



**INDIA&CHINA**  
**TALKING PEACE**

**THE ECONOMY**  
**BRAVADO VS BUSINESS**



# FRONTLINE

JULY 31, 2020

INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE

[HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM](https://frontline.thehindu.com)

RS.125

## POLITICS OVER PUBLIC HEALTH

The government's reluctance to disclose information on the nature of COVID-19 spread in the country and to involve the research community in devising its anti-pandemic strategy has made the future uncertain for the people, including health workers

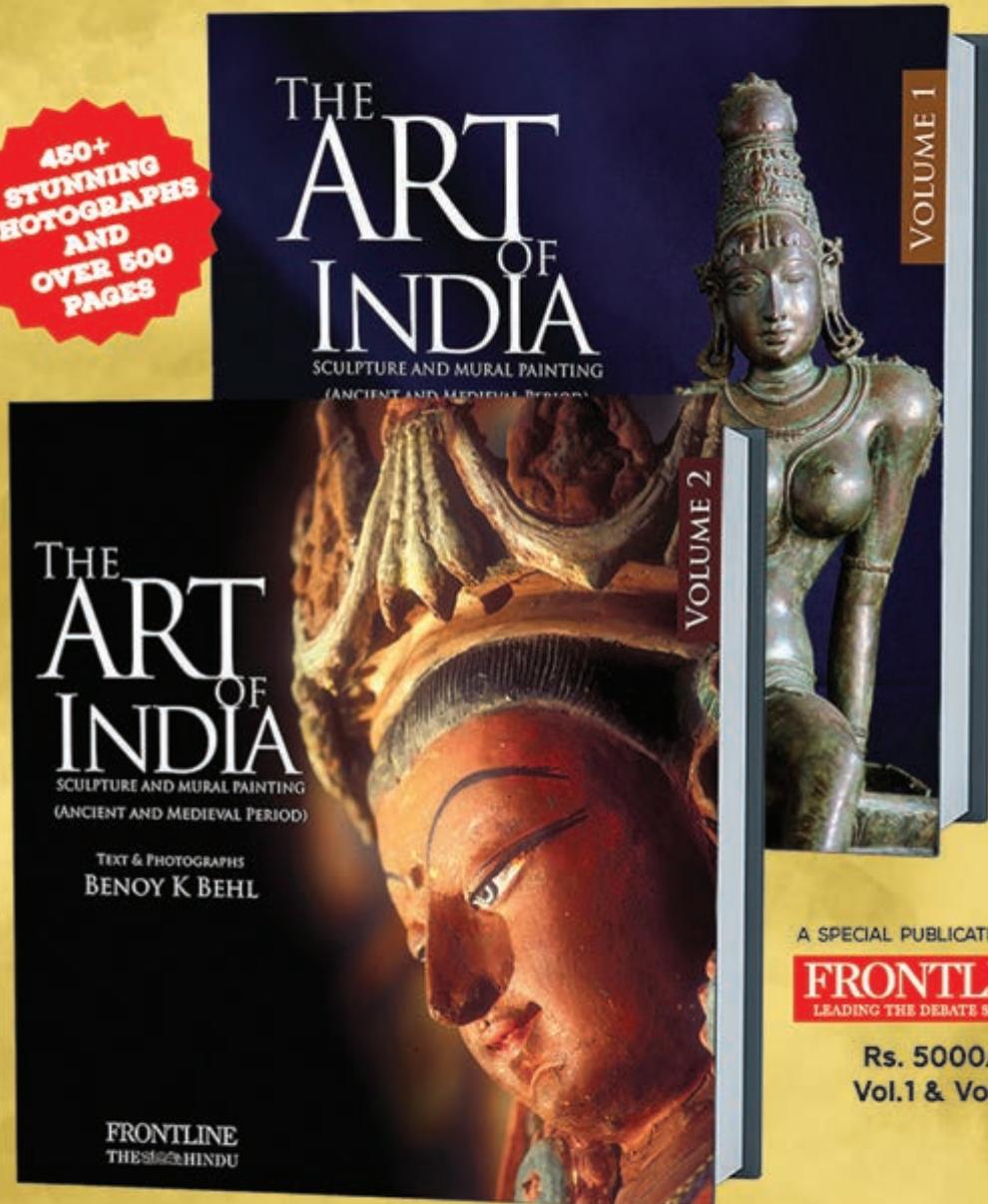




THE HINDU GROUP

Each page is a gateway  
to India's rich art history

450+  
STUNNING  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
AND  
OVER 500  
PAGES



A SPECIAL PUBLICATION FROM

**FRONTLINE**  
LEADING THE DEBATE SINCE 1984

Rs. 5000/-  
Vol.1 & Vol.2

Discover India's unique and magnificent art heritage with this limited edition coffee table book series authored by eminent art historian **Benoy K Behl**.

**BOOK**  
YOUR COPY  
ONLINE



Visit: [publications.thehindugroup.com/bookstore/](http://publications.thehindugroup.com/bookstore/)  
For bulk booking, e-mail: [bookstore@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bookstore@thehindu.co.in)  
For any enquiries call: 1800 102 1878

# FRONTLINE

VOLUME 37 NUMBER 15 JULY 18-31, 2020 ISSN 0970-1710 HTTPS://FRONTLINE.THEHINDU.COM

## COVER STORY

### Trials and tribulations

With the government not open about information on the nature of the spread of COVID-19 and the research community helpless without data from the sero-surveillance already done, the Indian people are left to face an uncertain future. **4**



## COVER STORY

The geographic spread **9**



Health warriors' woes **13**

Drug production:  
A scam in the making? **17**

## STATES

Uttar Pradesh:  
Infrastructure in a shambles **21**  
Delhi: Silent exodus **23**  
Punjab: Wider spread **25**  
Rajasthan: Relative ease **27**  
Haryana: Hotspot for neighbours **29**

Madhya Pradesh:  
Communal virus **31**  
Gujarat: Not a model to follow **33**  
Maharashtra: A ray of hope **35**  
Karnataka: Slipping away **37**  
Kerala: Fear over the cities **39**  
Tamil Nadu: Districts in focus **41**  
Bihar & Jharkhand:  
Dangerous denial **43**  
West Bengal: Falling behind **45**  
Odisha: The going gets tough **47**



Global chaos **49**  
U.S.: Growing rate of disaffection **53**

## AGRICULTURE



Punjab: Land struggle in the time of pandemic **55**  
Karnataka:  
Undoing land reforms **60**  
Interview:  
Prof. T.N. Prakash Kammardi **62**  
Madhya Pradesh:  
Marketing privatisation **64**

## INDUSTRY

Surat textile trade:  
Silence of the looms **66**

## INDIA & CHINA



Talking peace **69**  
Bravado is no substitute for business **72**  
App ban as bluster **78**

## POLITICS

COVID crisis: BJP's desperation and diversion **85**  
BJP's blueprint for Odisha **88**

## COMMUNALISM

An insidious campaign against places of worship **90**

## CRIME



Sathankulam custodial deaths:  
Terror in uniform **92**  
A dubious record **94**

## ENVIRONMENT



Maharashtra: Unwelcome airport in Chandrapur **96**

## COLUMN

C.P. Chandrasekhar:  
A soft blow against China **82**

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

## On the Cover

Prime Minister Narendra Modi chairs a Cabinet meeting in New Delhi on July 8.

COVER DESIGN: U. UDAYA SHANKAR; PHOTOGRAPH: PIB/PTI

For subscription queries and delivery related issues Contact: Pan-India Toll Free No: 1800 102 1878 or customercare@thehindu.co.in

**Disclaimer:** Readers are requested to verify & make appropriate enquiries to satisfy themselves about the veracity of an advertisement before responding to any published in this magazine. THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., the Publisher & Owner of this magazine, does not vouch for the authenticity of any advertisement or advertiser or for any of the advertiser's products and/or services. In no event can the Owner, Publisher, Printer, Editor, Director/s, Employees of this magazine/company be held responsible/liable in any manner whatsoever for any claims and/or damages for advertisements in this magazine.

Published by N. RAVI, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai-600 002 and Printed by T. Ravi at Kala Jyothi Process Private Limited, Survey No. 185, Kondapur, Ranga Reddy District-500 133, Telangana on behalf of THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.

**EDITOR:** R. VIJAYA SANKAR (Editor responsible for selection of news under the PRB Act). All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited.

**e-mail:** frontline@thehindu.co.in

Frontline is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites.

# TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

With the government not open about information on the nature of the spread of COVID-19 and the **research community helpless without data** from the sero-surveillance already done, the Indian people are left to face an uncertain future. BY **R. RAMACHANDRAN**

DECEPTION AND DISINFORMATION continue, and so does the accompanying bluster. The two together have been the hallmark of the public information on COVID-19 given out by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and also the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), which was once an independent and autonomous voice on matters of health but has been rendered subservient to political bosses. The terse directive issued on July 2 by ICMR Director General Balram Bhargava to fast-track recruitment for trials, the conduct of trials and the approval process in order to launch the indigenous vaccine COVAXIN against COVID-19 (to be manufactured by the Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech Ltd) on the impossible deadline of August 15 had politics and nationalism written all over it (<https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31986304.ece>). It was not difficult to see who was calling the shots. The severe criticism that followed immediately from the medical and research community drove the ICMR into damage control and walk-back mode, but that did not help it much as the announcement had already made the organisation a laughing stock.

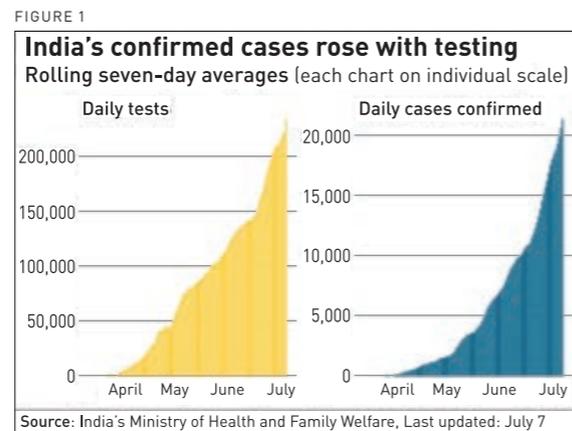
The following imagery by a cartoonist friend of this author captures it succinctly: the top political boss fires at the foot of the subordinate to carry out the diktat; the submissive foot soldier takes evasive action by putting the foot in his mouth.

At the press briefing by the Ministry on July 9, nearly a month after the June 11 (mis-) briefing by Bhargava on the sero-surveillance results (whose complete disclosure is yet to be done despite calls from various quarters, particularly epidemiologists, for the data to be made public), the same sham was repeated, this time, however,

by bureaucrats of the Ministry.

No new or important information regarding the spread of the disease, particularly the epidemiological reasons for the continuing increase in the number of infections in most of the States, was shared. The spokespersons merely resorted to clichéd remarks: that the number of cases per million population is one of the lowest in the world; the number of deaths per million population is one of the lowest in the world; and, recoveries and the recovery rate were increasing steadily. With these falsehoods comes the usual bluster about how the government handled the pandemic in a country of 1.38 billion people and how, with the measures that were in place, the country will overcome the current crisis-scale epidemic.

As long as the testing rate (or, equivalently, the infection detection rate) remains low compared with most other countries, the “number of [confirmed] cases”



MANISH SWARUP/AP

**A HEALTH WORKER** takes a nasal swab for a COVID-19 test at a hospital in New Delhi on July 6. India's testing rate, though ramped up significantly, continues to be one of the lowest in the world.

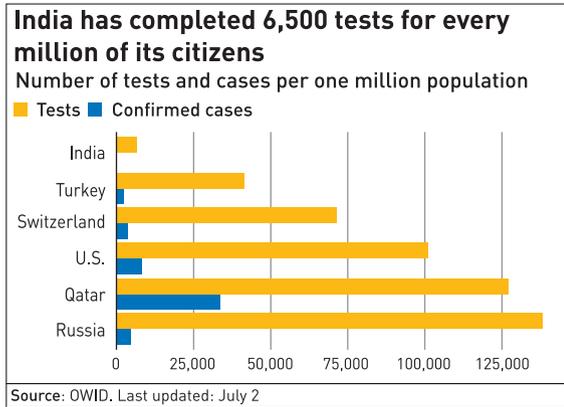
that is put out every day carries no real significance, especially when there is evidence from all over the world that there is significant transmission from infected people in the “pre-symptomatic” stage (that will eventually become symptomatic) as well as from those who remain “asymptomatic” (in whom perceptible symptoms do not even develop) and do not get picked up by the restrictive testing strategy and protocol being followed. As the numbers tested each day increase both from ramped-up testing rate and more broadened testing criteria, the number of cases also increases, as has been the case in India (Fig.1).

As the virologist Shahid Jameel, who currently heads the Wellcome Trust-DBT India Alliance, said: “If you look at the number of daily cases, these have gone up at almost the same rate as daily tests.” Officials of the

Ministry keep harping on the falsehood that cases and deaths per capita are low compared with other countries, but never acknowledge that India's testing remains fairly low per capita compared with most countries. “That is cherry-picking data to suit a predetermined narrative,” Jameel added. “The testing strategy is confined mainly to those with symptoms or their contacts. By tracing and isolating contacts we can limit the disease but get no view of an expanding outbreak.”

Way back in March, John P. A. Ioannidis, a professor of medicine and of epidemiology and population health at the Stanford University School of Medicine, wrote an article headlined “A Fiasco in the Making” in the online publication *STAT*, wherein he said: “The data collected so far on how many people are infected and how the epidemic is evolving are utterly unreliable. Given the limited testing to date, some deaths and probably the vast majority of infections due to SARS-CoV-2 are being missed. We don't know if we are failing to capture infections by a factor of three or 300... and no countries have [*sic*] reliable data on the prevalence of the virus in a

FIGURE 2



representative random sample of the general population.”

Since then, while most of the countries have managed to scale up their testing rate, India’s testing rate, though ramped up significantly, continues to be one of the lowest (Fig. 2; India’s confirmed cases per million is barely visible at this scale on this plot as it is around 550, a misleading figure, as of July 2). But, even on the basis of this meaningless figure of confirmed cases, India ranks only 112 (according to worldometers/info/coronavirus/) among 215 countries. Malaysia and Nepal rank lower than India. As regards tests per million population, India, with its current rate (as of July 9) of about 8,000 tests per million population, ranks 138, lower than Malaysia and Nepal.

Similar is the case with deaths per million population, equivalently the crude case fatality rate (CFR). The crude CFR (the number of deaths divided by the total number of confirmed cases) is a poor metric for decision-making on public health care measures and a particularly bad one for comparison between countries. The Ministry has claimed that India’s CFR of about 2.8

per cent is lower than that of many other countries because of better hospital care, particularly for critical cases of COVID-19 needing intensive care unit (ICU) facilities.

