that anyone who stood for Article 370 was a threat to the security of the state,” he said.

The message from New Delhi is

clear: political actors in Kashmir must submit to its programme of securing a direct and absolute hold on Kashmir. The creation of the Apni Party in March, reportedly with the blessings of Modi and Amit Shah, is also a hint in that direction. The party is led by PDP defector Altaf Bukhari, who, in an interview in January, had asked people to reconcile themselves to the changed realities in Kashmir. “Life goes on; we must try for things that we can get,” he had said.

ALL EYES ON N.C., PDP

Iltija Mufti said: “Leadership and political parties aren’t start-ups that can be created through incubators.” According to her, the authorities asked Mehbooba Mufti in October 2019 to sign a bond in exchange for her freedom, but the former Chief Minister “categorically refused” to do it. “She won’t compromise on Article 370,” Iltija said. Apparently, the political prisoners who were released in the past few months were made to sign a bond pledging that they would not confront the government.

Frontline has information from N.C. insiders that the party’s top leadership would settle for restoration of Jammu and Kashmir’s statehood and participate in elections whenever they are called. “Farooq and Omar Abdullah are realistic. The BJP won’t restore the special status unless there is a seismic change in geopolitics,” is the gist of what *Frontline* has gathered from the N.C. This reporter has also learnt that sensing a possible rapprochement with the N.C., Modi and Amit Shah have “dumped the Apni Party”. But Imran Dar dismissed any notion of a compromise. “We are determined for a long-drawn battle over Articles 370 and 35A both within and outside the Supreme Court,” he said.

As anger and resentment swell on the ground, the situation is grim. As the Kashmiri politician and author Prem Nath Bazaz said decades earlier: “Before long when India wakes up as it must someday in the near future, if not today, it may be too late. No liberalisation of policy may be able to repair the damage.” □

‘The government’s action has broken the backbone of Kashmir’s economy’

Interview with **Mohammed Yousuf Tarigami**, CPI(M) MLA for Kulgam. BY **ANANDO BHAKTO** IN NEW DELHI

MOHAMMED YOUSUF TARI-GAMI, four-time MLA from Kulgam in Kashmir, says that regional leaders must get their act together and resist the “undemocratic ways” of the Union government. Excerpts from an interview.

When Article 370 was revoked on August 5, 2019, one of the narratives that the government and a section of the media floated was that this decision would help eliminate terrorism. Do developments of the past one year support the government’s argument?

The government has been trying to showcase the large-scale elimination of militants as victory over militancy. This is a mechanistic assessment that does not take into account the real enablers and triggers for militancy. The question that needs to be asked is, how many of the now eliminated militants joined militancy after August 5, 2019? If you look at the data, it becomes clear that the government’s unilateral decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir’s semi-autonomous status has failed to thwart recruitment into the militant ranks.

Kashmiris feel pushed to the wall, and there is a systematic violation of people’s rights. The government has been relaying messages that are aimed at humiliating the people. Is there an example anywhere in the world where armed conflict was

contained by suspending people’s rights and stripping them of their dignity? Despite the government’s triumphant declarations, the fact is that Kashmir has been rendered a fertile ground for those who stand for violence rather than those who advocate dialogue, normalcy and the operation of democratic processes.

The BJP and the RSS maintain that Article 370 was an impediment to economic development. Has its abrogation given the economy of Kashmir a boost?

The spurious claims made by the government become apparent when one looks at tourism, horticulture, agriculture or any other sector of the region’s economy. Where are the tourists? Is there a robust market for the local handicraft? Do artisans have adequate work? When was the last time paddy growers in Jammu or orchardists in Kashmir had a brisk sale of their produce? The government’s August 5 action of last year broke the backbone of Kashmir’s economy. Cultivators and apple growers suffered losses in the millions due to the long and intermittent blockade of highways and the prevailing atmosphere of violence and other disturbances. There was no procurement by the government.

The government might hide behind the excuse that the situation in Kashmir is not conducive to push-



AADESH CHOUDHARY

ing investment, but what about Jammu, which is a peaceful region? How many new projects were announced after August 5? How many ongoing projects were completed? Whereas several States provided relief to migrant labourers as per their limited resources after the coronavirus erupted, in Jammu and Kashmir the community has been left in the lurch.

What is the current state of mainstream politics in Kashmir? Will it be easy to hold elections in the politically fractious Union Territory once delimitation is complete?

It is apparent that the political and electoral processes in Kashmir are at a standstill and that is the outcome of the Centre’s deficient, exclusivist policies *vis-a-vis* Jammu and Kashmir. The government claimed on August 5 that it was committed to integrating Kashmir. But the question is integration with whom? When there is a political va-

Reliance's 5G claim: reality check

Reliance's claim that it has developed fully "indigenous" 5G capability appears dubious given the way the technology has evolved across the world. Its pole position in the Indian telecom market raises fears that this may limit India's capabilities in telecommunications. BY V. SRIDHAR

COMPANY chieftains, like politicians, are known to make outlandish claims. And, like politicians, they often get away with them. When Mukesh Ambani, chairman of Reliance Industries Limited (RIL), India's largest company, recently made the stunning announcement that its telecom venture, Jio, had developed "world class 5G services", not a single media outlet stirred in surprise at the enormity of the announcement's implication. Instead, a prominent business daily's header led thus: "RIL builds indigenous 5G tech, says ready to take on the world".

Addressing RIL's annual general meeting on July 16, Ambani said that Jio was ready with "a complete 5G solution from scratch". Even more astonishingly, he claimed it would be based "100 per cent on home-grown technologies and solutions". Media reports a few days later indicated that Jio had applied to the government for 5G spectrum for test operations, even though 5G spectrum auctions are nowhere in sight.

Reliance's claims are breathtaking because 5G rollouts across the world have been sporadic since the first rollouts began in South Korea last year. Across the world, telecom equipment suppliers, operators and regulators are struggling with the still evolving 5G technology ecosystem. They are also disturbing for another reason—the threat of what RIL's growing oligopolistic clout implies not just for competitors in gen-

eral but also for how the adoption of nascent 5G standards and technologies progresses in India.

Even by the standards of a company that has the habit of making at least one "dhamaka" announcement at its annual general meeting since 2016, when it launched Jio services, this year's event was truly spectacular, marked as it was by a string of such announcements.

There was the announcement that Google would take a 7.7 per cent stake valued at Rs.33,737 crore in Jio Platforms, RIL's technology venture. Then there was the declaration that Google would partner Jio to develop an Android-based phone, exclusively for Jio. The biggest of all was the announcement that Reliance was now completely debt-free, a year ahead of schedule.

INDIGENOUS 5G TECHNOLOGY

Ambani made no further reference to how Reliance proposed to lay out its 5G network. Instead, he said Jio would be ready for trials as soon as the relevant spectrum was made available, with its "made in India 5G solution". "We are ready for field deployment next year," he said. Making vague references to Jio's "all-network



MUKESH AMBANI, chairman, RIL.

architecture", he let on that this would enable the operator to quickly "upgrade 4G networks to 5G". Instead of offering any substantive details about the kind of 5G network Jio was planning, he drifted away and focussed on something completely different—Jio's platform and the "solutions" available on it. He claimed that Jio was well positioned to emerge "as an exporter

of 5G solutions to other telecom operators globally as a complete managed service". He suitably peppered his speech with references to the usual IT buzzwords—artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, block chain, and so on. Finally, in keeping with the 'national mood', he dedicated Jio's 5G solution to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "highly motivating vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat".

Ambani's announcement that Jio is ready with an indigenously developed telecom network is spectacular because, across the world, telecom operators are struggling to roll out 5G. This is partly explained by the high cost of the rollout; it is evident that most operators are planning a phased rollout, targeting premium customers first before spreading the 5G network wider.



5G APPARATUS, manufactured by Ericsson AB, sits on the roof of a commercial building in Barcelona, Spain. Photograph taken on July 16.

Users of 4G would recall that this is how it happened when that technology made an appearance initially, including in India.

But even more crucially, 5G is not just about faster downloads, it is about setting up a network infrastructure that would enable large-scale networks to function in a mission critical mode on a real time basis. Managing a metropolis-wide network—or at the regional or national scale—which maps and gathers data on traffic patterns, pollution levels, electricity grids or telemedicine on a continuous and real-time basis—requires it to be fail-safe with low latency, which is what 5G is expected to facilitate. This is the qualitative shift that 5G marks over 4G. Reliance is not known to have invested anything in building such a network. The "solutions" that Ambani talked about are a distraction in this context. They are what float on a net-

work; but the network itself is the real thing that remains to be built.

IPLYtics, a Berlin-based company that monitors technology trends, reported that Huawei held the most number of patents among "5G patent families" in the world. Chinese companies, including Huawei and ZTE, commanded the largest number of such patents, closely followed by Korean companies, including Samsung and LG. As of November 2019, Huawei held 3,325 such patents; its nearest rival was Samsung, with 2,846 patents. Nokia's alliance with Alcatel-Lucent was the most significant non-Asian rival with a combined tally of 2,308 patents. What is obvious is that a lot of grunt work has gone into the development of 5G.

Samsung, for instance, started work on 5G networks several years ago; by 2013 it announced it had developed its own 5G system. Progress since then has been slow, even

if steady. Incidentally, Reliance is reported to have sourced some 5G gear from Samsung. The fact that established industry leaders have taken many years to develop 5G technologies warrants a sceptical assessment of Ambani's claim.

There was another giveaway, just two days before Ambani spoke. United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that he was giving British telecom companies time until 2027 to rip out and replace all Huawei equipment from British networks. What does this extended seven-year time frame suggest? It implies that telecom companies would either risk, at the very least, a partial blackout across their networks or that the capital costs would be prohibitively high if the time frame were to be abridged. So, when an Indian telecom company, even if it happens to be the biggest, with a mere four-year track record and no significant patents in the relevant domain, makes the claim that it is positioned to establish a fully indigenous 5G network, a coherent explanation is needed.