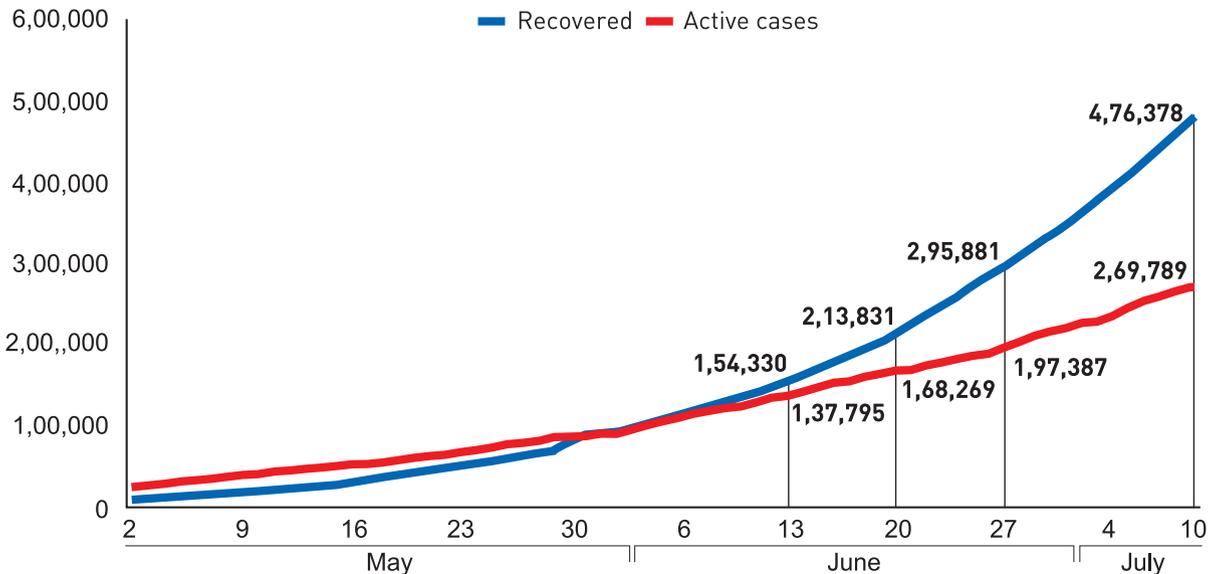
The press release based on the presentation briefing said: “The proactive delineation of containment and buffer zones, aggressive testing, early and timely detection and adherence to clinical protocols and better ICU/hospital management also manifests in India having one of the lowest fatalities in the world. Deaths per million population in India is 15.31, which translates to a fatality rate of 2.75 per cent, whereas, the global [average] deaths per million population stands at 68.7.”

In a paper posted on the preprint repository *medRxiv* on May 15, which was updated on July 2, Manfred S. Green and his associates said that it was misleading to compare crude CFRs between countries. In their work, the researchers had compared the CFRs of six countries where age-structured data were available and arrived at the following conclusion: “In addition to the selection and information biases inherent in computing CFRs, the age structure of the cases dramatically impacts on the differences in the crude CFRs between countries. Failure to account for this source of confounding markedly distorts the country comparisons.”

The researchers found that adjusting for age substantially reduced the differences in the CFRs among the six countries they analysed. “Other factors,” the authors wrote, “such as the differences in the definition of the denominator [due to selection bias in the reported cases and the testing criteria], the definition of a case and the standard of health care are likely to account for much of the residual variation.... [These] suggest that differences in the standard of healthcare between these countries may not play as important a role in affecting the death rates.... Crude COVID-19 CFRs have no real use for between-country comparisons and should be avoided. In

**Active & recovered cases – Progressive increase in recoveries**

FIGURE 3





**MUNICIPAL HEALTH WORKERS** on the way to screen people at the Ambujwadi slum at Malad in Mumbai.

general, for comparisons between groups and countries, age-adjusted CFRs can be used, but age-specific COVID-19 CFRs are generally far more meaningful.”

As has been pointed out, the ideal comparison would be in terms of the infection fatality rate (IFR), the ratio of the number of deaths to the true number of infections. But as long as catching all the infections remains a difficult proposition, the true value of this metric will not be available for most countries, however broad-based the testing strategies are. But estimates of IFRs, on the basis of projections from data of control (cohort) groups (*Frontline*, May 8), for most countries is around 1 per cent. For India, it is estimated to be 0.41 per cent, which reflects its demographic structure, which is dominated by younger age groups.

So, again, claiming *ad nauseum* that the number of recoveries has gone up (which now has overtaken the number of active cases) and the recovery rate is correspondingly increasing has no meaning (Figs. 3 & 4, which were shown at the briefing). At the risk of repeating what has been pointed out before, if the crude CFR is only 2.75 per cent, the recovery rate will approach 97-plus per cent; in fact, if we accept the IFR estimate of around 1 per cent, the recovery rate should eventually approach 99 per cent.

### COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION

The Ministry spokesperson denied there was community transmission. The government continues to peddle this lie. But, now a new euphemism is used to describe the situation: “There is no community transmission; there are only pockets of outbreaks of infection in certain areas.” If this is not community transmission, what else is it? “When community transmission is taking place,” pointed out Jameel, “we will not discover new cases in the community [with the current testing strategy]. The testing strategy needs to be looked at.”

A senior scientist in the government hierarchy is reported to have said (on condition of anonymity) that, for some reason, there is a feeling within the Ministry

that accepting that there is already community transmission is tantamount to admitting that lockdowns and other measures had failed.

### SERO-SURVEILLANCE

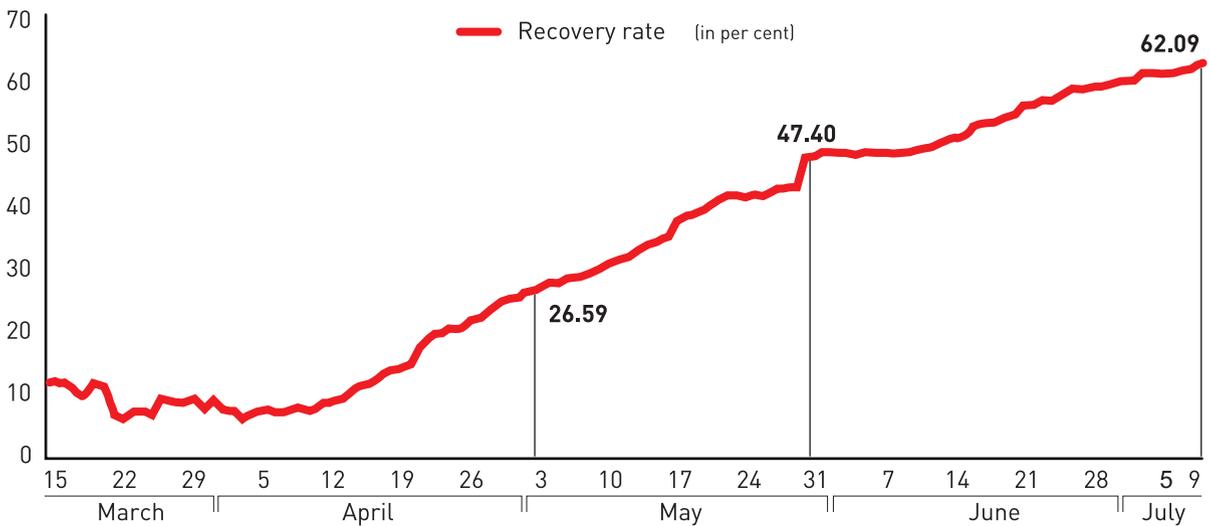
To a query on making public the data relating to the sero-surveillance conducted in May, the Ministry spokesperson put a new spin on them. He said they were old, pertaining to a situation in April end. The ICMR would soon launch a second round of sero-surveillance, he said. While it is good that a second round will be conducted, it is being done without disclosing the results of the first one to the nation, in particular the research community and epidemiologists. As was pointed out in *Frontline* (issue dated July 17), the protocol adopted for the sero-survey called for multiple rounds of surveillance.

It was also stated at the briefing that the research paper on the sero-survey was under peer review. But it is reliably learnt that the paper is yet to reach *The Indian Journal of Medical Research*, a journal of the ICMR, to which it was meant to be submitted for peer review. Apparently, following the controversy set off by the paper, which had claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic in India would peak in November, the ICMR has mandated that any paper by ICMR scientists has to be vetted by the Director General before publication. It is learnt that it is yet to go past that hurdle. The work on peaking was funded by the ICMR and the authorship included a couple of ICMR scientists. The ICMR distanced itself from the work and even claimed that it had not funded it. But the paper states clearly that the work was funded by the ICMR.

Coming to the basic question, what are the epidemiological reasons for the increasing number of cases in the country? As pointed out earlier, the [confirmed] caseload will increase as the number of tests a day continually increases and, as seen in Fig.1, the growth curves of the two nearly mirror each other. But how much does the unlocking and movement of people in and out of regions for work, business, trade and other

FIGURE 4

**Rising recovery rate**



reasons contribute to this increase?

As has been pointed out in a paper posted on *medRxiv* on June 14 by researchers of the University of Michigan COVID-India Group, these factors would vary significantly from State to State, variations which are important for State-level non-pharmaceutical (NPI) interventions get masked by national trends as revealed by Ministry-level data. But such nuanced State-level data, relevant for detailed epidemiological analysis, are perhaps not easily available as one has not come across any such detailed analysis by Indian or foreign researchers as compared with work that became available in the early phases of the pandemic as it spread within China, and from regions of China to other parts of the world.

“The expanding outbreak in India does have the unlock component,” said Jameel, “but I feel it also has to do with people not following guidelines—masks in public, distancing and hand hygiene. This can get difficult for vulnerable sections of society, especially in urban slums. Even those wearing masks wear it incorrectly. The sheer density of our country must have a role.”

**AIRBORNE TRANSMISSION**

In fact, with the recent letter to the World Health Organisation (WHO) signed by 239 scientists pointing to the significant role of airborne virus in disease transmission, the densely populated habitats of large sections of the Indian population are also probably accentuating the spread. Airborne transmission—meaning virus carrying respiratory aerosols, which are droplets of sizes less than five micrometres that can go floating and wafting around with air currents in closed



**BALRAM BHARGAVA**, Health Secretary and Director General of the ICMR.

spaces with poor ventilation even when individuals maintain the required physical distancing—now seem to have a role. Following this letter, the WHO has taken cognisance of this and is apparently considering revising its guidelines for preventing the spread of infection.

“Equally important is trust and communication,” Jameel added. “There is a lack of both because the state is seen as having abandoned people—[in terms of] food, jobs, etc. There is a lot of mixed messaging too. There also seem to be no clear SOPs [standard operating procedures] for testing and treating. While these will evolve with time as

more information becomes available, is there even a credible group of people who understand the disease and its epidemiology who are being consulted?” Jameel asked. “The response appears to be more political than public health and data/evidence-based.”

This correspondent asked Jameel what he thought was the reason for the near total lack of data-based epidemiological analysis to show the factors that were driving the current spread? Is it because the country lacked expert epidemiologists or was there an absence of adequate publicly available data? Jameel said: “The old adage is all models are wrong but some are useful. Models also depend on available data. When data are not released as they come and some are held back to avoid creating fear and may be released later, models will get messed up.”

So, with the government not open about information on the nature of COVID-19 spread in the country, and the research community rendered helpless, the people (including perhaps clinicians and health care workers) are left to face an uncertain future probably until the end of the year. □

# The geographic spread

Despite the government's unfounded optimism, the southward movement of the virus and the growing absolute numbers imply that India has **quite a distance to cover** before it can breathe easy in the ongoing fight against the pandemic. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

ON JULY 9, WHEN COVID-19 MONITORING sites showed a single-day spike of 25,790 cases in India, the biggest so far, the government continued to maintain that there was no “community transmission”.

On the same day, at a Group of Ministers meeting chaired by Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, members were told that India had one of the lowest number of cases and deaths per million when compared with the five worst-affected countries. However, no comparisons were drawn with the world's most populous nation, China, which had controlled the spread of the virus rather effectively.

“It would perhaps be not fair to compare India to other countries. In terms of absolute numbers, India had

195.5 cases per million population,” the government said in a press release.

However, a Health Ministry official, quoting the World Health Organisation's (WHO) situation report, told the media that there were 538 cases per million in the country.

At the press briefing on July 9, held almost a month after the previous one, Ministry officials presented a picture of optimism. India, they said, was not in the community transmission stage and added that there were localised outbreaks in some areas. This was borne out by the data that showed that only 49 of the country's 733 districts had reported cases.

The officials also said that it was possible to trace and



**RAJESH BHUSHAN**, Officer on Special Duty with the Health Ministry, addressing a media briefing on the COVID-19 situation in New Delhi on July 9.

track contacts of active cases within 72 hours, and therefore, it was erroneous to talk of community transmission. They added that the WHO had not issued any standardised definition of local or community transmission.

#### UNFOUNDED OPTIMISM

Senior Health Ministry officials appeared optimistic that despite being the second most populous country in the world, India's management of the COVID-19 situation was satisfactory and that it had done "relatively well".

The number of cases per million population as per the WHO situation report was 538, which a Health Ministry official said was among the lowest in the world. The cases to population ratio from the Americas and Europe was much higher, and in some countries, it was 16-17 times the Indian ratio.

The death rate in India was only 15 per million of the population, whereas the rate in some countries was several times that figure.

The officials said that as of July 9, 4,76,000 patients had recovered and there were 2,69,789 active cases. The low caseload had prevented the public health systems and infrastructure from getting unduly burdened, they added.

The rate of recovery was 1.75 times that of active cases of infection. The recovery rate rise was appreciable, said Rajesh Bhushan, Secretary in the Health Ministry, and shared a graph that showed the recovery percentage as 62 per cent now. However, there was no reference to the single-day spike of more than 25,000 cases that day.

The daily testing rate in India, 2.67 lakh on an average, had definitely gone up. But it had increased in the process of chasing a growing spread of the infection. The increase in the present testing capacity had made it possible to confirm a growing number of cases. This is hardly an achievement.

Instead of a rapid ramping up of testing in order to get ahead of the infection by quickly identifying the infected and isolating them, which should have been done when the country was under lockdown, the country's strategy was to chase the infection, and not preempting it.

The strategy pre-empting infection adopted by countries such as South Korea succeeded in controlling the spread. A faster rate of testing in the initial stages of the outbreak in that country meant that fewer tests were required. In contrast, a slow rate of testing in India allowed the infection to spread and go out of control.

Within India, eight States—Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat—accounted for 90 per cent of the active caseload, while six States—Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal—accounted for 86 per cent of the COVID-19 deaths. Some 32 districts accounted for 80 per cent of the deaths.

The authorities have not given any official epidemiological explanation for these trends. Rather, the government continues to adopt the same self-congratulatory

demeanour that has characterised its approach from the beginning of the outbreak.

There was no epidemiologist or senior scientist at the press briefing of July 9, which was surprising given the high count of cases every day and the southward movement of the pandemic.

Jacob John, Professor of Community Medicine and Epidemiology at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, told *Frontline* that the reporting of the cases depended on the quantum and appropriateness of testing and the phase of the pandemic.

"The patterns that are visible need not reflect the reality. We are still early in the exponential phase of the pandemic in our country and the south being more connected is seeing now the second level of spread after the metros," he said, adding that the worst was yet to come.

(In the context of the United States, the top infectious diseases expert Dr Anthony Fauci has warned the U.S. President against having a false sense of complacency over low death rates.)

Despite the bluster of optimism, it was clear that deep down the Union government was aware that the numbers indicated something more serious. Hence, its directions to continue with strict containment measures, surveillance, demarcation of containment zones, strict perimeter control, intensive contact tracing, house-to-house search/surveillance and identification of buffer zones to identify new cases.

#### STEADY TRENDS

India's position as a country with the third largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world and the largest number of cases and deaths in Asia has been marked by a combination of remarkably steady trends that are not always seen in other parts of the world.

The proportion of active or currently infected cases to the cumulative total of confirmed cases has been coming down over time in India. Since the fatality rate was not high, this decline reflected primarily the growing numbers of those who have recovered. Their numbers now far



**UNION HEALTH MINISTER** Dr Harsh Vardhan in New Delhi on July 10.

exceed the number of active cases—4,95,512 recovered versus 2,76,685 active cases and 21,604 deaths as per official data on July 10.

Some 15 per cent of COVID-related deaths were in the 14-44 years age group; 32 per cent of the deaths were in the 45-59 years age group (15 per cent of the population); 39 per cent of deaths were in the 60-74 years age group (8 per cent of the population).

People aged 75 years and above, who belong to the age group that comprised 2 per cent of the population, accounted for 14 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths.

Viewed in isolation, high absolute numbers would be considered a good sign because the pandemic is deemed to be have come to an end, when there are no longer any active cases and all those infected have either died or recovered.

With the proportion of active cases now having come down to around 35 per cent from the near 100 per cent level it was at the beginning of the pandemic, and deaths

still being under 3 per cent of all cases, it seemed that the country was approaching the end without having paid a very heavy price in terms of lives lost to the COVID-19 infection.

Yet, the absolute numbers of the active cases have been increasing day by day and the curve has not yet started moving downwards indicating that the pandemic is coming to an end. The absolute numbers are relevant because they determine the extent of the caseload on the health system, a load the government claimed it has prevented.

In this regard, India's experience has not only been different from that of countries of the European Union and east Asia, where the downward movement began several months ago, but also from other countries that had a large number of cases, such as Russia, where the number of active cases began declining mid June. India is still climbing the hill and is far from being over it.

#### MIXED PICTURE

The growth in the number of new infections every day presents a mixed picture. Over the course of the epidemic, there has been a downward trend in the rate of growth of confirmed cases per day, as a result of which an increasing trend in the doubling time has also been visible.

This has been the main reason for the decline in the proportion of active cases, since the active cases on any day are mainly those added to the total tally relatively recently, typically those that tested positive in the previous two weeks or so.

This, again, would appear to be a good sign as the end of the epidemic requires this daily growth rate to become zero or near zero. In India, the daily growth rate is currently around 3.5 per cent, compared with the 8-10 per cent level seen in mid April, when the first three-week lockdown ended.

Despite this, however, the absolute number of new cases reported every day has also steadily increased day by day and has kept hitting a new high every second or



**DISINFECTION** work in Thiruvananthapuram in the wake of a spurt in COVID-19 cases, on July 3.



**AT A 'FEVER CLINIC** in Chennai on June 29. The surge in the number of cases in Tamil Nadu intensified from the end of May after the State eased lockdown restrictions.

third day. For the pandemic to end, the absolute number of cases must decline for several days successively. But that has not happened.

There is no evidence that India is past the peak. The decline in the daily rate of growth was not fast enough to achieve it; also, the rate does not show any further reduction.

India's situation was not even like the U.S., where a decline in the number of daily cases was under way; things took a turn for the worse only when the country opened up and started easing restrictions.

The experience of the U.S. and countries that have managed to control the pandemic suggested that even after the peak was crossed, it would take a long time to reach the point where it was possible to be sure that things were not going to get out of hand again. Controlling the COVID-19 pandemic still remains a long haul for India.

India's tryst with the coronavirus can thus be described as being marked by a peculiar combination. On one hand, there is a sustained failure to control the pandemic, even three and a half months after the first round of drastic containment measures were initiated. On the other, there are signs that at no stage did India experience the kind of sudden explosion of the epidemic as seen in some other countries.

#### **SHIFTING GEOGRAPHY**

Lurking behind this big picture is perhaps a story of the shifting geography of the infection marked by an increase in the spread of potential hotspots, reflecting a moderation in some part of the country being accompanied by acceleration elsewhere. And complete control has not been achieved.

From the beginning of Lockdown 1.0 to date, 75-80 per cent of the total number of confirmed cases were accounted for by a cluster of nine States in western, southern and central India: Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. However, the timing and extent of their contribution to the growth in the national totals has been far from uniform.

At the beginning of the epidemic, Maharashtra and Kerala laccounted for the bulk of the confirmed cases . However, these States quickly moved in completely different directions: while Maharashtra saw an explosion in numbers and became the epicentre of the growth of the infection in the country, Kerala succeeded in in taming the infection to a large extent.

Several other States soon crossed Kerala in the number of cases, and the number of active cases in that State was as low as 16 in early May, when the return of expatriates began.

Kerala saw a surge in imported cases after that, which has continued since, but the State still accounts for less than 1 per cent of the total number of confirmed cases in India. In contrast, Maharashtra's share in the nation's tally of fresh cases every day remains the highest despite the fact that the average growth of daily cases in the State

has slowed down considerably and has been lower than the rate in the rest of the country since the end of May. This is chiefly because of the lasting effects of the earlier surge.

#### **SURGE POST-JUNE**

Cases surged in Delhi and Tamil Nadu early on during Lockdown 1.0, a surge that was attributed mainly to the Tablighi Jamaat event in Nizamuddin in Delhi. However, this specific surge soon subsided, and Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh replaced these two States to drive up the country's infection rate for most of April.

In May, however, there was another switching of positions between these two groups of States as Delhi and Tamil Nadu saw a fresh surge while Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh saw an easing despite the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

This surge in Delhi and Tamil Nadu got intensified from the end of May when both States eased lockdown restrictions. During June, the combined share of these two States in the country's total number of confirmed cases climbed rapidly to match that of Maharashtra, whose numbers had been slowly declining over the same period. The surge in Delhi was also reflected in neighbouring regions, most notably Haryana, which earlier appeared to have brought the infection under control. A rise in numbers in the east after the return of migrant workers added to the overall growth. This region, except West Bengal, had seen very few cases until then.

Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka appeared to have things under control and along with Kerala. Their combined share in the total number of confirmed cases began to steadily decline and stay below 5 per cent until the last week of June, when they started experiencing an acceleration of the infection. While Tamil Nadu's daily numbers were higher because of the base created by the past growth, the rate of increase in these three States has been far higher.

States such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan continue to add to the increasing numbers although their share in the overall growth of numbers has been coming down.

This leads to the question, Could the objective of taming the epidemic in India have been better achieved and with much less pain by a strategy of more targeted lockdowns spaced out in time, combined with a "trace and test" procedure?

The government's strategy to impose a nationwide lockdown, when the number of cases and the regional spread was low, might have been counterproductive and played a role in creating conditions that accelerated the spread.

The Centre's twin steps of overuse of the drastic containment measure, casting the net wide, and enhancing testing and ramping up the public health system capacity right at the beginning are probably flawed. It has resulted in a situation where both these steps are more difficult and expensive at a time when they are needed the most, given the country's limited resources. □

# Warriors' woes

The COVID crisis has **increased the work pressure** on National Health Mission staff, but there is no effort to make their remuneration commensurate with their efforts. BY **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

IN THE EARLY PHASE OF THE COVID-19 outbreak, Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhorted the nation to bang utensils and clap as a mark of appreciation for health workers fighting the pandemic. Perhaps that made National Health Mission employees feel that their work was being recognised at last. When one Chief Minister declared that he would double the salaries of NHM workers in his State, Rihan Raza, all-India president of

the NHM employees' union, declined the offer politely. The health workers were after all doing their duty, he reasoned. Today, he rues his decision.

Only a tiny percentage of NHM staff are permanent employees. The mission is run on the principle of incentives and conditionalities, which militates against the goal of good health outcomes and is demotivating for its workforce. A Health Ministry document links the alloca-



T. NARAYAN/BLOOMBERG

**ACCREDITED SOCIAL HEALTH ACTIVIST** (ASHA) workers conducting a door-to-door survey on the COVID-19 situation, in New Delhi on July 2.

tion of NHM funds to States with performance-based conditionalities. The Result Based Financing Approach, basically a carrot-and-stick approach, is a brainchild of the NITI Aayog.

*Frontline* spoke to several NHM workers and their representatives in Haryana and Rajasthan. Of the nearly 10.5 lakh NHM workers in the country, nine lakh are accredited social health activists (ASHAs). In Haryana alone there are around 14,000 NHM workers who are radiologists, pharmacists, accountants, data entry operators, lab technicians, ambulance drivers, staff nurses, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), AYUSH doctors and paramedics. There are also 20,000 ASHAs.

ASHA workers receive a paltry fixed amount and an incentive-based honorarium, which is bad enough. The rest of the NHM staff are on a renewable contract with no social security or additional benefits. The contract was earlier for only three months. Following protests by NHM staff, the Haryana government agreed to extend it to nine months. The terms of the new contract, a copy of which is available with *Frontline*, came into effect in March 2020. It says services can be “automatically terminated” on expiry of the contract, without any notice or any liability to pay any remuneration or compensation. The NHM staff have no “right or claim or preference either for regular appointment in the State government or for regular appointment in any government job or for regularisation or for extension of the period of contract.” The contract employee is required to undertake to not make “any claim at any point of time”, not even in the future. But though employees signing the contract “shall not claim any right to be treated as a government servant or be absorbed in government service at any future point of time”, they are expected to function with “professionalism, utmost care, skill, honesty, good faith and integrity as well as high moral ethical standards”.

The appointing authority retains the right to terminate their services at any time during the tenure of the contract on grounds of “insubordination, professional misconduct, unsatisfactory or poor performance, irregularities and impropriety committed of administrative or financial nature, unsafe practices, inefficiency, insensitivity, false reporting of information and fabrication of data in maintained records”. The contract can also be terminated on other grounds such as non-availability of funds for the project, rationalisation of activities depending on the government’s needs, and discontinuation of the project by the Central government. The contract says that as health services are essential services, provisions of the Essential Services Maintenance Act apply to NHM workers, who cannot therefore strike work or protest.

NHM workers are expected to have a phone by which they can be reached “at all times”; they are expected to be able to serve at any place within the State in the public interest. They must stay at their place of work (“headquarters” in NHM parlance) and cannot travel out without permission.

The contract says NHM employees cannot contest elections for public office or take up any other activity or



XAVIER GALIANA/AFP

work. These are restrictions that apply to government employees, a status that NHM employees do not enjoy.

The government has the right to amend the job description and the “minimum performance benchmark” to suit its requirements. Haryana requires NHM employees to secure an 80 per cent performance grade to be eligible for contract renewal.

#### IN THE FRONT LINE

ASHAs and other NHM workers are in daily and direct contact with the community; they are responsible for collecting information on all health indicators and helping the community to access treatment. They are the first to come in contact with suspected COVID-19 patients and help them in getting screened and accessing treatment; they are also responsible for maintaining records of those patients and their contacts.

The pressure on this workforce increased exponentially in the past few months. Yet, regularisation of their services was not on anyone’s agenda. No surprise, then, that NHM workers in various parts of the country have been protesting against their pitiable working and living conditions. (They have also been performing their duties.) In June, 1,800 employees in Nagaland organised protests demanding pay parity with permanent Health Department employees. There were protests in Haryana and Rajasthan also. Raza, who is also the president of the Haryana unit of the NHM employees’ union, told *Front-*

**ALKA AND NIRMALA**, ASHA workers, showing a migrant worker who returned to Bahadarpur village in Meerut district the correct way to wash hands, on June 9. An all-women army of health workers confront suspicion, anger and the threat of infection as they go door to door searching for COVID-19 victims among the poor.

*line* that the conditions of the contract in Haryana were demoralising. “We are called corona warriors, but when it comes to treating us like government employees, the government backs out. We need job security if we are to effectively fight the coronavirus,” he said. He recalled that when blood banks ran short of blood for transfusions, NHM workers got together and donated 2,000 units and declared they would be happy to donate again if the need arose.

Speaking of the pressure on ASHAs, Raza said: “The ASHAs are the point of contact for the community. All health indicators have to be monitored by them. Yet they do not even get minimum wages. Our work begins after all the material is collected by them. We collate, keep accounts, make payments. A doctor cannot deliver a baby without the help of an NHM worker.”

Though primary health care centres (PHCs) are able to wind up work after a few hours every day, the NHM worker must be on call. The pandemic has not only increased the pressure on NHM staff but endangered

those who work in close contact with the community. Raza pointed out that while ASHA workers were expected to do contact tracing and help those with symptoms get tested, they were not given adequate protective gear. They are given simple cloth masks instead of triple-layer ones and a cake of soap instead of alcohol-based sanitisers. Worse, if any of these workers is quarantined after testing positive, her wages are deducted.

Anil Kumar Racheta, secretary of the Sikar district NHM employees’ union in Rajasthan, had a similar grouse: increased pressure but inadequate compensation.

When the NHM was launched in 2006 with funding assistance from the World Health Organisation (WHO), by the Central and State governments, the gap between emoluments for medical and the non-medical cadre was not very wide. But after 2008, while the salaries of the permanent employees went up following the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission, contract workers remained out in the cold. “We are given only a 5 per cent annual increment, which is around Rs.500. When the project began, MBBS doctors under the NHM earned slightly more than we did. Today they earn in lakhs and we are where we were,” Racheta told *Frontline*. While many of the NHM’s medical staff were made permanent, the entire management cadre was on one-year contracts, he said.

There are pay disparities between the State-, district- and block-level cadre. While the district- and State-level management cadre’s salaries went up after the Sixth Pay Commission, there was no commensurate increase in the salaries of block-level NHM staff. Anil Kumar Racheta, who is an accountant with the NHM, was paid Rs.8,000 a month in 2008; 10 years later, his monthly pay was Rs.16,000.