Of course, given the precarious state of the finances of operators in many parts of the world, which is partly the result of the thin margins with which they work, telecom companies are also trying to build a "5G-like" network. In effect, because of the nascent stage of the technology ecosystem, the limited prospective subscriber base in the short term and the high costs associated with a full-scale rollout, industry participants are exploring options in the interim until the ecosystem matures. The idea is that if a full-scale 5G rollout is not immediately possible or feasible, patches based on software solutions as well as open source hardware could be built in order to give a "5G-like" network performance, at least in limited markets or demographics.

It is obvious that telecom operators are aiming to put in place specific features of "5G-like" performance without having to invest the hu-

mongous amounts that a full-scale 5G deployment demands. Verizon, the largest telecom operator in the United States, for instance, deployed its proprietary version a couple of years ago. It promised its customers high-speed data, but its protocols were not in compliance with the 5G NR (New Radio) standards laid down by the 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) that defines 5G standards. Although Verizon did roll out full-scale 5G services in select cities later, the deviation from globally defined 5G standards implies the adoption of a lower technology standard. This is tantamount to rolling out a network that necessarily precludes the potential that a fully compliant 5G network potentially offers. Conversely, from a user-perspective, the adoption of a lower standard severely limits possibilities that the shift to genuine 5G promised in terms of standards and quality of service.

Indeed, 3GPP, which set international telecom standards and protocols from 2G to 5G, has set benchmarks for an intermediate stage, what in industry parlance is referred to as 5G networks operating in Non-Standalone (NSA) mode. In this mode, initial 5G NR launches would ride on the existing LTE (4G) infrastructure. Worldwide, this is expected to act as a bridge to a full-blown 5G network. When that happens, the software as well as the hardware of the network will be completely independent of 4G infrastructure. The global telecom industry is still struggling to establish a full-scale 5G network that conforms to standards for a network core architecture set by 3GPP. This involves building a core that comprises switching, signalling, data management and a cloud interface involving both software and hardware domains, which would enable 5G in its true sense.

Network equipment companies and their vendors have recognised this and have been active on both fronts—"5G-like" as well as the real thing. All the top-tier telecom equipment vendors—from Huawei to Cisco—have their hands in both seg-

ments, realising that grabbing the markets immediately while neglecting the still-evolving 5G game would pose serious risks to their fortunes in the future.

In early July, Vodafone UK announced that it had conducted trials on a Standalone 5G network at Coventry University. It said the network was not limited by a 4G platform, which provided a breakthrough for faster speeds, reduced latency and better utilisation of spectrum resources across the network. Telecom equipment major Ericsson participated in the project at Coventry, the first such in a British university. Other companies such as Qualcomm also participated.

Significantly, Oppo, the Chinese company that is known in India as a maker of lower-end smartphones, provided software solutions that enabled "slicing" of network switching, which results in better network efficiency. More recently, on July 19, Huawei announced that it had provided equipment and solutions for the launch of 5G data services by South African telecom operator rain in the Cape Town area, the first 5G service in the continent. Huawei said the solution was Standalone 5G, not one built as a patch on a 4G platform.

NOWHERE IN THE RACE

Meanwhile, across the world, telecom operators and smaller equipment suppliers are exploring other options for an interim solution. Indeed, India's two biggest operators, Jio and Airtel, are both members of the O-RAN Alliance, a body formed in 2018. Its primary objective is twofold.

The first is to enable the building of radio access networks (RAN) that are based on an open interface, which allows smaller vendors to custom-build networks that are suited to specific classes of users. The second addresses the specific issues arising from the enormous tide of data flows, which imply that human interventions to monitor and direct network traffic in an optimal and "intelligent" manner are simply impossible. This requires harnessing computing power for artificial intel-

ligence in networks. If and when Reliance rolls out a 5G network, it is most likely to ride on a version of the NSA. It is also obvious that the company is nowhere in the race to build a true-blue 5G network if and when technologies and markets are ready. Just two days after Ambani's speech, Jio asked the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) to assign 800 megahertz (MHz) spectrum each in both the millimetre wave bands (26 gigahertz, and 24 GHz). It also sought 100 MHz in the 3.5 GHz band for field trials of its new network in a few metros. Millimetre bands wave (mmWave) bands are preferred for 5G operations because they offer much higher bandwidths when compared with existing 4G networks, although they are restricted by the limited range of signals. This, in turn, requires a much closer cluster of cells in a service area, which has cost ramifications for telecom operators.

The dismissal by the Supreme Court on July 20, in what is popularly referred to as the "AGR case", of pleas from Jio's two main rivals—Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea—for a revision or a staggered payment of their dues to the DoT also skews the pitch. While Airtel's dues amount to Rs.25,976 crore, Vodafone's amount to Rs.42,545 crore. This is bound to affect their ability to participate in not just the auction of 5G spectrum but in undertaking the huge capital investments that a 5G rollout would demand.

Reliance clearly occupies pole position in the 5G race. But this could come at a significant cost to society. The development of 5G and associated technologies in India would be limited by Reliance's own restricted capabilities in the field. Reliance's effective monopoly would act as a stumbling block to further development in communication technologies in India.

Thus, when the world moves on to full-blown 5G systems, India, because of its reliance on Reliance, would be restricted by the choices made today by its biggest private enterprise. That would be a travesty of the promise of 5G. □

Crossing the line

A gold smuggling case being investigated by Central agencies, with alleged links to terror financing, kicks up a political storm in Kerala. BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR

FACT, fiction and media frenzy have merged once again to stir up a political controversy in Kerala.

The furore that has followed the seizure of 30 kilograms of gold from baggage addressed to an officer of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) consulate in Thiruvananthapuram on July 5 has ingredients that are all too familiar and capable of rattling ruling parties and unsettling governments.

A senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer in the Chief Minister's office, with an unblemished service record, suddenly found himself at the centre of a political storm because of his personal association with a woman suspected to be a key facilitating link in a murky smuggling network.

The network, using the UAE consulate as a cover and the woman's status as a former employee there as a tool, was a flourishing one, with a chain of facilitators, financiers, black gold traders, money movers, jewellery owners and many more. At the very end, it may also have had ordinary folk in Kerala and their non-resident Indian relatives long used to sending and receiving money through the more gainful hawala "tunnels", rather than through regular banking channels. The network could well be a cover for terror financing, if the National Investigation Agency's (NIA) remand note filed at the NIA Special Court in Kochi seeking the extension of custody of some of the accused is any guide.

The woman, Swapna Suresh,



S. MAHINSHA

P.S. SARITH, the main accused in the gold smuggling case (green mask), being taken to the apartment complex near the Kerala Secretariat by the NIA team, in Thiruvananthapuram on July 20.

now the darling of rating-hungry television channels in Kerala and an accused in the Customs/NIA cases, seems to have had a chequered life and career. Born in Kerala and brought up in the UAE where her father was employed, she worked in a few travel agencies in Thiruvananthapuram for nearly a decade after returning to the State in 2000. She was then employed as an HR executive with AISATS, the ground and cargo handling agency for Air India. It was a controversial stint when she is alleged to have used

a fake degree certificate to gain employment and to have later engineered a false complaint against some colleagues.

In 2016, she found work at the UAE consulate as an executive secretary and soon became a regular presence at important events, including VIP visits and *iftar* parties at the consulate. Then, even while continuing to work for the consulate on a "need-to basis", she is alleged to have used the fake degree to find contract employment in government through a little-known placement agency,

Vision Technologies, which worked on behalf of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), an international consultant firm employed by the State government.

She was thus hired on contract as an Operations Manager at Kerala State Information Technology Infrastructure Limited's (KSITL) Space Park, a new State initiative based at Technopark, Thiruvananthapuram, meant to offer services and products for space missions and to support companies that require "geospatial applications". While many knew Swapna Suresh as the high-profile executive secretary to the UAE Counsel General, soon she also became well known as Space Park's representative and event hostess/manager at two major conclaves organised by the government: The "Kochi Design Week, 2019", held in December 2019, and described as the largest design festival in India; and, Space Technology Conclave at Kovalam in February.

M. Sivasankar, the IAS officer who had held several key posts in the State and had earned a reputation for being one of the most trusted officers of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, was removed from the key posts of Principal Secretary in the Chief Minister's Office and IT Secretary following media reports about his alleged association with Swapna Suresh and acquaintance with some other accused in the gold smuggling case.

Later, after an inquiry by a committee led by Chief Secretary Biswas Mehta, the government also suspended him from service. The suspension order said that "while inquiring into the allegation on contractual appointment of Operations Manager/Junior Consultant in the Space Park project under Kerala State Information Technology Infrastructure Ltd., Sivasankar had "made a reference" to appoint a person (Swapna), who was working at that time as Secretary to the Counsel General, UAE, to the post of Operations Manager/Junior Consultant for Space Park."

The committee had found that "*prima facie*, Sivasankar's conduct in this regard constitutes a violation of the All India Service Conduct Rules,



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

THE NIA team taking Swapna Suresh (face covered) to her flat in Thiruvananthapuram.

1968, and such association and frequent contacts with a foreign consulate official in violation of the above rules, and on both these counts, departmental action should be initiated."

The order said that "in view of the wider ramifications of this case", the committee recommended that Sivasankar be placed under suspension with immediate effect "pending completion of disciplinary proceeding". It also said that the government finds that Sivasankar violated Rules 3(2) and 3(2B) iii, v, vii and x of All India Service (Conduct) Rules, 1968, and Government of India Miscellaneous Executive Instructions regarding Contact of members of All India Services with foreign national/missions.

Pinarayi Vijayan later said the recommendation to suspend Sivasankar was based on the finding that "his conduct was unbecoming of a civil servant", that the committee's report also had focussed on "service-related issues" and that "other matters" were being probed by the State police (initially).