There are close to 3,000 NHM employees in Rajasthan. The government insists on their presence in the villages where they serve. Earlier, they took buses to the villages, but now there is no public transport. Racheta said: “They expect us to be there when sampling and testing is done. We don’t get any house rent allowance. How can we stay in the villages? Earlier it was cheaper as we used to go by bus, but now we take our motorbikes. There is no public transport because of COVID-19. We are given no extra allowance for the petrol costs we incur.” Accountants like him make payments to ASHAs and other employees. They make entries and file reports on a day-to-day basis. So there is no option but to go to the villages.

Sunita Rani, general secretary of the ASHA workers’ union in Haryana, told *Frontline* that the work done by ASHAs and other NHM staff showed clear results on the ground. Within five years of the NHM’s launch, infant mortality and maternal mortality rates had improved. Nearly all deliveries now were institutional, she said. The limitations in the system were in the infrastructure and not in the performance of NHM staff, she said. Explaining how ASHAs were made to address crises that were not of their making, she recalled how they were asked to



S. GOPAKUMAR

**ASHA WORKERS** checking with the family of a quarantined person in Thiruvananthapuram on June 29.

address the problem of anaemia when it was found that 71 per cent of the women and children in Haryana were anaemic.

An ASHA herself, she said ASHAs were overburdened. At the time of self-appraisal, they were supposed to fill as many as 45 columns, which showed the amount of work they were entrusted with. Distributing iron tablets, mapping immunisation, mapping the number of children, getting pregnant women to undergo prenatal and postnatal check-ups, ensuring institutional deliveries, and keeping a watch on non-communicable diseases were some of their routine activities.

The pandemic has made things harder. “We hardly received any training on how to handle people infected with COVID-19. It took us a month to convey to people what the virus was all about. In April, they told us to visit homes and give reports. We encountered a lot of hostility. ASHAs were attacked, abused and even threatened during the lockdown, even by the police. All the clapping and banging of utensils did not help our situation,” she said.

One of their tasks was to identify homes with infected residents. When they tried to do this, village residents threatened them. Sunita Rani also said that the lockdown and job losses took a toll on women, many of whom suffered domestic violence and forced pregnancies. The reproductive health of women also suffered in this period. Children missed out on important vaccinations because of lockdown restrictions, and pregnant women

had to go without routine check-ups. “We were at risk too. If we fell ill, there was no empanelled hospital where we could claim treatment. We implement government schemes but are not government employees,” she said.

In one village in Sonipat, among the worst COVID-affected districts in Haryana, an ASHA put up a quarantine notice on a home. The homeowner, who was related to the village sarpanch, threatened to kill her. In Gohana, also in Sonipat, an ASHA and her daughter were beaten up for the same reason. Attacks on ASHAs were also reported from Gurugram, Hisar, Faridabad and Panchkula. In Yamunanagar, an ASHA who was on duty in the city asked her teenaged son to pick her up on his motorbike as there was no transport. The police pulled up the boy for not wearing a helmet and fined him Rs.25,000. “She is a widow. Where would she get the money to pay the challan? This is how corona warriors are being treated,” said Sunita Rani.

The allocation for the NHM in the 2020-21 Union Budget was reduced by Rs.390 crore. The budget for capital outlays under the NHM meant for strengthening rural health infrastructure went down considerably. There has been no commitment from the Central government to either regularise all NHM staff or increase their emoluments significantly. This indifferent approach is bound to take a toll on the poorer sections, who depend majorly on public sector health care, and on the NHM itself in the long run. □

# A scam in the making?

Two government institutions are collaborating with a private pharmaceutical company to come up with drugs for COVID treatment. The company's **connections are dubious**; nor does it have a great track record in business achievement or scientific research.

BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN, GAUTAM D. AND SHEETAL P. SINGH**

THE ALLEGED “SCAM” INVOLVING VENTILATORS that did not apparently meet quality standards, which made news in Gujarat in May, also brought up questions about the manufacturing company’s close links with the leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The trouble started when senior doctors at the General Hospital in Ahmedabad, the city’s largest COVID hospital, repeatedly pointed out that many of the 5,000 ventilators “did not meet the standards of clinically usable quality ventilators”. The supplier was Rajkot-based Jyoti CNC Automation Ltd.

Chief Minister Vijay Rupani had launched the ventilators at a function attended by, among others, Deputy Chief Minister Nitin Patel. The BJP governments at the Centre and in the State were involved in the purchase and deployment of these ventilators. Later, it was revealed that due diligence was not done on the company manufacturing the machines and they were installed after only one person was tested on one of them. The close relationship between some of the company’s top brass with Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister Rupani was the topic of discussion not only in the media and political forums but also within the pharmaceutical industry and the scientific community.

One name that came up frequently in the media (for instance, in *Ahmedabad Mirror* and *The Wire*) was Rameshkumar Bhikhabhai Virani. (Virani had gifted the much talked about “name inscribed” suit that Modi wore during United States President Barack Obama’s visit in January 2015. That sartorial “statement” generated much debate, much of it downright critical of the Prime Minister.) The Surat-based Virani family has had a signi-

ficant financial stake in Jyoti CNC for many years. The company’s chairman-cum-managing director, Parakramsinh Jadeja, is also known to be close to Rupani, who has repeatedly praised Jadeja’s “inspiring” words and deeds on social media and in public forums.

After the controversy broke out, the Gujarat government issued a statement saying it never described Jyoti CNC’s product as a ventilator. However, the government’s earlier press releases show that the machines were



**GUJARAT CHIEF MINISTER** Vijay Rupani and Deputy Chief Minister Nitin Patel at a meeting to take stock of the COVID-19 situation, in Surat on July 4.

not only termed “ventilator” nine times but also touted as a “glorious achievement” that would “add a new feather” to Modi’s “dream campaign of Make in India”.

#### ANOTHER CONTROVERSY?

Another pandemic-related controversy may well be in the making. A Press Information Bureau (PIB) press release on April 25<sup>1</sup> announced a Central government initiative involving the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology (IICT), Hyderabad, and some private companies “to reduce dependency [on China] for active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and drug intermediates”. The initiative, the release announced, would have a special focus on Umifenovir, Remdesivir and a key intermediate of Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ), all important ingredients in COVID treatment.<sup>2 a</sup> The release said that the IICT, a laboratory under the CSIR, was working with LAXAI Life Sciences (LLS) Private Ltd, a Hyderabad-based pharmaceutical company, for the synthesis of drugs to treat coronavirus infection.

The release added that “realising that drug security and uninterrupted access to essential medicines are critical for public health, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister has approved a special package<sup>2 b</sup> for promotion of bulk drug manufacturing in India and reduction of our dependence on China”. It stated that the “collaboration will result in a cost-effective process with minimal dependency on China for key raw materials”.

Highlighting other key aspects of the project and the collaboration, the release said: “India, one of the largest producers of anti-malarial drug HCQ, has seen a spurt in demand in the recent weeks. India has sent HCQ to over 50 countries over the last few days, including the United States. The LAXAI Life Sciences Pvt. Ltd. (LLS) was established in the year 2007, with a vision to accelerate the discovery chemistry campaign of global pharmaceutical companies. Today LAXAI has grown into an integrated pharmaceutical company with presence in API [active pharmaceutical ingredient] formulation development as well as API manufacturing. The collaboration will use the know-how for commercial manufacturing of the products. LAXAI Life Sciences shall be one of the first few to commercialise these products. The manufacturing of these APIs and intermediates will be taken up at U.S. Food and Drug Administration (USFDA)/Good manufacturing practice (GMP) approved plants held by LAXAI through its subsidiary, Therapiva Private Limited.”<sup>2 c</sup>

The LLS website states that its vision is to “accelerate the discovery chemistry campaign of global pharmaceutical companies, by supporting the high quality intended compounds in reduced pricing and timeline”. This is what it says about its objective: “Our



VIJAY SONEJI

**AT THE 1,200-BED CIVIL HOSPITAL** in Ahmedabad, now dedicated to COVID treatment.

goal is to produce fast and innovative solutions to global pharmaceutical and biotechnological firms within the space of integrated contract research. We combine Science, Innovation and People to help our clients strengthen their competitive advantage, while providing high quality, quick and reliable services. LAXAI acknowledges and strongly supports international efforts, to advance drug discovery. We especially value the human capacity of creative imagination, and believe that it should be essentially nurtured. The dogma for business ethics at LAXAI is, that humanity should very responsibly use modern technologies to improve the human condition in the present and the future generations.”<sup>3 a and b</sup>

In a section titled “Newsroom”, the website highlights the selection of Vamsidhar Maddipatla, chairman and managing director, LLS, as the “Transformational Entrepreneur of the Year in 2018” by “Pharma Leaders”. It also lists the achievement of Nikhil Baheti, chief financial officer of OSR Infra, Therapiva Private Ltd, and additional Director of LLS, in three acquisitions in 2018.<sup>4 a and b</sup>

Significantly, the website makes no references to recent research undertaken by, or the achievements of, LLS in its self-professed core areas. There is also no mention of specific COVID-related projects or pharmaceutical investigations that the company has carried out. Calls to the numbers listed on the website of the company’s offices in Hyderabad did not evoke a response, probably on ac-



RAJEEV BHATT

**B. R. SHETTY** at an investors’ meet in Lucknow in July 2018.

count of the multiple lockdowns in different parts of India since the last week of March. However, the profiles of LLS and its core manufacturing subsidiary, Therapiva, as listed in public, quasi-government platforms and credit rating agencies such as the ICRA Limited—a joint venture between Moody’s and various Indian commercial banks and financial services companies—reveal much about their credentials and activities and, perhaps more importantly, their ownership. Going by the Ahmedabad ventilator experience, the question whether the ownership of these companies had anything to do with the sanctioning of CSIR-IICT collaboration to LLS is pertinent.

The credentials of Therapiva, which are available in these public listings, show these entities as having a modest scale of operations but higher fixed costs. A recent ICRA rationale report shows that the company incurred operating losses with an operating margin (OPM) of -15.3 per cent and -20.4 per cent in FY2019 and H1 FY2020, respectively. The report points to high debt levels and relatively low net worth and adds that the company’s capital structure and coverage indicators were stretched and adjusted to total debt/OPBDITDA of 5.1 times and -8.4 times respectively as on September 30, 2019.<sup>7</sup> The report expects net losses in FY2020 and FY2021. Clearly, LLS and Therapiva are not recording huge successes in terms of either business or advancement of research.

#### A CURIOUS CONNECTION

The most important fact that comes up from a perusal of credit agencies’ public documents is that Therapiva is a

joint venture between Omnicare Drugs India (ODI) Private Ltd and LLS. Significantly, the ratio of ownership is listed as 61 per cent with ODI and 39 per cent with LLS. Yet, there is no mention of the predominant partner of Therapiva in any of the government or quasi-government pronouncements regarding the API project.<sup>5a</sup>

In yet another twist, ODI is a 100 per cent subsidiary of Neopharma<sup>5b</sup> International Holding Company, Dubai, which in turn is owned by Dr Bavaguthu Raghuram Shetty, the billionaire-founder of scores of enterprises, including NMC Health, once the biggest private health-care company in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Shetty’s business empire comprises various businesses, including money transfer agencies such as the UAE EXCHANGE and the forex major Travelex based in the United Kingdom as well as enterprises in hospitality, education, pharma, real estate and film production.

Shetty happens to be going through legal and financial problems in recent times. Allegations about misappropriation by Shetty in many of his companies and public limited firms have been coming up over the past year. He was forced to resign from the positions of director in many of his companies. On April 8, NMC Health went into administration in the U.K. on account of insolvency.

A sharp drop in share prices and shares pledged by Shetty to pay off debts reportedly saw his net worth falling to a fraction of the earlier estimate of \$3.5 billion. On April 15, 10 days before the PIB release was issued, the Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank filed a criminal complaint against NMC Health with the Attorney General’s Office of the UAE. On April 27, the Central Bank of the UAE ordered the freezing of his accounts and the blacklisting of his firms.<sup>6a and b</sup>

Around the same time, Indian agencies also initiated inquiries to identify potential risks caused to Indian banks through Shetty’s operations. In the last two weeks of May, the Bank of Baroda (BoB) moved lower courts and the Karnataka High Court, seeking the prohibition of sale of assets, even those not pledged to the bank, by Shetty. The billionaire had an outstanding loan of approximately Rs.1,912 crore with BoB. He and his wife had pledged 16 properties as collateral for these loans. There were reports of other banks, including the Union Bank of India, planning to take recourse to multidimensional judicial options to reclaim the loans they had offered to Shetty.

#### HIGH-LEVEL CONNECTIONS

This, then, is the context in which one must view the API project, which appears connected with a pharmaceutical company linked to Shetty. The UAE-based billionaire’s deep connections with the BJP leadership, particularly with Modi, is well recorded. Shetty was prominently visible around Modi every time the Prime Minister visited the UAE. Shetty’s praise of Modi’s leadership has always been fulsome. At a public reception during one of those visits, Shetty proclaimed that Modi was the best

Prime Minister India had ever had. He said he was such an ardent fan of Modi that he would fetch even tiger's milk if Modi asked for it.

When *Frontline* made enquiries with IICT on whether due diligence was carried out in choosing private entities for collaboration before the API project was announced, the response was affirmative. Dr M. Chandrasekharam, Senior Principal Scientist and Chair of Department of Knowledge and Information Management at IICT, said in an email response to *Frontline's* questions: "CSIR-IICT is an R&D lab, where one of the focus areas of research is to transfer some of its bench-scale technologies to the industry for commercialisation. During the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the effort was to transfer technologies on Non-Exclusive basis to pharma companies, so that a drug to the pandemic is quickly made available to the industry. So, the same technology can be transferred to several other companies who are interested in getting a licence to the technology. Before entering into an agreement with a company, we see if there is any directive from State/Central government against the company. We have not received/ no-

ticed any such directive. We then see if the company is technically competent to commercialise the bench-scale technology being transferred. The company was found to be technically competent. We have seen that the company has been prompt in making payments for the services rendered by us in the past. So, we had no issues regarding finances."

Questions on the current progress and status of the project are yet to evoke a response from IICT. As the PIB release mentioned, there is a special package allocated by the Prime Minister for promotion of bulk drug manufacturing in India, which covers the API project. The quantum of allotment for this project is not yet known, though the total approved package has an outlay of Rs.13,760 crore. Evidently, there are many questions that beg answers in relation to this project, not least about the owners of the private companies that are set to benefit from IICT innovations through this collaboration. □  
*Gautam D. is a science researcher interested in public health and communication.*  
*Sheetal P. Singh is a freelance journalist and social activist. He is co-founder of the Satya Hindi web portal.*

## Endnotes

### 1. Ministry of Science & Technology

CSIR-IICT initiatives to reduce dependency for APIs and drug intermediates

Posted on: April 25, 2020 3:41p.m. by PIB Delhi  
<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1618136>  
CSIR-IICT, Hyd, collaborating with Hyderabad-based integrated pharma private company, LAXAI Life Sciences (LLS), to develop and manufacture APIs and drug intermediates.