The suspension was announced even as the opposition Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) coalition and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) launched agitations in all districts of the State demanding Sivasankar's ouster and the Chief Minister's resignation, ignoring a spurt in COVID-19 clusters in the State. (The Kerala High Court later banned all agitations in the State until July end.)

All through this, there was fever-

ish media coverage and speculation about the smuggling case, particularly as to whether it had terrorist links. There were reports, prompted by the statements of UDF and BJP leaders, about Sivasankar's links with Swapna Suresh and her family, his "frequent visits" to their flat and his role in finding them accommodation near his own spare flat, close to the State Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram.

In a related development, Arun Balachandran, a former IT Fellow to the Chief Minister, was also removed from his new position as Marketing and Operations Director to the Chief Minister's High-Power Digital Committee, for reasons not yet made clear officially. Balachandran, who was also an organiser at the Kochi Design Festival, had booked the flat to be taken on rent for a brief period by Swapna Suresh and her husband, by his own account, on Sivasankar's request.

Sivasankar had allegedly met Swapna Suresh and her husband in this flat too, which, two other accused, P.S. Sarith and Sandeep Nair, also frequented. Sarith, a former PRO at the UAE consulate, continued to run errands for people there even after he was sent out, and, it is presumed that he was the one who collected consignments of smuggled gold that came through the "diplomatic route" at the airport. Sandeep Nair, another important player, thereafter transferred the gold to K.T. Ramees, a middleman financier in north Kerala described by the NIA as one of the "kingpins" in the case. Ramees organised funds locally to be sent to the UAE for purchasing gold, which he later distributed to jewellers (or others?) across the country. The network's suspected UAE link, Faisal Fareed, a businessman originally from Thrissur, who is believed to have sent the gold to India, was taken into custody by the Dubai police and is likely to be extradited to India.

All the ramifications of the multiple smuggling "runs" made through the Thiruvananthapuram International Airport, where gold was sent in the baggage addressed to the Charge d'Affaires at the UAE consu-



S. MAHINSHA

M. SIVASANKAR coming out of the Police Club in Thiruvananthapuram after being questioned by the NIA in the gold smuggling case.

late, Rashed Khamis Ali Musaiqri Alshemeili, will be known only after the Central agencies, including the Customs Department, the NIA and the Enforcement Directorate, complete their separate probes. Already, there are reports that such daring attempts to use a diplomat's baggage as a conduit for smuggling gold could not have worked so well without the help of someone from within the consulate itself. The network is believed to have smuggled gold using the cover of the diplomat's baggage at least 15 times.

At the end of the foiled attempt on June 5, the Charge d'Affaires at the UAE consulate was called to the airport by the Customs Department. He identified the baggage and confirmed that it was addressed to him and then reportedly disowned its contents. By the time more details of the racket became the talk of the town, he had quietly left the country. It is unclear whether his exit was with the knowledge of the authorities.

Meanwhile, the focus of political attention in Kerala is on the result of the NIA/Customs inquiry into the role of Sivasankar, and answers to questions on whether his role extended beyond "personal association" with some of the accused; whether he had allowed himself to be a pawn in the hands of a smuggling nexus; or, if he had a part in it even.

Ever since the gold smuggling case came to light and the Chief Minister's Principal Secretary was found to be associated with one of the ac-

cused, leaders of the UDF have been elated. The case must have come as a godsend, falling on their laps right when they were running out of ideas to check the growing popularity of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government following its deft handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the two floods that had devastated the State earlier.

THE SOLAR CASE

Outwardly at least, the smuggling case has many similarities with the infamous Solar case that had rocked the State and proved to be the bane of the previous UDF government headed by Congress leader Oommen Chandy (*Frontline*, December 8, 2017).

The solar scandal broke out in June 2013 during the early days of the Oommen Chandy government, when the popularity of the Chief Minister was at its peak. Oommen Chandy had just then launched an innovative annual mass contact programme and had won a United Nations award for the "openness and accessibility of his office" and the "transparency in its functioning".

Despite the Solar case being based entirely on the fluctuating statements of a woman who had been accused of defrauding several people of large sums of money, it helped the LDF, which was in the opposition, to build a political case on the basis of the woman's links with people in the Chief Minister's office (and some Ministers and MLAs), and demolish the UDF government's credibility and push it firmly to the brink.

What is important about the Solar case in the present context is also the way the woman, Sarita Nair, and her (now estranged) partner Biju had operated. The duo had a renewable energy company and used to demand advance money from gullible clients and investors, flaunting their real or contrived proximity to prominent people in government as an endorsement of the credibility of their company and the genuineness of its schemes. Ministers and other leaders were regularly invited to "company programmes" and functions. The company even presented

awards to prominent people to gain credibility.

Sarita Nair, who was in charge of marketing and sales of the company, had obviously charmed her way into the corridors of power, including the Chief Minister's office, and had clearly used her acquaintance with Ministers, MLAs and/or their personal staff and officials to entrap customers to invest sums ranging from Rs.70,000 to Rs.50 lakh in unlikely solar and wind energy projects.

Even after nearly a decade, with an inquiry commission appointed in between, nothing substantial has come of the allegations against Oommen Chandy and his government. But it opened a grand political opportunity for the LDF to hound the UDF government and the then Chief Minister.

In the gold case, too, as in the solar scandal, a woman on the wrong side of the law is hogging the limelight. She too had a high-profile presence at functions attended by many VIPs, including Ministers. She too had access to the corridors of power, especially through people in government. She too met the media's propensity for scandal with her association with a person in the Chief Minister's office, in this case, more so, because the one involved is a senior IAS official who had the trust of the Chief Minister.

Opposition UDF leaders know that whatever may be the truth of their allegations or the facts of the case or the conclusions of the NIA/Customs inquiry, if they play their cards well, make a ruckus and succeed in portraying it as a case on which the credibility of the Chief Minister's office hinges on, they may well do a "Solar-like trick" on the LDF government, and seek their revenge.

That is why the Customs/INA inquiry regarding the actions of the IAS official assumes political significance in Kerala. But for Sivasankar's involvement, it would be just another case of gold smuggling that could turn a shocker only if it is found to have links with terror networks in the country, a proposition that may perhaps be more to the liking of the BJP than the UDF. □

Another historical twist

The Supreme Court **upholds the rights** of the erstwhile royal family of Travancore to manage the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram but has also ordered the constitution of administrative and advisory committees. **BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR**

THE Supreme Court has upheld the right of the erstwhile royal family of Travancore to “manage and administer” the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram with its immense riches. “We hold that the death of (the last Maharajah of Travancore) Sree Chitra Thirunal Balarama Varma... would not in any way affect the shebaitship of the temple held by the royal family of Travancore,” Justices U.U. Lalit and Indu Malhotra of the Supreme Court said on July 13 in a much-awaited verdict.

The decision of the two-judge bench marks the end of a nine-year legal battle (“Treasures of history”, *Frontline*, July 29, 2011) over whether the erstwhile royal family or the State of Kerala had the rights to administer and manage the ancient temple after the death of the last Maharajah of the princely state.

The court said that after such death, the “shebaitship” (management) must devolve in accordance with the applicable law and custom upon his successor; that the expression ‘Ruler of Travancore’ (as mentioned in the covenant signed by the

Maharajahs of Travancore and Cochin with the Government of India at the time of accession of these states to the Indian Union)... must include his natural successors according to law and custom; and that the shebaitship did not lapse in favour of the State by principle of

escheat.” (The principle of escheat postulates that where an individual dies intestate and does not leave behind an heir who is qualified to succeed to the property, the property devolves on the government.)

Devaswom Minister Kadakampally Surendran said the State gov-

ernment accepted the verdict and would not go in appeal against it.

Significantly, the court considered the petition filed by the royal family after the reversal of their earlier stand that the temple was “a private temple and its treasures belonged to the family”.

The court said the judgment had been premised on the unequivocal stand taken by the appellants (members of the family) that “the temple is a public temple and no claim can probably be made by the petitioner or anyone to owning the temple or its treasures” and that what was being sought was only the right as a trustee of the temple to manage and administer it.

RIGHT OF SHEBAIT

As per the principles laid down by the Supreme Court in various other cases, the judgment said, the “shebaitship” has the elements of office and property, of duties and personal interest blended together and they invest the office of the shebait with the character of proprietary right. It has further been laid down that the shebait is the custodian of the idol, its

earthly spokesman and the human ministrant; is entitled to deal with the temporal affairs and to manage the property of the idol; and even where no emoluments are attached to the office of the shebait, he has the right or interest in the endowed property which has the characteristics of a proprietary right.

However, the court has also ordered the constitution of an administrative committee headed by the district judge of Thiruvananthapuram (“which is broad based and would not be loaded in favour or against the trustee”) and an advisory committee for the management of the temple—curiously, both these points were suggested by the royal family members in their petition against the government’s submission seeking a separate devaswom board on the lines of the one at the Guruvayoor Sri Krishna temple.

The court has also said the new committees will now have to decide on another controversial issue in the case: whether the mysterious ‘Vault B’, one among the six vaults that held the riches of the temple (as also articles used for the rituals in the tem-

ple), should at all be opened to make an inventory of the articles in it. The apex court had earlier ordered a stay, when the royal family opposed the opening of Vault B based on the belief that it would invite divine wrath on the perpetrators and on the family members.