### 2. Press release says:

- a) Primarily focus on Umifenovir, Remdesivir & a key intermediate of Hydroxy Chloroquine.
  - b) Union Cabinet chaired by the PM, approved a "special package" for promotion of bulk drug manufacturing in India. (<https://pharmaceuticals.gov.in/sites/default/files/SCHEME%20GUIDELINES.pdf>)
  - c) Manufacturing through Therapiva Private Limited, subsidiary of LLS.
  - d) Prime Minister's "special package" deal involved.
3. a) LAXAI Life Science (LLS): <http://laxai.com/index.php> (Est. 2006), Vamsidhar Maddipatla is Chairman & MD.  
b) Corporate office of LLS in Hyderabad is shared also by OSR Infra, <http://www.osrinfra.com/index.html> (& also Therapiva, Clinovo).
4. Vamsidhar M is MD of OSR Infra. Nikhil Baheti is CFO of OSR Infra, Therapiva, Add Director of LLS. Nikhil is CA by education. (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/nikhil-baheti-b825833a/?originalSubdomain=in>, this is what's written in his About section in LinkedIn profile: He is the CFO of Therapiva Pvt Ltd, an Indian subsidiary of Abu Dhabi headquartered NeoPharma LLC. Note: no mention of LAXAI as shareholder here.  
This is Forbes article: <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/30-under-30-2019/nikhil-baheti-the-money-minder/52485/1>).
5. a) THERAPIVA Pvt Ltd (Est Dec 2017), main firm to hold manufacturing. Union Cabinet & CSIR-IICT do not

mention that Therapiva Pvt Ltd is a 61:39 joint venture between Omnicare Drugs India Pvt Ltd & LLS. <https://www.icra.in/Rationale/ShowRationaleReport?Id=93689>

b) Omnicare Drugs is a 100 per cent subsidiary of Neopharma International Holding Company, Dubai, which in turn is owned by Dr Bavaguthu Raghuram Shetty (UAE). On April 27, 2020, Central Bank of UAE ordered freezing of his accounts and the blacklisting of his firms. He needs bailout ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B.\\_R.\\_Shetty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._R._Shetty)).

6) a) On April 15, 2020, ADCB filed criminal complaint against NMC Health w/ Attorney General's Office of UAE.

b) On April 8, NMC was placed into administration by a U.K. High Court due to insolvency of the company caused by alleged frauds committed by founder & then-chairman of the board BR Shetty. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B.\\_R.\\_Shetty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B._R._Shetty)

7. ICRA report: W/ high debt levels & relatively low net worth, company' capital structure & coverage indicators were stretched w/ adjusted gearing & adjusted total debt/OPBDITDA of 5.1 times & -8.4 times, resp as on 30/09/19. Expect to report net losses in FY2020 & FY2021 also.

Relevant details of THERAPIVA:

a) <https://www.tofler.in/therapiva-private-limited/company/U73100TG2017PTC120931> (overview, financials)

b) <https://www.zaubacorp.com/company/THERAPIVA-PRIVATE-LIMITED/U73100TG2017PTC120931>

LAXAI Life Sciences: a) <https://www.tofler.in/laxai-life-sciences-private-limited/company/U24119TG2006PTC050583>

b) <https://www.zaubacorp.com/company/LAXAI-LIFE-SCIENCES-PRIVATE-LIMITED/U24119TG2006PTC050583>

Omnicare drugs India Ltd: a) <https://www.tofler.in/omnicare-drugs-india-private-limited/company/U74999TG2017PTC116303>

b) <https://www.zaubacorp.com/company/OMNICARE-DRUGS-INDIA-PRIVATE-LIMITED/U74999TG2017PTC116303>

# Infrastructure in a shambles

The rising COVID-19 figures in Uttar Pradesh point to the debilitating effects of the State's **poor public health infrastructure** on the efforts to deal with the pandemic. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**



AMIT DAVE/REUTERS

THROUGHOUT JUNE, ALL COVID-19 monitoring agencies of the Uttar Pradesh government recorded a steady rise in the number of infections and fatalities. The week comprising the last two days of June and the first five days of July registered an all-time high in weekly surge—5,560 new patients and 125 deaths, accounting for 20 per cent of the total caseload in the State and 16 per cent of the total number of fatalities respectively. As many as 1,155 cases came up on July 5, the last day of that week. The total number of cases, as of July 5, was 27,707, and 785 deaths. On both counts, Uttar Pradesh is fifth among the States affected by COVID-19.

**MIGRANT WORKERS** from Uttar Pradesh and their families arriving back in Ahmedabad, on July 1. Many of those who went back home to Uttar Pradesh at the start of the lockdown have started returning to cities in other States in search of work.

These figures, along with hundreds of individual case studies on the medical, social and economic impact of the pandemic, make it starkly clear that the overall situation in the country's most populous State is worsening by the day. They also underscore the many failures and deficiencies of Yogi Adityanath's government in

handling the crisis and related social and economic issues.

A major cause for concern, right from the first lockdown in the last week of March, was that the majority of the cases were reported from the western Uttar Pradesh districts—Gautam Buddha Nagar, Ghaziabad, Hapur, Bulandshahr, Meerut and Baghpat. About 100 days and several lockdowns later, these six districts, which form the backbone of the State's predominantly agricultural economy, continue to be the most affected. In the first week of July, they accounted for nearly 8,000 cases. They also have recorded the highest number of fatalities (220) for any administrative division of the State, constituting nearly 30 per cent of the total number of deaths.

A couple of days before these figures came out, Chief Minister Adityanath directed the bureaucracy in Lucknow and also in the six western districts to evolve special measures to tackle the pandemic. This was followed by an announcement about a special 10-day screening campaign.

Professor Sudhir Kumar Panwar, a Samajwadi Party (S.P.) leader and president of the Kisan Jagriti Manch, a collective of activists and academics focussing on agrarian policy and practical interventions in the sector, pointed out that the State government's COVID-related initiatives, especially in the six "agricultural backbone" districts, lacked concrete action and output. "The manner in which the medical crisis has continued to spiral in these districts signifies how things have been allowed to drift for as long as three and a half months. The economic hardships that have come along with this for the predominantly agrarian populace in this region are indeed crippling. There is need for a detailed study on this, leading to well-thought-out remedial measures and an action plan. It is not clear how actively the State government is pursuing this," he told *Frontline*.

The State capital, Lucknow, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Varanasi constituency are also viewed with growing concern. Lucknow added 338 cases between June 29 and July 5, taking the total number of active cases in the city to 550 and recording the third highest number in Uttar Pradesh after Ghaziabad and Noida. Varanasi district recorded 204 new cases and 11 deaths between June 29 and July 5. These figures marked a 46 per cent jump in infections in the district, whose case fatality rate rose to 4 per cent against the State average of 3.6 per cent. Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh's major industrial district, also registered 244 new cases and 13 deaths in the corresponding period.

#### **THE PRICE OF POOR INFRASTRUCTURE**

Many State Health department officials who had been consistently highlighting the utter lack of basic public health infrastructure in the State, particularly in the rural areas, cited these alarming figures to emphasise how debilitating this weakness was. One senior official, who is also a medical practitioner, said: "As is evident, it is not possible to build up good infrastructure in a short period, especially when you are confronting a pandemic of this

scale." He went on to add that the public health machinery in the State was also corruption-ridden. "We have been getting reports that several private hospitals in different parts of the State have been supplying fake COVID-19 negative reports to people for a price. An FIR [first information report] has been registered against a private hospital in Meerut for duplicating the seal and stamp of Pyarelal District Hospital, one of the two government hospitals in Meerut, to issue these fake certificates," he said.

#### **NO SUCCOUR AT HOME**

Grinding economic hardships are taking a toll on the people in large parts of the State, especially in rural areas. Historically backward regions such as Bundhelkhand and Poorvanchal are reportedly the worst hit. Right from the middle of May, there have been reports from these regions about migrants who came back as recently as the second week of April preparing to return to the cities where they had worked—Delhi, Mumbai and Gurgaon, and cities in southern India. They know that the prospects of regaining their jobs are bleak in those cities, but the situation back home is so grim that they are willing to brave that. Social activist Manoj Singh of Mahoba town in Bundhelkhand, who brought this trend to *Frontline's* notice in May, said: "Reports coming to us from all over Bundhelkhand and Poorvanchal point to frenzied efforts by these poor people to somehow make a living in their places of origin and the reverses they are suffering in this regard. As reported earlier, they are all contemplating ways to go back and making desperate efforts towards the same."

He cited the suicide of Dharmendra, a 32-year-old migrant labourer in Gangapurva village of Banda district of Bundhelkhand, to show how alarming the situation was: "Dharmendra was working as a labourer in Delhi and had returned to his village in April. He tried to enrol himself in the various job schemes announced by the State government, including the rural employment guarantee schemes, but couldn't find a place. Villagers say he was getting progressively depressed and on July 5 he hanged himself." Dharmendra's younger brother, Gyan Singh, reportedly told Manoj Singh that Dharmendra was worried about not getting a job, especially because their sister was about to get married.

Manoj Singh felt that the relief schemes announced by the government were not commensurate with the scale of reverse migration that had been taking place over the past three months. "Hundreds of thousands of people have returned to their villages. It is clear that the government has not got a fix on the exact number of those who have returned. Our inquiries show that a large number of those who have returned are starving, what to speak of medical care," he said.

Manoj Singh is apprehensive that with a pandemic raging and the socio-economic conditions worsening, many others may resort to desperate steps. Leaders and activists like Panwar and conscientious officials do not disagree. □

# Silent exodus

Migrants continue to flee the capital despite official assurances on the **city's preparedness** to tackle the pandemic. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

UNSEEN BY TELEVISION CAMERAS, A MASS exodus from the capital is under way. The first wave of migrants who left for their homes on foot were daily wagers who did not have roots in the city. But the current wave of reverse migration includes families that had lived in Delhi for decades. They survived the lockdown and hoped that the situation would improve soon. But on July 6, when the number of positive cases in Delhi crossed one lakh, no one was willing to believe the government's word on the situation being under control any more.

Reports of the collapse of the public health system, with patients being turned away from hospitals, and economic problems, pushed families to take the extreme step of moving back to where they had come from.

Even though the government used terms such as "community transmission" with caution, the public could see that COVID-19 cases were surging through communities.

A white-collar worker with a Gurgaon multinational company took a transfer to move back to Patna and continued to "work from home". A family packed its entire possessions in two cars and undertook a five-day journey to Manipur. Slum-dwellers across Delhi, gripped by fear of the virus and unable to eke out a living, took trains and buses arranged by the government, non-governmental organisations and individuals back to their villages and hometowns.

Owing to the high population density in slums, where several households share a toilet, it is impossible to practise physical distancing or maintain hygiene. Access to water, a major challenge for slum-dwellers even in normal times, is an added problem in the fight against the coronavirus. In Jai Hind and other slum colonies of South Delhi, people depend on the Delhi Jal Board tankers that supply water once a week.

Towards mid June, the first positive case was detected in the Jai Hind colony. The affected woman was shifted to a temporary structure erected at the edge of the slum. "She was not allowed to see her baby and she did not even have access to a toilet. The waste was collected in a container," said Sajida, a domestic worker, who was jolted by the entire episode.

After this, in a decision taken overnight, Sajida and her family decided to send all their furniture and travel by



PTI

**HOME MINISTER** Amit Shah and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal during a visit to the Sardar Patel COVID Care Centre and Hospital in New Delhi on June 27.

train to their village in West Bengal. Since several slum-dwellers were vacating their residences, trucks were plying regularly between Delhi and villages in West Bengal with furniture and other household items.

"It was a wise decision as now there are close to 20 cases in the slum," Sajida told *Frontline* over phone. She said she had started working in the fields back home and was generally happier. Most Jai Hind residents worked as taxi drivers or domestic workers in upmarket homes nearby.

Sultana (name changed), who lives in a slum near Jai



SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

**ANTIGEN TESTS** being conducted in a New Delhi neighbourhood on July 4.

Hind, said she was aware of the rising number of cases in the slum but did not have the option of going back to her village as her family did not own agricultural land. An orphan who was first trafficked and then sold into marriage, she had built a respectable life for herself in the city. While going back to the village was not an option for her, she said that work was drying up in the city.

Meanwhile, the Delhi government failed to carry out its decision to screen every house in Delhi by July 6. Instead, it said it would screen only those living in the containment zones.

An estimated 3.6 lakh people live in the 445 containment zones of Delhi. Some 1.6 lakh among them were identified as belonging to the high-risk or symptomatic category. These include senior citizens, pregnant women and people with co-morbidities such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases.

Within this group, 7.5 per cent were found to be positive through rapid antigen tests. Those who tested negative but showed COVID-19 symptoms were asked to take RT-PCR tests.

The latest ICMR guidelines state that “track and treat” was the “only way to prevent spread of infection and save lives” and that it was “imperative that testing should be made widely available to all symptomatic individuals”.

Every laboratory in Delhi demands a doctor’s prescription for a test although guidelines do not mandate this.

Even as Delhi became the third worst-affected region

in the country after Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, Kejriwal urged residents not to panic and provided a positive spin on the increasing numbers.

“COVID-19 cases have crossed one-lakh mark in Delhi, but there is no need to panic as around 72,000 people have also recovered. Out of 25,000 active patients, 15,000 are being treated at home. The death rate has also come down. We’ve also started the country’s first corona plasma bank. Our trials have shown that plasma therapy can help moderate patients improve significantly,” he said at a digital press briefing.

He asked people to donate plasma and said on Twitter that fewer people in Delhi required hospitalisation and more were recovering at home. “Whereas there were around 2,300 new patients daily last week, the number of patients in hospital has gone down from 6,200 to 5,300,” he said in a tweet, adding that 9,900 beds were available for COVID-19 patients in Delhi.

However, there were reports of patients complaining that hospitals refused to admit them citing non-availability of beds as the reason although the Delhi government’s app on COVID-19 treatment showed beds were available. This indicated a mismatch in the data put out by the Delhi government and hospitals, leading to confusion.

Meanwhile, the Central government said that the average number of samples tested per day had gone up in Delhi from 5,481 to 18,766 in a month and that in spite of increased testing, the positivity rate (the average rate at which samples test positive) had declined from around 30 per cent to 10 per cent in the last three weeks. □

# Wider spread

Since mid June, the **positivity rate has doubled** in the State, with COVID-19 cases, the majority of which were concentrated in the cities of Ludhiana, Amritsar and Jalandhar, being reported from rural areas. BY ZIYA US SALAM

WITH THE EASING OF LOCKDOWN restrictions, Punjab is not only confronted with a surge in COVID-19 cases or an increase in the positivity rate but also the spread of the cases over a wider area. The majority of the cases were initially reported from the cities of Ludhiana, Amritsar and Jalandhar. The disease has now spread to Patiala, Mohali, Hoshiarpur and Ferozepur. Relatively smaller numbers are being reported from Moga, Pathankot, Fazilka, Bhatinda, Mansa and Fatehgarh Sahib. What this indicates is that the rural areas of the State, that is, the agricultural belt, which was hitherto considered relatively safe, is now as much prone to COVID-19 as the urban areas are.