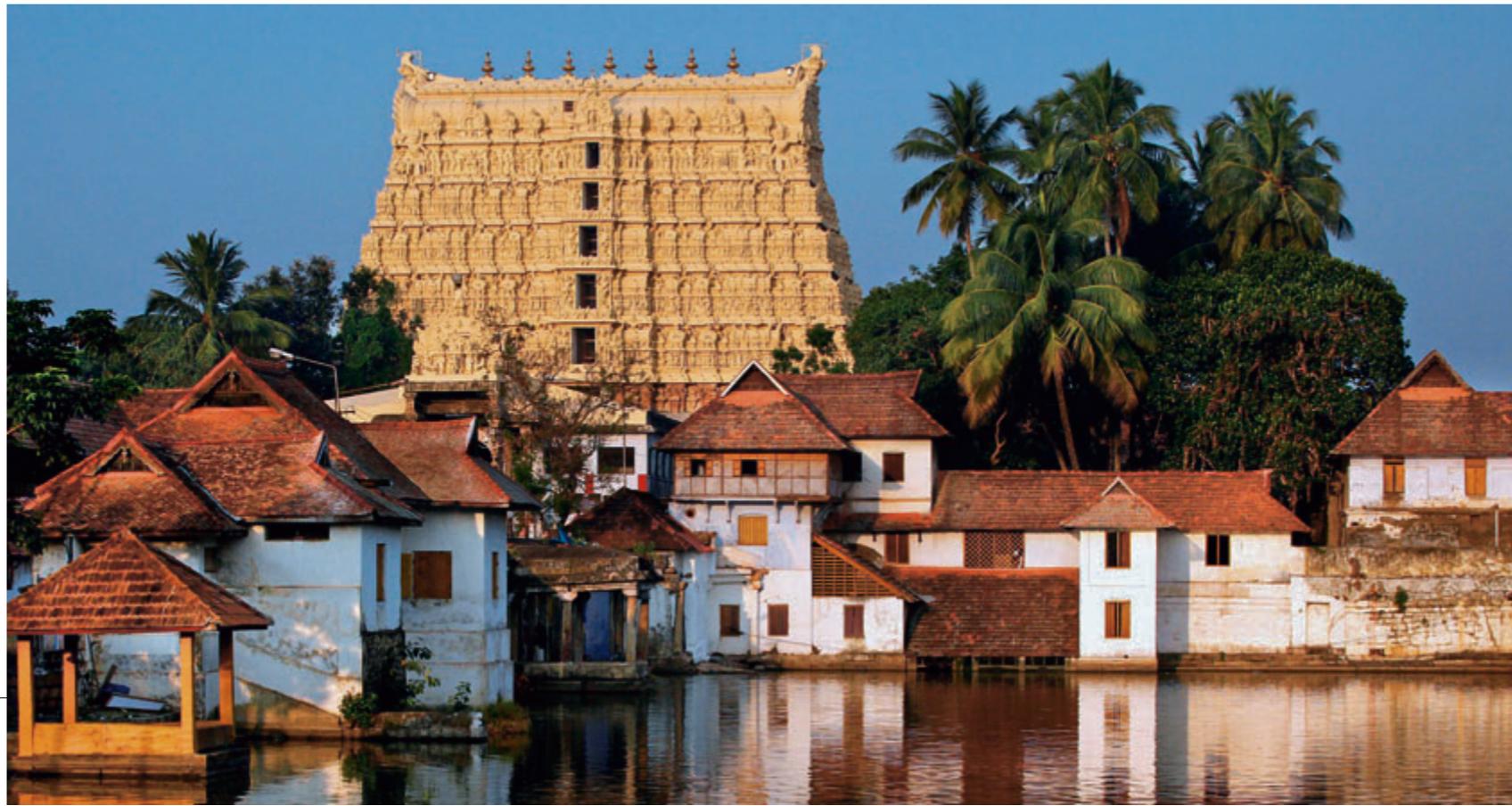
The antiquity of the temple is not known. But since the 16th century, this temple had been closely associated with the political history of Travancore, particularly after Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma, the founder of modern Travancore, in a shrewd political and deeply religious act (January 3, 1750), laid his sword before the deity, dedicated his kingdom to Sree Padmanabha and assumed its management as the vassal of the deity.

The kings who succeeded him ruled the kingdom as vassals of the deity and managed the temple’s affairs and its riches as the deity’s representative and as per their ancestor’s instructions.

There were indeed hundreds of temples under the control of the rulers of Travancore and Cochin just before the two princely states merged as a Travancore-Cochin state. These temples were subsequently brought under the control of the State-run devaswom boards. But the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple alone remained “vested in trust” in the ruler of Travancore, a condition the last Maharajah Chitra Thirunal (“almost fanatical in his faith”) insisted on during the integration of the princely state with the Indian Union as part of the Agreement of Accession he signed with the Government of India.

This condition in the accession agreement was later incorporated in the State law governing the administration of temples (the Travancore-Cochin Hindu Religious Institutions Act, or the TC Act, 1950) after the reorganisation of the States.

Until the death of Chitra Thirunal (on July 20, 1991) and for several years thereafter when his brother, Uthradam Thirunal Marthanda Varma, the next eldest member of his family, retained the management of the temple, there



DANISH SIDDIQUI/REUTERS

THE SREE PADMANABHASWAMY TEMPLE in Thiruvananthapuram, a 2012 photograph.

had been no challenge to the legal position that the temple “vested in trust in the ruler of Travancore”, who controlled and managed it through an executive officer.

WRIT PETITION

But as the Division Bench of the Kerala High Court explained in a January 31, 2011, order (on the basis of a writ petition filed by Marthanda Varma challenging lower court orders that went against him), “public resentment started when the last ruler’s brother..., who took over the control and management of the temple, arranged to take photographs of the treasures of the temple and made a claim in the Malayalam daily *Kerala Kaumudi* on 15.9.2007 stating that the treasures of the Padmanabha Swamy Temple are the family properties of the erstwhile royal family of Travancore”.

When a lower court passed an injunction against the opening of the treasure vaults of the temple, Marthanda Varma approached the High Court. T.P. Sundara Rajan, a former Indian Police Service officer and a devotee, also filed a petition in the High Court seeking the issue of a writ of quo warranto against the (then) executive officer of the temple who he claimed the last ruler’s brother had appointed without any authority whatsoever. (Sundara Rajan was described in the verdict as “the licensee of premises belonging to the temple, against whom the management had taken steps for eviction.”)

‘RULER OF TRAVANCORE’

The High Court said that the only issue to be considered was “whether the description ‘Ruler of Travancore’ would include the brother of the last ruler (Chitra Thirunal) who had died on 20.7.1991”. The TC Act, which incorporates the provisions of the Covenant, says that the administration of the temple and its properties vested in trust in the ‘ruler of Travancore’ and the Rs.6 lakh that the State government is to provide annually towards the expenditure in the temple shall be conducted, subject to the control and supervision of the ‘Ruler



FORMER ROYAL FAMILY members Pooyam Tirunal Gouri Parvathy Bayi, Aditya Varma and Aswathy Tirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi at Kowdiar Palace in Thiruvananthapuram on July 13, the day the Supreme Court gave the verdict.

of Travancore’, by an executive officer appointed by him. However, the TC Act does not define the term ‘Ruler’.

The High Court ruled that the status of the ruler was not heritable, that ‘ruler’ is not a status that could be acquired through succession, and that Uthradam Thirunal Marthanda Varma or his successors of the royal family will not come within the description of ‘ruler’ as defined under Article 366(22) of the Constitution. Pointing out that the TC Act provided for “vesting of the temple in trust” in the hands of the last ruler of Travancore, the High Court said that since there was no provision in the TC Act to vest the temple “in the next senior member of the royal family after the death of the ruler of Travancore”, the temple and its properties and assets would revert to and vest in the State government.

The Supreme Court has now set aside the High Court judgment. It has accepted the contention of the appellant royal family that the definition of “ruler” in Article 366(22) would not be the governing definition to decide the claim of the successors to the management of the temple, but that the “matter has to be assessed going by the context in which the expression had been used in the Covenant (signed by the last maharajahs of Travancore and Cochin with the Union of India) and

the TC Act”. Therefore, the Supreme Court said that “as on the day when the Covenant became effective, the Ruler of the Covenanting State of Travancore was holding the office of Shebait (manager) of the temple, which was not in his official capacity as the ruler; and that the effect of (relevant articles in the Covenant) was not to invest any new authority and power in him for the first time because of his official status, but an acknowledgement of the existing authority and power already vested in him”.

The court further said: “If according to the settled principles, the Shebaitship is like any other heritable property which would devolve in accordance with custom or usage, and that the rule of custom must prevail in all cases, even after the death of the erstwhile Ruler of Travancore in 1991—the Shebaitship of the Temple being unconnected with the official status of the person who signed the Covenant, must devolve by the applicable laws of succession and custom.”

To the question whether the expression ‘Ruler of Travancore’ (as appearing in Chapter III of Part I of the TC Act) is capable of being understood to include his successors according to custom, the Supreme Court said: “Going by the normal incidents of Shebaitship including the heritability, the context in which the

expression was used in Article VIII of the Covenant, and carried in the provisions of the TC Act, it must be held that such expression must include the successors to the person who had signed the Covenant.”

The judges said that despite the Constitution (26th Amendment) Act, 1971, (which put an end to privy purses) even though concepts such as Ruler or Rulership had ceased to operate, “the private properties of the Ruler would continue to be available for normal succession and devolution in accordance with the law and custom”.

“We must conclude that the Constitution (26th Amendment) Act, 1971, did not in any way impact or affect the administration of the Temple, Sri Pandaravaga properties and the properties of the Temple, which continued to be under the control and supervision of the Ruler of Travancore,” the court said.

It was the High Court that had in 2011 ordered the State government to constitute an authority to open all temple vaults and make an inventory of the entire articles (by a team of “responsible and honest officers”) and create a museum on the temple premises itself to exhibit all the treasures of the temple for the public, devotees and tourists. Subsequently, the Supreme Court also passed various orders. Several committees were formed and inspections undertaken inside the temple. In August 23, 2012, the court appointed Advocate Gopal Subramaniam as *amicus curiae* and he submitted his report in April 2014.

It also later appointed the former Comptroller and Auditor General Vinod Rai for the audit of all records, including expenditure incurred for the temple’s upkeep. The court also appointed an (interim) administrative committee, and a committee to oversee renovation and maintenance of the temple, including the sanctum sanctorum.

In the nine years since, the Supreme Court also ordered “inventorisation” of most of the vaults, digitisation of the antiques and artifacts of the temple, and several other steps, with the State government be-

ing asked to meet all the expenses, including for the security of the temple and its wealth.

The court has now directed the members of the royal family to file an affidavit within four weeks agreeing to the verdict while pointing out that it will be binding on the family members and their successors. It has also said that both the administrative and advisory committees should be constituted within four weeks of filing the affidavit of undertaking.

The court has said the new administrative and advisory committees will be in charge of ensuring proper worship of the deity, maintenance of temple properties, providing facilities to the worshippers, and so on.

But in view of the findings of the *amicus curiae* and audit reports, which suggest several instances of irregularities and mismanagement in the affairs of the temple, the court has said the committees will also look after a slew of other tasks, including: preserving all treasures and properties endowed to the deity and belonging to the temple; protecting all tenanted properties and take appropriate measures to ensure reasonable returns from such tenanted properties; ensuring that all rituals and religious practices are performed in accordance with the instructions and guidance of the Chief Thanthri of the temple and according to custom and traditions; taking appropriate steps to return to the State the expenditure incurred by the government in connection with the temple (a sum of Rs.11,70,11,000 in 2012-2019).

It has also said that all the income accruing to the temple, as well as the offerings made by the worshippers, shall be expended only to improve the facilities for the worshippers; for such religious and charitable purposes as the advisory committee may deem appropriate; in investments that will fetch reasonable returns and ensure that the properties of the temple are completely safe and secure.

The committees have also been asked to “recover and retrieve any property or funds of the temple

which have been put to misuse or have been in unauthorised occupation or misappropriated”. They have also been asked to order “audit for the last 25 years” as suggested by the *amicus curiae*; take appropriate steps for conservation of the temple and its precincts in addition to taking a decision on whether kallara (vault) B is to be opened for inventorisation or not.

The court said that in light of the specific submission made by the appellant family members, the current head of the royal family (successor to Uthradam Thirunal Marthanda Varma who passed away on December 16, 2013) and his successors shall not be entitled to draw any remuneration for his or their services as the manager or trustee.

RESPONSES TO THE VERDICT

The members of the appellant royal family, Aswathy Tirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, Pooyam Tirunal Gouri Parvathy Bayi and Aditya Varma, said in a joint statement: “We regard today’s Supreme Court verdict as a blessing from Padmanabha Swamy, not just for the family, but for all his devotees. We pray for his continued benevolence on all humanity to keep us all safe and well.”

Opposition leaders in Kerala have also welcomed the verdict. Former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy, who was in office at the time the case was filed and treasures of the temple (valued at over Rs.1 lakh crore, according to him) came into the spotlight, said the verdict “respected the wishes of the believers and the royal family”.

He also described the verdict as a “setback” to the State government, which he said “was forced to welcome the verdict in the context of the controversy over Sabarimala temple”.

Bharatiya Janata Party leaders too adopted a similar stand, but Devaswom Minister Kadakampally Surendran refused to be drawn into any controversy, saying that the government must now study the verdict in detail before deciding on the implementation of the court’s directions. □

Enlightenment and its discontents

Tracing the history of human civilisation as a dialectical struggle between rational and irrational thought, this book makes a compelling case for the inevitability and value of both in our lives. BY **SHELLEY WALIA**

JUSTIN E.H. Smith's most recent book, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*, addresses beliefs about politics, gender, nature and reason by opposing the discourse of fundamental irrationality with accepted forms of rationality. Smith believes that the dialectical tension between the two is paramount owing to the inevitable rise of irrationality, which has proliferated in the face of our desire to purge it. As Yascha Mounk, the American-German political thinker, writes, the book is "an urgent warning that no grand design of perfect rationality can provide the solution to the depravity of this political moment".

The order of human history, from the beginning up to the present perversion of rational thinking by all manners "Trump", has a catastrophic impact on the well-being of humanity. The loss of faith in the structures of democracy points to an apocalyptic end. The effort to model society on rational principles has not fructified, going by the long and cyclic dark history of civilisation,

of wars and violence, of religious fanaticism and irrationality. Our inherently dialectical history confirms the simultaneous birth of opposing forces at the outset of the assertion of any "truth": "The thing desired contains its opposite". Thus the trajectory of liberal democracy evolving into totalitarianism was present in the brute forces of Italian fascism or German Nazism. The dearth of ideology is reflected in the irrational outburst of our times, particularly with the birth of vulgar nationalist fervour and muscular racial superiority.

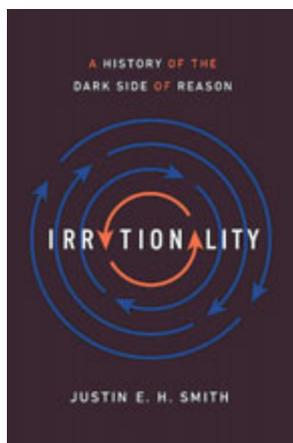
Smith offers the example of how mathematics was demonised in the 5th

century BC for its dependence on numbers and decimal series that were endless and "irrational". Anyone who believed in mathematics was drowned at sea in the Gulf of Taranto. The drowning of Hipposus, a Pythagorean philosopher, about a century before Socrates explains the upsurge of irrationality in the face of

the pursuit of a science that, in later centuries, would usher in the Age of Enlightenment.

Citing the example of the discovery of a human bone at the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's 1969 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Smith calls attention to the realisation by a protohuman creature of the value of a bone as a lethal weapon but also as a tool for survival. Similarly, technological breakthroughs bring along a world of comfort or misery, peace or violence, rationality or irrationality.

Something "clicks" in the mind of a person and then "nothing is the same", especially when you attain new power and knowledge that can be used for "new occasions for violence". All knowledge, therefore, has "brought out the best and the worst in us," a balance



Irrationality A History of the Dark Side of Reason

By Justin E.H. Smith
Princeton University Press

Pages: 330
Price: \$29

The dearth of ideology is reflected in the irrational outburst of our times, particularly with the birth of vulgar nationalist fervour and muscular racial superiority.

of “problem solving and problem creating” in the service of the “most exalted faculties of the human mind” that become “occasions for the flexing of muscle and, when this is not enough, the raining down of blows”. This is the age-old record of human rationality, and therefore also of its irrationality, “the exaltation of reason, and a desire to eradicate its opposite.”

THE IRRATIONAL INTERNET

Take the example of the cultural frenzy of the cyber world that intensified into an “unforeseeable landscape of customs and mores, underlain by new political norms and new institutional structures” visible in the ideology of the white supremacists, Brexit fanatics or the ultranationalists gripped by the narrow boundaries of identity politics.

A world overwhelmed by the use of the Internet allows anyone to get on it, make a “noise” and “change the world for the worse”. Instead of the “improved access to what we had valued”, the Internet has succeeded through its “accelerationism” in destroying the world of journalism, academia, commerce and publishing industries, thereby disrupting and forever altering the nature of what we have always “valued”.

In his diatribe against the misuse of the Internet, Smith opines that although initially it was hoped that the Internet would provide some form of “collective will and deliberation”, it has drowned humanity in the quagmire of an unpredictable re-

Irrationality is in itself neither left nor right, good nor bad. It is a twin of reason and equally vital to human development.

sponse to level-headed statements with the rise of “sheer abuse and often concerted and massive campaigns of abuse...from some sock puppet labouring away at a Russian troll farm, working to insinuate some new falsehood into public consciousness”. Reasoned arguments are few and far between, and the epidemic of images, allusions and jokes form the basis of a narrative deeply aimed towards the distortion of reality.

Smith considers the Internet today a far darker place “where the normal and predictable response to reasonable statements is, if it is coming from strangers, sheer abuse, and often concerted and massive campaigns of abuse; if it is coming from friends, then it is generally vacuous supportiveness, sheer boosterism with no critical engagement or respectful dissent.”

Can we finally come to the conclusion that what makes human beings unique is our “irrationality”? Apart from the damage caused by outrageous reasoning, Smith underlines the human aspect of our self-interest and existential choices based on expected outcomes. Why then does a father offer to vacate his space for his child on a lifeboat? This expression of irrationality, argues Smith, sur-

passes the realm of good and evil: “Life would be unlivable if they were suppressed entirely.” Smoking a cigarette or climbing a cliff without a rope seems ludicrous. Irrationality, Smith asserts, “is in itself neither left nor right, nor good nor bad”. It is a “twin” of reason and therefore “equally vital to human development”.

The rational thought propagated during the Enlightenment fails to hold up in an era of senseless pursuits coupled with our unrelenting predisposition to irrationality. The history of human civilisation is witness to the struggle between the forces of rational and irrational thought and the author has made a compelling case for the inevitability and value of the existence of both in our lives. His warning in the end is what humanity must heed: “We are, then, not so far from where Hippasus found himself millennia ago. The Greeks discovered the irrationality at the heart of geometry; we have most recently discovered the irrationality at the heart of the algorithm, or at least the impossibility of applying algorithms to human life while avoiding their weaponisation by the forces of irrationality. If we were not possessed of such a strong will to believe that our technological discoveries and our

conceptual progress might have the power to chase irrationality, uncertainty, and disorder from our lives—if, that is, we could learn to be more philosophical about our human situation—then we would likely be far better positioned to avoid the violent recoil that always seems to follow upon our greatest innovations, upon bagging the great hunting trophies of our reason.”