On July 5, Ludhiana once again reported the maximum number of fresh cases. Of the State's 175 new cases reported on that day, 70 were from Ludhiana, 26 from Patiala and 16 from Mohali. Chandigarh reported five new cases, taking the city's tally to 492, and one death. It was, however, the cases reported from Fazilka, Sangrur and Mansa that set the alarm bells ringing. Sangrur, in fact, became a new hotspot towards the end of June, reporting 81 fresh cases in 24 hours on June 25. This put a question mark on the State's bid to bring back migrant labourers from their hometowns and villages to resume economic activities and presented a clear danger of attempts to open up the economy too soon.



**PATIENTS DISCHARGED** after being treated for coronavirus infection at the COVID Care Centre in Jalandhar on July 3.

Gurvinder Singh, Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader, however, allays such apprehensions. “The spread of the disease has little or nothing to do with the return of migrant labourers. The fact is that due to the government’s campaign, more people are aware of COVID-19. So, if anybody has any symptoms, that person goes to get himself examined. This is combined with a slightly better testing ratio. Testing is still on the lower side, but it is still better than what it was in April. It results in more COVID cases coming to light from even small places.”

He said: “Until now, the government was sending anganwadi workers to check people. Now, when people see so many deaths being reported, there is an attempt to go to doctors, particularly in rural areas. People do not want to take a chance even in the case of a common cold.”



NARINDER NANU/AFP

**NEHRU YUVA KENDRA** and Punjab Youth Development Board members during the public awareness campaign, Mission Fateh, to check the spread of COVID-19 in Amritsar on July 4.

Ajmer Singh Lakhowal, BKU president, looks at it differently. “There has been a slight increase in testing, which is throwing up higher numbers. But more importantly, it is the result of laxity during the easing of the lockdown. People in urban areas forgot about physical distancing; they started participating in parties, weddings, etc. Well-off people in cities and towns just forgot about the norms to be followed during the pandemic. The disease spread from there. It has nothing to do with migrant labourers coming back. None of them has reported sick. It is the urban people who have acted in an irresponsible way.”

That may be true, but this time, the numbers are coming from places that had hitherto not reported any cases. How does one explain that, more so when there has been no arrival of travellers from abroad in recent weeks?

Lakhowal said: “It is simple. There is interaction between people. When a small town man comes to Ludhiana or Amritsar or when a big city man goes to check his fields in a small village, there is the risk of transmis-

sion. Having said that, it would be unfair to blame people from rural areas for the spread of the disease. They have observed all norms, physical distancing, wearing masks, and so on. Even when they come to *mandi* [market], they take these precautions. It is in the cities that such norms are flouted. In fact, in villages, people ensure that nobody goes to bed hungry. *Langars*, or community kitchens, are organised. And awareness programmes are held by local *gurdwaras* there. On the other hand, in cities everybody thinks of himself as a little prince.”

That could be one of the factors. Another is the lifting of most of the restrictions on weekdays. Punjab was among the first States to lift the curfew, allowing offices, shops and businesses to open from May 18. Most of the restrictions were reimposed on weekends to curtail family outings or people moving around without a sense of purpose. Cinemas, eateries, spas and gyms stayed shut. That, as it turned out, was not good enough. The latest data coming from Punjab show that the positivity rate has gone up significantly, and along with Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, Punjab is emerging as the new hotspot. Since mid June, the positivity rate, or total cases per hundred tests, has doubled in the State. The graph shows a steep climb from 0.8 cases per hundred tests in May to 2.15 cases per 100 tests between June 19 and July 2. While this is still below the national average, it shows a rise in the number of cases and the spread of the disease. Incidentally, Punjab’s testing rates are way ahead of the national average. The State does 10,257 tests per million people as opposed to the national average of 6,859.

Dr Rajesh Ghumman, who has been tackling COVID-19 cases in and around Patiala, said: “We must remember that 71 per cent of the fresh cases continue to be from the districts of Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Sangrur, and that nine of the 11 containment zones are in these three districts. So, if there is a spread, it is a thin spread across other districts. While the new figures give us a reason for concern, they are not alarming yet, which is a good sign. More so when you see the figures in relation to the numbers emerging from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat or Karnataka. The infection may have spread to more districts now in Punjab, but the numbers from the new places are not high enough to cause alarm. That provides the medical personnel with the time and opportunity to ramp up the facilities in those areas. It is easier to do so if you have just half a dozen cases in a week from Fatehgarh Sahib or Mansa but much more difficult if you have scores of patients or new patients from the families already afflicted by COVID-19. Then the resources are stretched in trying to save lives in the present or providing facilities to those who might need them tomorrow. There are no easy choices.”

Time may yet be Punjab’s ally as it seeks to prevent a rapid increase in cases in hamlets with infrastructure that may not be up to tackling the crisis. Dr Ghumman sums up the situation: “We have time, but it is constantly ticking. Whatever is to be done has to be done now.” □

# Relative ease

Rajasthan fares much better in comparison with its neighbouring States **in containing the spread** of COVID-19 and in keeping the mortality rate low. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI



**TEMPERATURE SCANNING** before the Rajasthan Board Class 10 examinations, in Bikaner on June 30.

RAJASTHAN HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT successful in keeping the number of COVID-19 cases and mortality rate low compared with some of its neighbouring States in northern India. From among the top States accounting for the most number of cases in the country, it is now in the ninth position, with West Bengal, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh surpassing it. In terms of mortality, Rajasthan is eighth among the States and has fewer deaths than Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. However, the recent spurt in the number of cases has been a cause for worry. On July 5, the State recorded the highest single-day spike of 632 COVID-19 cases. At least a hundred persons were found infected in a jail in Pratapgarh.

In March-April, Rajasthan was the second State in

northern India, after Delhi, to record a relatively high number of infections on a daily basis. This situation was particularly attributed to the spread of infection from a religious congregation in Delhi. Had its attendees been properly screened, tested and contact-traced, the incidence and spread of cases could have been controlled.

Ten districts, namely Jaipur, Jodhpur, Alwar, Bikaner, Bharatpur, Barmer, Pali, Dholpur, Sirohi and Jalore, accounted for 68.68 per cent of the total caseload in the State. Of these, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Alwar, Bikaner and Bharatpur accounted for 47.9 per cent of the total caseload. Alwar, which reported fewer infections in March and April, now stands third, after Jaipur and Jodhpur, in the total number of COVID cases.

The total number of COVID cases in the State



ROHIT JAIN PARAS

**AN AWARENESS RALLY** on COVID-19 by the Rajasthan Police in Jaipur on July 2.

doubled in a month, from 10,084 on June 5 to 20,164 as of July 6. Until June 21, the daily count of confirmed cases each day ranged between 220 and 350, which crossed 350 after June 29. And on July 6, the daily count went up by 632 cases over the previous day.

The week beginning June 29 saw a spurt in the number of cases. This could be because of the gradual “unlocking” of the State and the consequent relaxation of restrictions on people’s movement. The last weeks of April and much of May accounted for a large number of cases, mostly from migrant labourers coming in from neighbouring States. Significant numbers were reported from districts bordering Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. However, the government has managed to prevent the spread to rural areas.

The mortality rate in the State has remained at a constant of 2.2 per cent and the growth rate of confirmed cases around 2 per cent. The number of confirmed cases per million people (270.79) was almost half that of the national average (541.13). The levels of testing were also high compared with some of the States in its neighbourhood. From 4.8 lakh individuals on June 5, the number of tests doubled to 9 lakh within a month. The average number of tests conducted a day was close to 11,000 per million of the population compared with 4,960 in Madhya Pradesh and 6,066 in Gujarat. In the same period, Madhya Pradesh tested 4 lakh persons (up from 1.95 lakh on June 5) and Gujarat did 4.12 tests (up from 2 lakh on June 5). Again, when Uttar Pradesh, with a population of 22 crore plus, tested only 3,841 persons per million of its population, Rajasthan, whose population is only one-third of that (about seven crore) did 11,915 tests.

As of July 6, as many as 466 persons had died of

COVID-19 in Rajasthan. In comparison, there were 1,978 deaths in Gujarat, 833 in Uttar Pradesh and 626 in Madhya Pradesh. “Testing has increased and the number of cases is rising,” said Anil Goswami, president of the Rajasthan Nagrik Manch, a broad front of civil society organisations in the State.

The suicide of a man undergoing treatment for COVID-19 at a government hospital in the State in the last week of June drew attention to the mental health issues of COVID patients. There was still a lot of fear and stigma around the disease, Goswami said.

#### **NON-COVID CASES**

Patient footfall at the SMS Hospital, the largest government hospital in Jaipur, which had been converted to a COVID-19 hospital, had still not picked up to the level it was before the outbreak even after it was restored to being a regular hospital. From 18,219 inpatients in January, the number fell to 18,148 in February and 12,643 in March. It came to an all-time low in April with 4,305 admissions, but by June it had reached 7,840, yet less than half the number of admissions in January.

Similarly, the number of surgeries also declined to almost one-third in the period (5,507 cases in June from 13,110 in January). The number of surgeries elsewhere too had reduced in the same period as all government hospitals were converted to COVID facilities.

One of the distinctive features of the COVID-19 trajectory in Rajasthan has been the low rate of mortality and the relatively higher rates of testing. The emergence of new infections, however, poses a problem. For this reason educational institutions will continue to remain closed until the end of July. □

# Hotspot for neighbours

Even as the State grapples with an **exponential growth** in the number of cases in recent weeks, the government is desperate to restart industrial activity. BY T.K. RAJALAKSHMI

HARYANA'S SHARE IN THE NATIONAL COVID-19 caseload has been minimal, but its contribution to the sharp spikes in and around the National Capital Region in the last one month has been a cause for concern.

Until June 6, the State had reported only 3,952 con-

firmed cases. This figure zoomed to 17,999 as of July 7, according to data from the National Health Mission, Haryana. On July 6, 499 fresh cases were added, the highest single-day spike in the State since the beginning of the pandemic.

A sharp rise in infections was seen in the later part of



**A SHOP IN GURUGRAM** being spruced up on June 30. The government allowed shopping malls in Gurugram and Faridabad to reopen from July 1.



**CHIEF MINISTER** Manohar Lal Khattar, in white PPE, visiting COVID-19 patients at a hospital in Sonapat on July 4.

June. An analysis of the data for June showed that until June 12, less than 100 cases were being reported on a daily basis. From the second week onwards, however, this climbed to almost 200.

The number of cases per day jumped to 300 quickly, and by the first week of July, Haryana was reporting close to 500 cases each day. The average growth rate of cases for the State in this period was higher than the national average and greater than that of nearby States such as Punjab, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

The number of confirmed cases per million in Haryana on July 6 was 610.49, higher than the all-India average of 540.16. However, the State reported a significantly higher rate of recovery than the all-India average, with around 75.81 per cent per cent of all confirmed cases having recovered from the infection as of July 7. As a result, as of July 7 there were only 4,075 active cases under supervision.

As per the latest available figures, a total of 279 persons had succumbed to COVID-19-related complications in Haryana. This is a low figure when compared with the casualties in neighbouring Delhi.

However, according to the State Health Bulletin, not everyone who died had co-morbidities. Of the 279 casualties, only 166 persons had co-morbidities. This highlights the fact that persons without co-morbidities are also vulnerable to succumbing to the COVID-19 infection.

Haryana had tested a total of 3,23,491 persons as per data available on July 7. The testing rate per million is comparable to Punjab and Rajasthan but significantly lower than Delhi. However, the number of confirmed cases per million in Punjab and Rajasthan is less than half of Haryana's.

Haryana has probably not tested enough and the number of confirmed cases could actually be significantly higher if testing were to be expanded.

#### **WORST-AFFECTED DISTRICTS**

Not all parts of the State are equally affected, however. The top five districts in COVID-19 caseload, Gurugram, Faridabad, Sonapat, Rewari and Rohtak, accounted for

about 70 per cent of the State's total caseload as of July 7.

Among these districts, Gurugram (6,183), Faridabad (4,770) and Sonapat (1,577) accounted for a lion's share of the total number of positive cases in the State.

Gurugram had reported only 1,692 confirmed cases in the first week of June.

The rise in the number of confirmed cases was sharper in Faridabad, where, until June 6, only 620 cases had been reported. A month later, as of July 7, this number had increased sevenfold.

On June 1, a total of 14 deaths were reported in these five districts, but this went up to 197 by the end of the month.

In five other districts, the number of confirmed cases was between 100 and 250, and in 14 other districts, the number of cases was less than 100.

The spike has been concentrated in the top five districts, although reports of the emergence of fresh cases from districts such as Karnal, Palwal, Kaithal and Nuh have been worrisome. In fact, Nuh district reported its first COVID-19 death recently.

The spike in cases almost two and a half months after the nationwide lockdown came into force can partly be attributed to the opening up of public spaces, including offices and religious spaces.

The Centre's decision to go in for Unlock 2.0 might not work for States such as Haryana if the epidemic continues to steadily grow, especially in the industrial belts that employ a large number of migrant workers.

#### **LABOUR ISSUES**

The Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Manohar Lal Khattar in the State is desperate to restart industrial activity. The acute labour shortage caused by the exodus of migrant workers has affecting most industrial sectors. The government is trying to fill the gap by reserving jobs for local residents.

On July 6, the State Cabinet approved in principle the draft of an ordinance aimed at reserving 75 per cent of jobs in the private sector for local residents.

The ordinance envisages creation of industries in the private sector, which will employ more than 10 persons at a wage not exceeding Rs.50,000 a worker. The exact role of the government in facilitating the setting up of these industries and deciding the salary limit is not clear.

The State government also gave the nod for exempting new factories from labour laws such as the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, and the Factories Act, 1948, for three years.

"The government has also asked for a 'friendly atmosphere' to prevail in factories. We wonder who the government is addressing by making this kind of an appeal. We do not agree with this approach as it is anti-worker," said Jai Bhagwan, general secretary of the State unit of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

It remains to be seen if these moves will help meet industry's labour demands, especially since dilution of labour laws has already become a controversial issue among workers. □

# Communal virus

The BJP in Madhya Pradesh resorts to divisive rhetoric and tries to market its welfare schemes with an eye on the Assembly byelections even as the State is witnessing a steady increase in the caseload. BY ANANDO BHAKTO

EVEN AS COVID-19 CASES ARE STEADILY increasing in Madhya Pradesh, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has resorted to diversionary tactics, upping the ante against the opposition Congress and polarising the people on communal lines by renewing its vitriol against those who attended the Tablighi Jamaat conference held in early March in Nizamuddin, New Delhi, and blaming them for the spread of the infection. As of July 6, the cumulative positive cases in the State stood at 15,284 and deaths at 617. July 6 saw the highest single-day spike with 354 cases.