The book is a fascinating narrative, ranging across philosophy, politics and current events. This intertextuality defies the received assumptions of philosophy, science and Enlightenment with the central focus on the transitory nature of the triumph of reason. Understandably, the Enlightenment had built into its very essence the curse of racism and the white supremacist mindset that resulted in the imperialist scheme of dominance through the manifesto of the “civilising mission”. No wonder that such a political and cultural world-view set humanity towards the irrational path of genocide, war and totalitarianism. The paradox therefore lies in the fact that along with these dark forces that the Enlightenment unleashed, there was also the birth of the liberal ideas of anti-slavery as well as the malaise of materialism overtaking the world. Humanity, indeed, has failed to draw the rational or “right” inferences from the perceived facts and has carved out for itself a dialectical history of tensions and ambiguities, of madness and sanity, of liberal thinking and totalitarianism. □

Life and afterlife of Safdar Hashmi

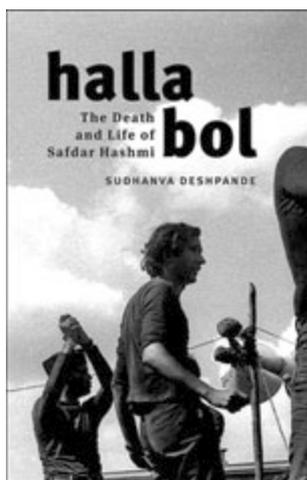
Beginning at the moment of his death, this book moves on to capture the iconic story of Hashmi's life and the city that formed the milieu of his work. BY KAUSTUBH NAIK

SAFDAR HASHMI was not an unfamiliar name in my childhood. I think I first heard about him in the recollections of a play titled *A Murder of an Artist*, written and staged by my uncle as a response to Safdar Hashmi's brutal killing in Delhi. However, apart from the fact that he was killed while performing, I did not know much about him.

A few years ago, I picked up a collection of essays on culture and politics by Safdar Hashmi to know more about his work and was enamoured of his writing. It was sharp, precise and simple. One of his lines, written in response to the Theatre of Roots movement, has stuck with me ever since. He wrote: "*woh parampara parampara nahi, jise chiraag leke dhoondhana pade*" (it is not a tradition if you have to seek it with a torchlight). The implication is that traditions are alive among people. He critiqued the tendency of theatre practitioners who thought "going back to the roots" to retrieve traditions would help them to evolve a nat-

ive vocabulary of Indian theatre. I felt that this line was representative of Safdar Hashmi's aesthetics and politics, if at all one could tell them apart.

Safdar Hashmi became an icon of cultural resistance after his death, a defining moment in the history of cultural resistance in India. However, very little was known about his life. Sudhanva Deshpande's book *Halla Bol* (2020) is set to fill that void as it gives us a peek into Safdar Hashmi's life from close proximity. One cannot adequately emphasise the importance of this



Halla Bol
The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi

By Sudhanva Deshpande
Published by LeftWord Books
New Delhi, 2020

Pages: 266
Price: Rs.495

book—it is not only an attempt to write a biography of Safdar Hashmi but also a successful attempt to situate his work in the socio-political milieu of India as it was headed for the 1990s.

Sudhanva begins with a vivid account of moments leading to Safdar Hashmi's death, which sets the tone for the book. The prose is precise and evocative. The author does not conceal the vulnerability of his situation of having to witness a comrade's death, besides bearing the weight of penning its absurd details. For instance, he briefly talks about the night spent at the

Communist Party of India (Marxist) office after Safdar Hashmi was declared dead; one of their friends, Lalit, smoking incessantly, hurled some abuses and left. The inability to articulate the overbearing certitude of death is captured evocatively in this recollection. The book is peppered with many such moments that leave the reader choked up and teary-eyed.

Many of us "met" Safdar Hashmi only after his death. The book gets done with it right at the beginning, preparing the reader to be charmed by a life that was even more iconic than the moment of death. There are accounts of Hashmi's early years of growing up in Delhi and his steady progression towards finding the form of street theatre that resonated with his politics. Since Safdar Hashmi's theatre was fundamentally driven by the communist ideology, one can see clearly how he was not only responding to the exigencies of his time but also crafting an alternative cultural movement that in turn influenced his politics. Not only did he think through the form of street theatre in his immediate context, he also networked and shared resources with similar cultural collectives elsewhere in India.

Sudhanva introduces us to Safdar Hashmi the intellectual, a relatively lesser known facet of his personality. Safdar Hashmi's insights as a cultural thinker, especially in his writings on the various aspects of street theatre, leave the reader with the



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

SAFDAR HASHMI in a performance.

regret that death cut short a promising writing career. It also makes one wonder how Safdar Hashmi would have interpreted India's current political crisis.

This book stands out in the way it captures Delhi and the broader cultural sphere that Safdar Hashmi inhabited. In a way, it maps a crucial phase in the political history of the city. It brings to fore a Delhi that is less romanticised and yet enlivened by the lives and struggles of ordinary people, the central

point of Safdar Hashmi's concern. It charts out the larger history of the Jana Natya Manch, which has outlived the tragic episode of Safdar's death and has emerged as a committed force of collective solidarity and resistance in our times. It also reiterates, through accounts of JANAM's performances, the importance of college and university campuses as spaces of political mobilisation and resistance in Delhi. As an aside, the book dispels the myth that

it was, in fact, Delhi University, and not Jawaharlal Nehru University, that played a pioneering role as a site of leftist student mobilisation.

In a moving and a provocative epilogue, Sudhanva returns to the moment and place of Safdar Hashmi's death and uses it as a trigger to ponder over an array of issues. He examines the steady industrialisation of Ghaziabad, the rise of trade unions, and the parallel rise of political goons

to keep the trade unions in check. We know this narrative too well from other industrialised dystopias in India, from the mills of Mumbai to the present-day expansion of IT parks in cities like Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

The civilisational violence they have unleashed on working-class communities does not seem to end. He ponders over the nature of political murders, citing the more recent ones; for instance, the murder of Narendra Dabholkar, which makes us wonder how things have remained fundamentally the same though they have changed superficially.

Defeating the finality of death, Safdar Hashmi continues to live on as a memory even today. His story has inspired and mobilised generations of theatre-makers, artists, writers, students and thinkers. Sudhanva succinctly captures this "after-life" of Safdar Hashmi and the influence that he has had on the progressive cultural sphere in India. The book will certainly inaugurate new debates around Safdar Hashmi's life, in addition to those that have been triggered by his death.

It re-emphasises the values of friendship, camaraderie and love that Safdar Hashmi embodied and pushes us to imagine newer possibilities of art-making, collective solidarities and, most importantly, a revolutionary future where the world belongs to either everyone or none at all. □

Kaustubh Naik is a playwright and a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania.

Walk in the WOODS

Notes from a five-day field trip in 2016 in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand that involved trekking through places immortalised by Jim Corbett and led to the welcome discovery that tigers were once again a part of the landscape.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY A.J.T. JOHNSINGH

THE sky was a cloudless blue and the warm, bright winter sun lit the forest and hills with a golden tinge. As we walked in the Ladhiya landscape in the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand, we were greeted by leopard signs in numerous places and tiger signs in some places. Apart from me, our group comprised Amitabh Dhillon from the Indian Police Service, Ravikiran Goverkar from the Indian Forest Service and Bivash Pandav from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). We also had the able assistance of some forest staff and two field assistants associated with the WII.

Our five-day field trip started with the pleasing sighting of a healthy leopard on the evening of November 20, 2016, near Thuligad as we drove from the Bhoom forest rest house to the base of the Purnagiri temple. We needed to speak to people at the temple to learn more about the trail we had to take from Selagargh to Chuka via Kotkendri the next day. These places have been immortalised in the writ-

ings of Jim Corbett, who shot the Thak and Chuka man-eaters in the late 1930s.

FOUR EARLIER VISITS

As we prepared for the trek, my thoughts drifted to my earlier four visits to this landscape. In April 1993, on a warm day, I came down from Chalti, on the banks of the Ladhiya river, a tributary of the Sharada, in the company of my colleague G.S. Rawat. Our destination was Chuka, along the Ladhiya river, some 20 kilometres away. We were both on the faculty of the WII. A local resident carried our bag, and as we were young and fit, we crossed the Ladhiya in several places and reached Chuka—a small hamlet befitting Corbett's description—by evening. Bullocks were used to plough the field and leg-driven wooden implements were used to dehusk paddy.

Sixty-two-year-old Umed Singh, the then pradhan of Chuka, gave us food and shelter for the night. Two days later, via Thak and Kaladhungi, we trekked to Thuligad, where the



SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS
seen from the ridgetop above
Kotkendri, Uttarakhand.

vehicle from the WII was waiting for us.

In May 1998, I travelled in the company of the late A.S. Negi, a respected forest officer who retired as Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Uttarakhand (now Uttarakhand). We walked from Selagargh to Kotkendri and climbed the 1,500-metre (5,000-foot) ridge to Talla Des via Thak, Chuka and Sem. We returned to Dehradun after spending a night in Champawat.

In November 2002, I enjoyed the admirable company of Dhananjai Mohan, an exceptional birdwatcher, then serving on the faculty of the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, Dehradun, on deputation from the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department and now director of the WII. We trekked from Chalti to Chuka largely along the right bank of the Ladhiya, and after spending a night at the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) camp in Kaladhungi, we walked to Thuligad to continue our journey to Dehradun.

My fourth trip was in December 2005, when the mountains were in the grip of winter cold. Dhananjai Mohan and Ravikiran, an avid fan of Corbett, were my companions. We spent a night at the forest rest house in Manch at an altitude of 1,800 metres in the Talla Des man-eater area, walked down to Chuka, trekked

to Kumen Chak to meet Umed Singh, walked to Kotkendri and, as darkness was shrouding the valley, returned to Chuka via Thak. Our return journey was via Kaladhungi, where we spent a night enjoying the hospitality of the SSB. The next day we walked to Thuligad along the trail that goes between the Sharada river and the steep hills of Purnagiri. The trail was perilous, bounded by large boulders and dropped steeply to the roaring Sharada 40-50 m below. The path was exceedingly narrow in at least a dozen locations.

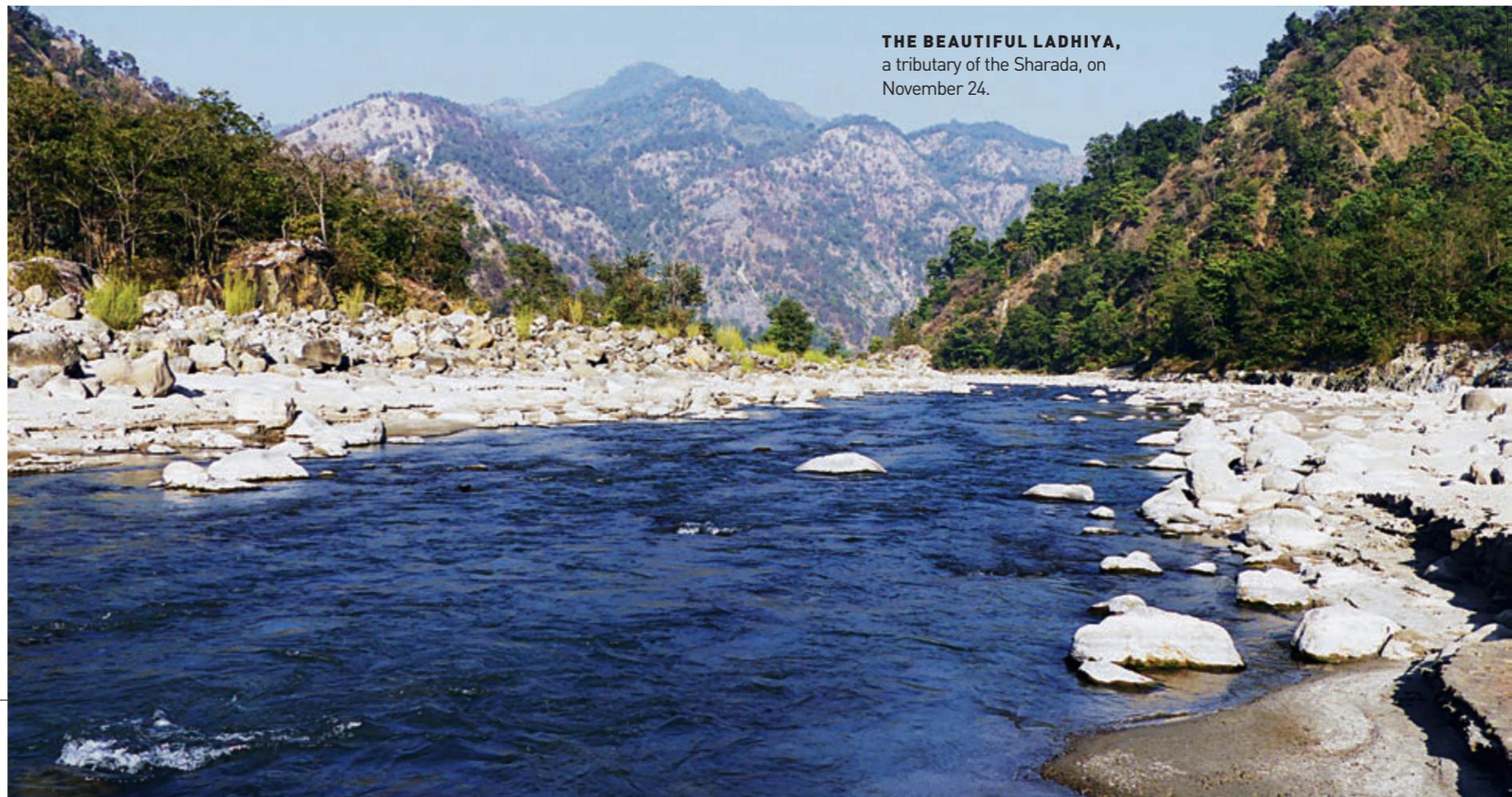
On these four walks, we never saw tiger signs although we did see leopard signs and, during the last three trips, plentiful evidence of sambar.

On this trip, we began in Selagargh, where a sign indicated that Kotkendri was 12 km from there and Chuka 6 km. At that point, we did not realise that the 6-km path I took in the company of Dhananjai and Ravikiran in December 2005 did not exist now and that we would be forced to take a much longer route to Chuka from Kotkendri.

As we walked uphill for nearly 900 m, blue-bearded bee-eaters, well hidden in the green canopy, called and indicated their presence. Jungle babblers noisily fed in the valley, a red-billed blue magpie flew across the valley and a barking deer



THE SHARADA RIVER,
on November 20, 2016.



THE BEAUTIFUL LADHIYA,
a tributary of the Sharada, on
November 24.



THE BHOOM FOREST REST HOUSE.

ran ahead of us, all this giving the impression that the wildlife in the environs of the Purnagiri temple may be protected. For some distance along the trail, there were simple homes of hill people, and almost every home had some cattle and a dog and was set amidst fodder trees such *Debregeasia longifolia*, *Ficus roxburghii* and *Grewia elastica*.

The vegetation in the forest included trees such as *Bauhinia malabarica*, *Mallotus philippinensis*, *Sapium insigne*, *Semecarpus anacardium*, *Shorea robusta* (sal) and *Terminalia tomentosa* and bushes such as *Artemisia nilagirica*, *Clerodendrum infortunatum*, *Flemingia macrophylla*, *Maesa indica* and *Pogostemon benghalensis*. We saw *Piptadenia oudhensis*, a tree

species that has a restricted distribution in the eastern Kumaon and the west-central Nepal foothills, and butter trees (*Diploknema butyracea*) as we walked towards the top of the ridge.

We had our first sighting of tiger signs in the form of pugmarks and a scrape on the trail around 11:00 a.m. when the trail led us past a natural salt lick to the left of the road. In another place, there was a patch of red cup plants (*Holmskioldia sanguinea*), their colour amidst the green bushes striking. A colourful butterfly, a rustic (*Cupha erymanthis*), was conspicuous on the green bush. There were more signs of leopard in the form of scats and scrapes. While approaching the ridgetop for the first time, I noticed the



KALADHUNGI FOREST REST HOUSE, now almost abandoned. Jim Corbett and Sir William Ibbotsons stayed here in April 1937.

presence of the low-altitude banj oak (*Quercus leucotrichophora*) at a place where a group of rhesus monkeys giving guttural alarm calls moved away from the trail. Before we reached the top (1,300 m), we heard barking deer alarm calls twice and once a sambar belled, possibly alarmed by the noise we were making. At the top, there were stone benches where we could sit and relax, a temple and, in the distant north, a view of a row of snow-capped mountains.

Beyond the ridgetop, on the way to Kotkendri, we saw signs of habitat degradation in the form of wood cutting and the abundance of weeds such as *P. benghalensis* and *Eupatorium adenophorum*. We stopped at the first house in Kotkendri, which was in the middle of neatly maintained terraced fields with many malta trees (*Citrus sinensis*). The lady of the house was so agile that it was difficult to gauge her age. She was silent. As requested by our assistants, she made tea for all of us with fresh ginger dug from her garden but refused to accept the money (Rs.200) I offered her. She also silently moved away when I wanted to take a picture of her.



THE AUTHOR'S TRAVEL COMPANIONS in November 2016: (Left to right) Amitabh Dhillon from the Indian Police Service, Bivash Pandav from the Wildlife Institute of India and Ravikiran Goverkar from the Indian Forest Service.

the narrow bunds in the terraced fields. Further on, the trail meandered through the densely forested north-facing slope and was strewn with rocks in many places. We crossed bridges over at least two streams that flowed down the forested slope, merrily singing, into the Ladhiya valley. Roughly 3 km before Chuka, in the rapidly fading light, I saw another scrape of a tiger.

When some of us were about 2 km from Chuka, it became pitch dark, and as we were not prepared

for this, we stopped, and Amitabh sent a message to the Chuka SSB camp via phone. After an hour or so, some jawans and village residents came to us with lights and led us to the two-room community hall in the village that had been kept ready for our stay. Hot water for a wash and warm food cooked over wood stoves were waiting for us before we rested for the night.

In the morning, the sun rising through the dense mist looked like a large moon. White-crested laughing thrushes raised their chorus in the jungle to the south of Chuka. While having tea, we learned about the village residents and their problems. Sixty-year-old Prahlad Ram, the pradhan of Chuka, supervised all the arrangements for our stay. He and a younger person from the village had brought provisions for us from Thuligad to Chuka along the 20-km rugged and treacherous trail. Everyone in the village complained bitterly about the lack of rain, and we could see that the wheat crop, only a few inches high, was withering. They said that sambars, wild pigs, porcupines and rhesus macaques raided their crops but were happy about the domestic dogs, which helped keep away the animals, particularly the



India-Nepal border



THE RED CUP PLANT (*Holmskioldia sanguinea*) on the Selagargh-Kotkendri road and (right) a rustic butterfly (*Cupha erymanthis*) in Selagargh, Chuka man-eater area, on November 21.





A PANORAMIC VIEW OF
Chuka village. (Above).



(RIGHT) THE LADHIYA-SHARADA CONFLUENCE,
on November 22. In his narrative on the Thak man-eater, Jim Corbett writes about the confluence being full of big mahseer, but on this field trip, the travellers did not see any fish here.



PRAHLAD RAM, pradhan of Chuka, made all the arrangements for the travellers' stay at his village in November 2016. (Left) Gowri Singh, 83 years old and the liveliest person the travellers met in Chuka.



marauding macaques. They also reported occasional predation of livestock by leopards and, occasionally, tigers.