On July 5, Health Minister Narottam Mishra sought to blame the previous Kamal Nath government for the spiralling caseload. He said that the Congress government's "inaction" when the Tablighi Jamaat attendees returned to the State in droves proved costly. (The BJP assumed power in the State on March 23.)

Narottam Mishra was speaking at a function at Bairad town in Shivpuri district. "People who arrived in flights from Dubai and [Tablighi] Jamaatis are responsible for bringing coronavirus to Indore. The infection spread to other parts of the State from Indore," he said, adding that "Kamal Nath was busy with Bollywood actors Jacqueline [Fernandez] and Salman Khan and did not hold a single meeting to chalk out a strategy to tackle the spread." He was referring to a Bollywood event that the Congress Chief Minister was planning to hold in the State.

Rebutting the Minister's charges, Congress spokesperson Abbas Hafeez Khan told *Frontline* that the BJP had failed to contain the virus and was hence trying to whip up communal passion. "There is nothing unusual about what they are doing. The BJP's only hope in winning the byelections in the State lies in how best it can fracture society on religious grounds. People are disillusioned with [Chief Minister] Shivraj Singh Chouhan. Chouhan also knows this and is hence blaming a handful of Tablighi Jamaatis for the health crisis in the State," Abbas Hafeez said.

Byelections to 24 Assembly seats, most of them fall-



A. M. FARUQUI

**BJP MP JYOTIRADITYA SCINDIA** greeting Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan during the "Virtual Rally" at the party headquarters in Bhopal on July 3.

ing in the Gwalior-Chambal region, are due in the State. The BJP with 107 seats in the 230-member Assembly must win at least nine seats to remain in power.

Hafeez said: "Kamal Nath had initiated a phased restriction, closing down schools and shopping malls first [on March 8]. But the BJP felled his democratically elected government, moved his Ministers, including the



**SHIVRAJ SINGH CHOUHAN** flagging off vehicles as part of the government’s “kill corona campaign” in Bhopal on July 1.

Health Minister, to a resort in Bengaluru and undermined Kamal Nath’s proactive measures.”

The Congress was quick to point out that the BJP’s efforts to grab power resulted in the State being without a Health Minister for almost a month. Congress leaders said that the fact that top officials in the Health Department had contracted the virus was testimony to the government’s lackadaisical attitude to the pandemic. The BJP’s continued membership drive and pictures of its leaders flouting physical distancing norms have invited criticism.

As part of efforts to restrict the spread of the virus and upgrade public health preparedness, the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government planned to create a plasma bank and conduct door-to-door testing. On June 30, an official said that a plasma bank had been set up at the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Medical Science (SAIMS) in Indore. The facility would store the plasma of patients who have recovered from the infection. Narottam Mishra tweeted: “The first plasma bank in the State is being set up by SAIMS to introduce plasma therapy in Madhya Pradesh for the treatment of coronavirus infection. This bank will prove effective for the treatment of patients.”

#### ‘KILL CORONA CAMPAIGN’

On July 1, the government launched a door-to-door survey across the State in order to identify people who have COVID-19 symptoms. Advertised as the “kill corona campaign”, the drive is to be completed by July 15. “A health survey has begun in all the 52 districts in the State under the ‘kill corona campaign’,” said Additional Chief Secretary (Health) Mohmmad Suleman. He said that

under the programme, the State’s 7.5 crore population would be screened. Health Commissioner Faiz Ahmed Kidwai said: “We have conducted health surveys in 86,749 houses under 52 slums in Bhopal in which around 4.13 lakh people have been covered. Samples of 6,455 suspected coronavirus cases were taken during the survey. Of them, 160 samples tested positive.” As per the Health Department, the drive is being conducted by around three lakh people, including anganwadi workers, volunteers and non-governmental organisation workers, who have been trained by health care experts.

At the same time, the Shivraj Singh Chouhan regime appears determined to wage a political slugfest ahead of the byelections. On July 3, the Chief Minister launched a scathing attack on Kamal Nath, mocking him as a “bigger problem than COVID-19”. “Is Kamal Nath capable of fighting COVID-19? He is a bigger problem in Madhya Pradesh than COVID-19. We fought the crisis well,” he said, in his address to the people on the occasion of his 100th day in office.

Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Minister Kamal Patel demanded a Central Bureau of Investigation probe against Kamal Nath. He said that when Kamal Nath was Commerce Minister in the United Progressive Alliance government at the Centre he had favoured imports from China. By criticising the Congress for pooling in funds from China and other sources to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, the BJP’s top leadership in New Delhi has been trying to create an impression of impropriety on the part of the Congress.

Kamal Patel wrote to Union Home Minister Amit Shah on June 30 seeking action against Kamal Nath. “The way the then Commerce Minister [Kamal Nath] gave relaxation to China in imports, it appears it was done in lieu of granting assistance to the foundation,” he said in his letter.

The BJP government is heavily marketing Kamal Patel’s welfare schemes and doleouts in the midst of the pandemic with an eye on the byelections. Shivraj Singh Chouhan, in his recent address to the people, said: “We have deposited Rs.40,000 crore into the accounts of the poor in Madhya Pradesh under different schemes. We made arrangements to buy farmers’ produce even in this crisis.” He alleged that “Kamal Nath did not pay insurance premium. I [Shivraj Singh Chouhan] paid the premium as soon as I formed the government and deposited Rs.2,990 crore of insurance into farmers’ accounts.”

Prime Minister Narendra Modi amplified the BJP leaders’ self-congratulatory chatter on July 4 when he heaped praise on Madhya Pradesh’s handling of the public health crisis while reviewing the work done by party workers across the country.

Narottam Mishra attempted to trivialise the concerns regarding the situation in Indore, which has emerged as the State’s coronavirus epicentre. He claimed that Indore had recovered exceptionally well from the health crisis compared with Delhi and Mumbai. As of July 6, Indore recorded 4,954 cases and 246 deaths, while Bhopal reported 3,110 cases and 112 deaths. □

# Not a model to follow

With the total positivity rate and **the case fatality rate** almost double the national average, Gujarat appears to have completely lost its grip on managing the pandemic. **BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM**

GUJARAT'S INABILITY TO CONTAIN THE spread of COVID-19 has made it one of the top five States in the country that have emerged as regions of grave concern. It is not just the number of positive cases and deaths that makes the situation worrisome but the State's total positivity rate too, which is well above the national average. Additionally, the case fatality rate is also rising. In spite of the Central government's pressure on severely affected States to adopt stringent measures, which includes ramping up testing, Gujarat appears to have com-

pletely lost its grip on managing the pandemic. Among the main reasons for the surge is the opening up of industrial zones such as those in the southern city of Surat. Until then, it was only Ahmedabad that had a high concentration of positive COVID-19 cases and deaths. While Ahmedabad still remains the epicentre, there are ample signs that the virus has made its way across the State.

On July 7, Gujarat recorded 34,812 positive cases and 1,920 deaths. Gujarat, after Maharashtra, Delhi, Tolan-



**WAITING IN QUEUE** to collect medicines from "Clinic on Wheels" in Surat on July 9.

gana and Tamil Nadu, accounts for a large number of cases in the country. On July 4, it recorded a daily high of 712 cases.

### TOTAL POSITIVITY RATE

It is the State's total positivity rate (TPR) and case fatality rate (CFR) that are of utmost concern. Currently, the TPR is 13.47 per cent, well above the national average of 6.73 per cent. The TPR is the rate of percentage of tests that turn out to be COVID positive. In short, a large percentage of the people being tested are turning out positive. According to an epidemiologist, if the rate is high, it usually indicates that only the sickest persons are being tested. According to him, it is critical to ramp up testing to include a larger number of people. Only then will a true picture emerge, said the doctor who works at a private laboratory in Ahmedabad.



VIJAY SONEJI

**OUTSIDE** a health care centre in Ahmedabad, waiting to test for COVID-19 on July 8.

Delhi's TPR was around 37 per cent towards the end of June. The State was told to increase testing, which it did not do. Once it goes over 10 per cent, the number of people being tested needs to go up substantially, said the epidemiologist.

A spokesperson for a private testing kit manufacturer said there were enough testing kits available. It is the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) that allots kits according to a State's requisition. Gujarat hopefully would have asked for adequate numbers, he said.

### CASE FATALITY RATE

The CFR is the number of people who die from COVID-19 for every 100 people who test positive. Figures say that Gujarat's case fatality rate is 5.56 per cent. Ahmedabad's is far higher at 7.2 per cent. India has reported a 2.95 per cent CFR.

Some sources say the State has tried to hide the number of deaths and even the number of positive cases. Local people too fear that the number of positive cases and deaths could be much higher than what is given by the government now. "No purpose is served when you

hide the numbers," said the Ahmedabad doctor. "This is why testing is crucial. If cases are detected early, it will immediately reduce the fatalities as treatment can be given in time."

In order to address these concerns, the ICMR sanctioned 33 hospitals and 19 private laboratories in Gujarat to conduct tests and advised the State government to make optimal use of the testing capacity.

Adhering to the ICMR's advice and to encourage more testing, the State reduced the fee for tests from Rs.4,000 to Rs.2,500. According to the State Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Gujarat tested approximately 5,300 cases a day in June, while it has the capacity to test up to 8,000 per day. Until July 7, a total of 4,18,044 people had been tested. A doctor treating COVID-19 patients in Ahmedabad said there was an urgent need to ramp up testing.

Until the ICMR and the Central government stepped in, the State government had been reluctant to allow private laboratories to conduct COVID-19 tests, saying that government facilities were not being used to their full capacity.

Under pressure from the top, in June, private laboratories were permitted to test, but with the caveat that only those holding a Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree could prescribe the test and not those with bachelor degrees (MBBS). This led to a petition being filed in the Gujarat High Court.

"It is an indicator of how they work. Clueless and without a long-term plan. What is the point in ruling out MBBS doctors? Prescribing a COVID test does not require you to be a specialist," said the Ahmedabad doctor.

Interestingly, the State, which keeps harping on its progressive development schemes, has been significantly silent these past few weeks on the COVID situation and the "stringent measures" that will be put in place.

### SURAT, THE SECOND HOTSPOT

The only major announcement made by Chief Minister Vijay Rupani in the recent weeks was that Surat, with a surge in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, would be declared the second largest hotspot in the State. Surat had reported 2,014 active cases and 188 deaths as of July 7.

The opening of the diamond polishing units and textile markets is perhaps a reason for the spike in cases. Although diamond units say they have maintained physical distancing norms, there have still been positive cases in factories, leading to several units being shut down.

However, the bigger culprit would be the textile markets where thousands of shops are housed in massive towers. Moreover, the manpower required is sizeably large, increasing the risk of virus transmission.

"It was bound to happen in Surat and in the markets," said Hasmukh Shah, a textile trader. "But we have to start work. If they keep shutting us down, people will start closing businesses."

The districts of Aravalli, Banaskantha, Kheda and Gandhinagar have also witnessed a spike in cases. □

# A ray of hope

The COVID situation continues to take Mumbai through **ups and downs**, but there seems to be a slight improvement. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**



RAFIQ MAGBOOL/AP

**HEALTH WORKERS** screen people for COVID-19 symptoms at a slum in Mumbai on July 8.

MUMBAI CONTINUES TO EXPERIENCE UPS and downs in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is a distinct feeling that the “ups” are gaining ground.

The statistics of July 7 showed an encouraging drop in the number of cases of infection, with Mumbai recording 806, the lowest single-day figure in the past two months. Even Dharavi, which until recently was a hot-spot, recorded only one new case on that day. The city’s doubling rate, which was about 14 days at the start of June, is now 38 days. In Dharavi, it is 102 days.

After the initial easing of restrictions on June 1, the

State government has been slowly adding to the list of things that will lead the city back to normal life. Local trains have started running, albeit with fewer services. Only those engaged in essential services and those who have to travel to work are permitted to ride the trains. Self-employed people such as electricians, plumbers and others who provide services have also been allowed to start working as long as they carry identity cards and licences given by their associations. Taxis and rickshaws plying on the roads are also bringing back a sense of normalcy.

The government is going to implement staggered



PTI

**CHIEF MINISTER** Uddhav Thackeray.

working hours for its staff in order to space out the load on public transport. While the ban on gyms, malls and dining-in restaurants still holds good, the easing up for salons, barber shops, cobblers, stand-alone shops selling non-essential goods has brought relief to small and medium businesses.

Hotels, lodges and guest houses started operating on July 8 with 33 per cent occupancy. It is doubtful how many guests will check in in a situation where there are still no international flights and no tourists or people visiting on business. Yet, the very act of allowing hotels to reopen is an indicator that things are looking up. The State government has issued guidelines with standard operating procedures for hygiene and restrictions in the functioning of gyms, pools and other common areas within hotels.

#### **OPENING UP OF TESTING**

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has also taken a step forward with its decision to open up testing for coronavirus. Earlier, only patients with symptoms could be tested, and that, too, with a doctor's prescription. Those who had no symptoms or no high-risk contact but still wanted to reassure themselves that they were free of the virus could not get tested. Now they can do so at 17 designated private laboratories in the city at a cost of Rs.2,500 without a doctor's prescription. If the test report is positive, a hospital bed is allocated through ward-level "war rooms" of the BMC. A BMC press release said 3,63,120 tests had been conducted in the city until the first week of July.

The move is part of the BMC's Mission Universal Testing, which aims to get every Mumbaikar tested. It is in keeping with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) guideline that States should do away with the need for a doctor's prescription for testing. The move may result in a spike in recorded cases as more people come forward to get themselves tested.

There are also signs that the COVID-19 graph in Mumbai may be plateauing, though the situation might change with increased testing. As of July 5, there were

23,732 active cases in the city against 27,659 active cases as of June 25.

Such encouraging developments notwithstanding, the crisis persists. The number of positive cases is rising in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) comprising eight major civic bodies of Navi Mumbai, Mira-Bhayander, Thane, Bhiwandi-Nizampur, Ulhasnagar, Kalyan Dombivli, and Panvel. Government data show that between June 1 and June 23 the number of positive cases in Mumbai increased by around 70 per cent. During that period, the MMR saw a 235 per cent surge. Cases in Navi Mumbai leapt from 2,673 to 5,923; in Thane they rose from 3,721 to 7477; Ulhasnagar saw a rise from 331 to 1,084 cases. The worst hit was Mira Road and Bhayander, where the number of cases jumped from 699 to 2,510. This sudden increase is being unofficially attributed to the relaxation of the lockdown, which saw local trains running and offices reopening.