The liveliest person we met in the village was 83-year-old Gowri Singh, who possibly weighed 45 kg and was bent with age. He wore glasses. There was always a beautiful, mischievous smile on his face. He sat comfortably on his haunches and could get up without anybody's help though he moved around with a walking stick. His house was next to the community hall. The remarkable aspect of his life was the journey he made once in three months to Tanakpur to collect his meagre monthly pension of Rs.800. This involved a walk of three days to Selagarch (from where he could get a vehicle to Tanakpur) and a two-night stay in Kotkendri—the first night in Lower Kotkendri and the second in Upper Kotkendri—where he was provided food and shelter by residents who were in one way or another related to him. He spent some of his pension money on medicines and batteries for his radio (he was fond of listening to the news) and the rest he brought back. He said that while climbing the ridge he often crawled up along the trail, which in most places went through dense vegetation, knowing full well that tigers also used it.

Although his son lived in Chuka, Gowri Singh liked to stay alone and was a frequent visitor to our camp.

During our two-day stay in Chuka, we walked along the Ladhya for about 1.5 km looking for tiger signs and assessing the status of the golden mahseer. Leopard and sambar signs were commonly seen in the Ladhya riverbed, and the village residents showed us a cluster of bones of sambar killed by a tiger nearly a year ago. There was a gill net strung across the confluence of the Ladhya and the Sharada, and the village res-

GOLDEN MAHSEER in the Kosi river protected by Infinity Resorts and the Forest Department, on November 18. There is potential for a mahseer conservation programme in Uttarakhand as the State has a 500-km stretch of riverine mahseer habitat.

idents said that it belonged to the people of the Sem village across the river who regularly arranged it across the confluence at night. The second reported victim of the Thak man-eater was the mother of the headman of Sem. She was killed when she was cutting brushwood close to her house. In his narrative on the Thak man-eater, Jim Corbett writes about the confluence being full of big mahseer, but we did not see any fish, and even the large, long pool in Sharada beyond the confluence showed few signs of fish as indicated by the presence of only a few large cormorants and the rarity of sightings of playful fish leaping above the surface late in the evening. The white-capped water redstart, the plumbeous water redstart and the wall creeper were the interesting birds we saw along the river.

On the second day, we walked to Kaladhungi as we had an invitation for lunch at the SSB camp. The distance was reported to be 6 km. A small boy and a girl from Chuka were herding their goats along the road in the direction of the town, and the goats were busy eating the leaves of *A. vasica*. There had been landslides in four *nallahs*, which had brought an avalanche of large boulders on to the road. This made crossing those stretches a bit risky and painful. So, on our return after lunch, we covered the same stretch by walking along the riverbed as there was water flowing only along the left bank close to Nepal. Leopard and sambar tracks were common in the riverbed. This is the only stretch where we saw some brahminy ducks. It appears that people from Nepal collect firewood from the Indian side of the river. We saw bundles of cut firewood and driftwood and tracks of barefoot people on the dry sections of the riverbed. The Nepalese deftly cross the river using inflated tyre tubes. The people of Parigaon village on the Nepal side of the river, comprising more than 500 houses, continue to collect firewood from the Indian side as the only trees visible on the Nepal side are large mature sal trees.

On the night of November 23, we bought a goat weighing 8 kg and al-



RESIDENTS OF CHUKA VILLAGE and the team from the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) camp in Chuka, on November 24.



A TIGER PUGMARK, just short of Chalti. The reappearance of the tiger in the area can be attributed to the SSB camps along the Nepal border.

most the entire village had dinner with us. The next day, many of the villagers cheerfully accompanied us for about 2 km until we came to the first crossing of the Ladhiya. Thereafter, we walked rapidly, as Chalti, where our vehicles would be waiting for us, was far away. The Ladhiya

river comes under the category of blue rivers in India (fairly pristine), and the problems I could visualise for it were pesticides and fertilizers draining into it from agriculture fields and unethical means of fishing (dynamiting, poisoning, gill netting and trapping). A pair of crested king-

fishers flew ahead of us; we saw one more gill net across the river and, in one place, a trap made of long sticks into which the entire river water was diverted.

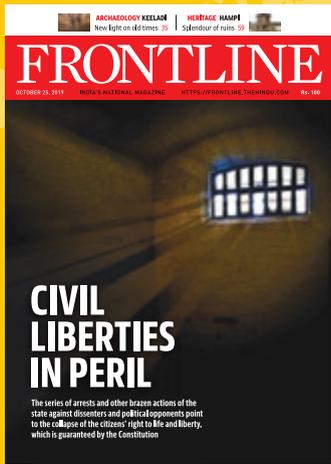
There were six small villages in the valley. We stopped for tea in Baelgate village, where the men reminisced about the past when the river had an abundance of large fish. We wished that a programme to protect the whole of Uttarakhand as the State has a 500-km stretch of riverine mahseer habitat. We saw tiger tracks in several places, and at one place Ravikiran and Bivash Pandav saw what may have been fresh signs of a pair. Close to this location, a woman was cutting firewood in a dense lantana patch. The reappearance of the tiger in the Ladhiya landscape can be attributed to the establishment of SSB camps all along the Nepal border to control the entry of Maoists. This has, according to local people, prevented poaching by people from Nepal and led to the revival of the sambar population and the return of the tiger.

Before we reached Chalti, we saw goral in three places. The last climb to Chalti along a rugged steep path was done when it was dark. We estimated that we had walked about 55 km in total in the four days of our trip, and it was a tough walk because of the rocks and boulders along the trail. The woman we saw cutting firewood in the dense bush close to the fresh tiger signs made me hope that no man-eating tiger would make its appearance in the Ladhiya valley as that would frighten people and could lead to the imposition of a curfew in the area. If a man-eater appears in this challenging landscape of mountains and valleys, it will be an extremely difficult task to get rid of it. We may be forced to awaken Jim Corbett from his grave as hunters like him no longer exist. □

A.J.T. Johnsingh is with the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru; WWF-India; and the Corbett Foundation. The author thanks Madhavi Sethupathi and Mervin Johnsingh for the help with this article.



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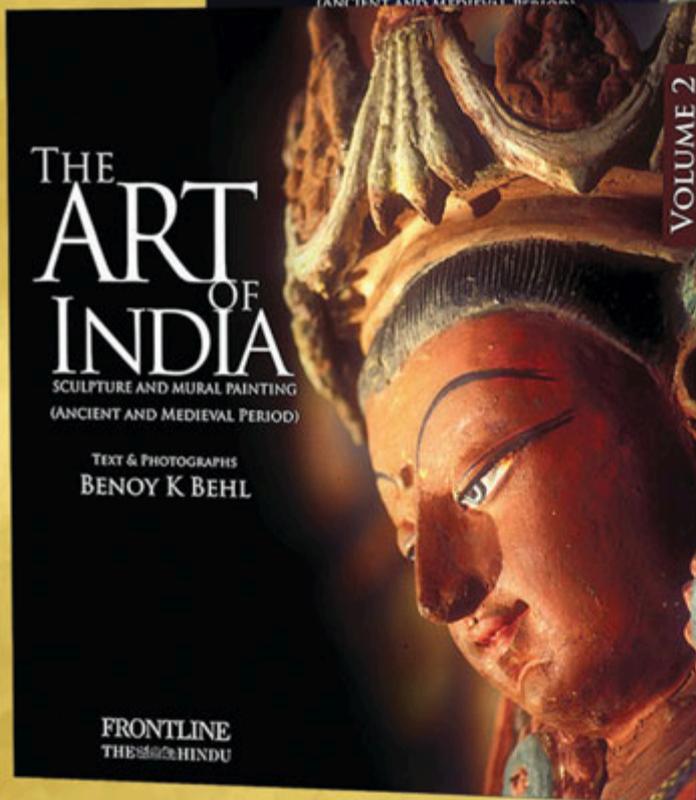
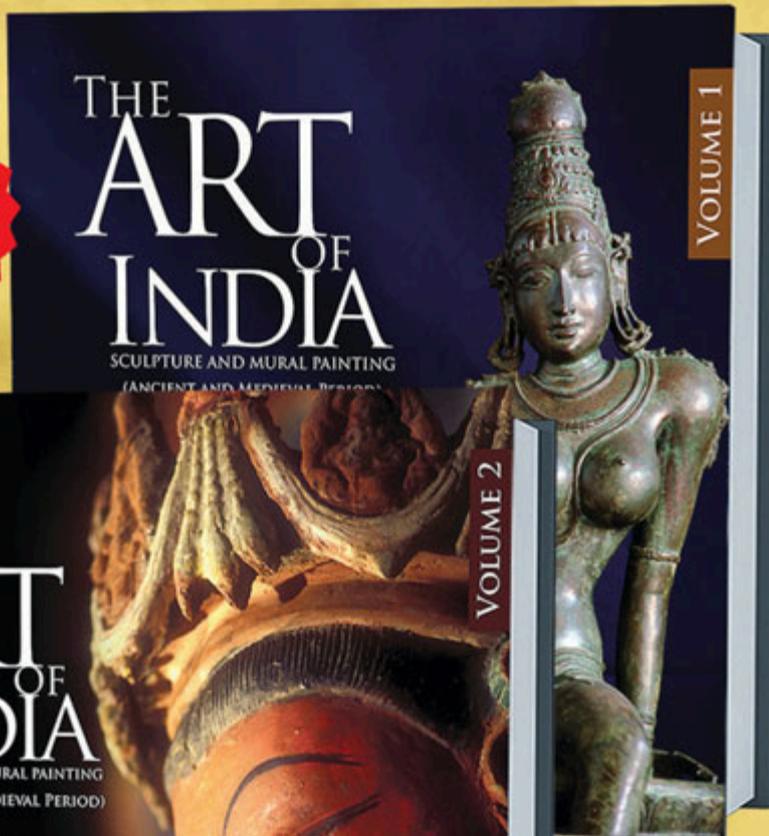
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