#### **ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS**

There are job losses at all levels. The fact that street vendors are not able to ply their trade yet and the tight rein on local train services are aspects that will have to be tackled in the near future for the city to become an economic powerhouse again. With over 10 lakh migrant workers having left for their home States, there is a severe shortage of labour. Mumbai perhaps appreciates for the first time the symbiotic relationship that existed between the services provided by migrant workers and the job opportunities the city provided. Many of them wish to return but are finding it difficult to do so; there are also fears about the COVID-19 situation in Mumbai. The return of migrant labour is crucial to the city's functioning.

The Maha Vikas Aghadi government has tried to plug this gap by launching the Maha Jobs portal on which potential employers can post information about job openings. The only negative thing about it is the insistence on a domicile certificate, a throwback to the days when the Shiv Sena used to rant about preferences for the *Marathi manoos*. However, it is unlikely that returning migrant workers will face problems on this count.

For exhausted Mumbaikars, the lifting of even the smallest restriction is welcome. The city, which put up with more than three months of stringent curbs, is now gradually emerging out of a dark zone. Mumbaikars also bore the brunt of subtle and not-so-subtle jibes from the Centre. Of course, these were part of an ugly political game, with the Bharatiya Janata Party using the pandemic to belittle its former ally, the Shiv Sena. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray reacted with a composure that, quite frankly, one hardly expected from a Sena leader. It is only now that he finally took a dig at the Centre through his party newspaper, *Saamna*. In the July 7 edition, the *Saamna* editorial recalled that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had expressed confidence that the battle against COVID-19 would be won in 21 days. It reminded its readers that it was now over 100 days but the crisis remained unresolved. □

# Slipping away

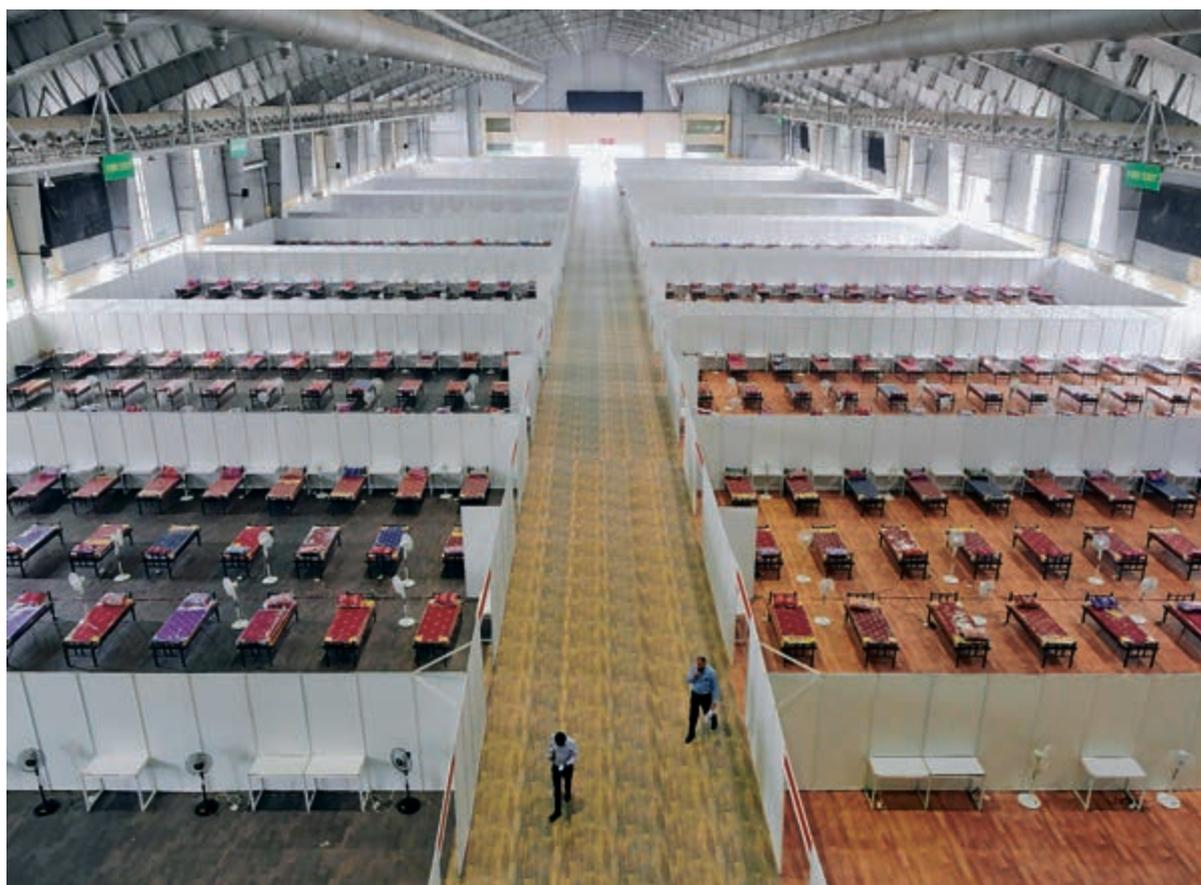
As the State government is **struggling to identify the sources** of the rapidly spreading infection, issues such as shortage of medical personnel and hospital beds for COVID-19 treatment are causing concern.

BY VIHAR AHMED SAYEED

IT WILL NOT BE WRONG TO SAY THAT THE Karnataka government is losing the plot in its management of the COVID-19 spread in the State, particularly in Bengaluru. Ever since the pandemic broke out, the Health Department has been publishing a daily media bulletin giving the latest list of infected persons. What

used to be a document containing a few pages has since late June turned into an almost 100-page volume as the number of cases has increased exponentially.

The Department, which was lauded for its comprehensive “testing-(contact)tracing-isolation” system to contain the spread of the virus in the first three months of



MANJUNATH KIRAN/AFP

**A VIEW OF** a COVID Care Centre with a 10,100-bed capacity at the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre in Bengaluru on July 7.



K. MURALI KUMAR

**A CONTAINMENT ZONE** at Deepanjali Nagar ward in Bengaluru on July 4.

the pandemic, was struggling to identify the source of infection in an overwhelming majority of cases in the first week of July.

On June 24, the State had 10,118 cases, and the corresponding figure for Bengaluru was 1,678. By July 7, the figure had risen sharply to 26,815 cases, with Bengaluru accounting for 11,361 of them. Of the 416 deaths recorded in the State so far, 252 were reported in the fortnight since June 24. Of the 155 deaths that have taken place in Bengaluru since the start of the pandemic, 77 took place in the past fortnight. The number of tests being done in the State has increased. Approximately 15,000 tests were conducted every day with a cumulative total of 7,22,305 tests done since March.

While the Health Minister and senior bureaucrats of the Ministry have not stated it categorically, experts are saying that the way the virus has spread in pockets of Bengaluru is a sign of community transmission. What is worrying is the lack of hospital beds in the city.

On June 30, a 52-year-old man who had complained of severe breathlessness and high fever was refused admission by 18 hospitals, including a couple of government hospitals. He died in an ambulance in the premises of a private hospital. On July 4, the body of a 65-year-old man infected with COVID-19 was reportedly lying unattended for hours. Having tested positive for the virus, he was waiting for an ambulance on the street for more than three hours when he complained of breathlessness and died. These are not isolated incidents. There have been many cases of people being turned away from hospitals.

In her Twitter post, Soumya Reddy, the Congress Member of the Legislative Assembly from Jayanagar in the city, narrated an incident in which even after her personal intervention, a patient who needed critical care could not be admitted to hospital.

A statement by the Chief Minister's Office in late

June had said that Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa had issued an order that 50 per cent of the beds in private hospitals should be reserved for treating COVID cases. This was followed by full-page advertisements in newspapers listing 73 private hospitals in Bengaluru identified for treatment of COVID patients, yet there have been cases of people being turned away at hospital gates.

A Bengaluru Bruhat Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) health official said that this could be because the government has capped the cost of treatment for COVID patients at private hospitals. (At the highest slab, the price of an Isolation ICU with ventilator has been capped at Rs.25,000 a day.)

After Dr K. Sudhakar, Minister of Medical Education, warned of criminal action against hospitals refusing to treat COVID patients or charging exorbitant fees, a show cause notice was sent to hospitals flouting the rules but there has been no follow-up action so far. While it is unclear how many beds have actually been reserved for COVID patients in private hospitals, information from BBMP officials has revealed that 1,300 beds in government hospitals and 850 beds in government medical colleges reserved for COVID patients were almost occupied.

While the shortage of beds in private hospitals may be artificial, there is a real shortage of medical personnel to attend to COVID patients in the city as doctors and nurses are panicky. An audiovisual clip of Dr Taha Mateen, managing trustee of HBS hospital in Shivajinagar in the city, explaining the crisis has gone viral. In the clip, which was shot in the ICU of the hospital, he says: "I have beds, oxygen beds, ventilators, but no doctors to handle patients. Patients are continuously calling me, because their fathers are breathless, their daughters are breathless, their brothers are breathless, and they cannot find a [hospital] room in Bangalore [sic]." Mateen also exhorts his colleagues to come back to the hospital.

Dr R. Ravindra, the president of the Private Hospitals and Nursing Homes Association, admitted that "all private hospitals are facing a shortage of medical personnel".

The government has incentivised the services of medical and nursing students by saying that they will get five extra marks in the postgraduate National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) if they get involved in treating COVID patients.

The government's response on the whole has been found wanting. A strict night curfew starting at 8 p.m. is being implemented in the city, and the entire State will be locked down on Sundays. Although it was certain that there would be a surge in cases in Bengaluru, the government has been slow to act.

Dr Sylvia Karpagam, a doctor and public health activist, said: "You cannot prepare for a pandemic in retrospect. You have to prepare ahead for a pandemic. There were enough warnings [in Bengaluru] that cases would rise, and that there would be panic among the people. What we are seeing here is that everything happens as a troubleshooting and firefighting kind of exercise." □

# Fear over the cities

As “triple lockdowns” and **community quarantines** increase in Kerala, the question is whether the State is finally seeing community transmission. BY **R. KRISHNAKUMAR** IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM



S. MAHINSHA

**THE KERALA STATE SECRETARIAT** locked following the “triple lockdown” in Thiruvananthapuram on July 6.

MORE THAN 200 COVID-19 POSITIVE CASES every day—that is the new normal in Kerala.

The State has so far managed to keep the caseload low, delay the spread of infection and keep the pressure on health facilities down. It reported just over 5,000 cases and 27 deaths in the five months since the first COVID case came to light in the last week of January. But a rising trend has been evident in recent weeks. On July 7, for instance, the State saw 272 new cases, the highest for a day until then.

Cases of local transmission of COVID-19 are increasing steadily. Hotspots are mushrooming where it is no longer possible to identify all infectious individuals and their contacts. Community-wide containment measures are being announced everywhere.

All of a sudden, by the first week of July, there were over 100 positive cases in which the source of infection could not be traced immediately. Such cases are being

reported from all districts, and is notably high in Malappuram, Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam and Kannur districts.

The State government is warning people to be “extremely vigilant” if things are not to go “out of hand”. But it maintains that there is no evidence of community transmission, yet.

A grave situation seems to be developing in cities that have huge floating populations and daily commuters and in congested “rural-urban” areas where a large number of people go to cities for work or business and where the concentration of expatriates who have come back from various parts of the world is high.

## TRIPLE LOCKDOWN IN THE CAPITAL

The worsening scene in the capital city, Thiruvananthapuram, was brought into focus on July 5 by the Minister in charge of the district, Kadakampally

Surendran, who described it as “a city sitting atop a volcano”. Days ahead of that, several wards in the Corporation area had been declared as “containment zones”, as clusters of people turning COVID positive began to be reported one after the other.

On July 5, as many as 27 positive cases were reported in the city, of which 22 were through local transmission. Two days later, when the city reported 54 new cases, 47 of them were those involving local transmission. It was the first time that the city was reporting transmission of cases beyond family members, number of local transmission cases exceeding the number of imported cases, an increase in containment zones and local clusters, and “super-spreading events”—those involving people who routinely engaged with the general public turning positive and transmitting the infection to many “contacts”.

Soon the situation turned so bad that the government put Thiruvananthapuram under “triple lockdown”, a fancy term to indicate major restriction of movement of people in the entire district, within specific localities, and inside homes. The State Secretariat was shut down. The Chief Minister announced that he would be working from home during the week-long lockdown.

The situation in Kochi, the business capital of the State, and Kannur, a burgeoning but congested urban centre, was no different. In Malappuram, another red spot, several panchayats within the coastal taluk of Ponnani were put under “triple lockdown” for a week until July 6.

The restrictions were announced after tests conducted as part of a sentinel surveillance effort found 10 persons, including two doctors and three nurses of two private, non-COVID hospitals, testing positive for COVID-19. Both hospitals were closed for a while, a measure that invited some criticism later, but the lists of contacts of the two doctors who were asymptomatic throughout were quite long.

An area of concern for the authorities is the string of coastal villages in the State, where the density of population is one of the highest in India. The number of cases reported in a single day (July 6) from Poonthura, a coastal village near Thiruvananthapuram, was 26. The next day over 60 samples tested positive there, a lot of them of people who also had visited a nearby market, closer to the heart of the city.

Another worry was the rise in number of “super-spreading” events in crowded urban centres that saw movement of people to and from other places as part of their official, business or medical needs.

From the last week of June, several such cases of vendors in markets, food delivery boys, wholesale cigarette sellers, provision store owners/employees, fish sellers, personnel on security duty (even before the Secretariat), paramilitary personnel, medical representatives and health workers had been identified as the nucleus of small and large clusters. The contacts’ list at times ran into hundreds.

Areas where these clusters had formed were routinely isolated, widespread tests conducted, and surrounding

areas put under surveillance. But fresh clusters were forming in many nearby places.

## WORRYING SIGNS

The State unit of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) has for some time been saying that community transmission is already a reality in Kerala and that the government must acknowledge it. IMA representatives say that the increase in the number of cases with no known source of infection, patients with no symptoms, health workers in non-COVID hospitals turning positive, and transmission of cases being reported in places such as markets are all worrying signs that Kerala needs to take into account urgently.

To support its argument, the organisation has also pointed out instances of people who have returned to the State with no symptoms turning positive later on; of health workers who have had no contact with COVID-19 patients testing positive; of Keralites who left the State testing positive in other States (a proposition challenged by the State Health Department through a study).

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said: “Even though there is need for heightened vigil, we need to understand that so far in only 2 per cent of the cases does the source of infection remain unknown, while the all-India average is around 40 per cent. However, if we do not bring the situation under control immediately, it will surely lead to a situation of community transmission. That is why we have announced lockdowns in many places even before it reached a point of community spread.”

Meanwhile, the State government has made regulations under the Kerala Epidemic Diseases Ordinance 2020 applicable in cases involving violation of containment guidelines; making wearing of face masks and social distancing norms mandatory for a year; and prohibiting mass gatherings and spitting in public places. Violators will have to pay a fine of up to Rs.10,000 and/or undergo a jail term of up to two years.

With the State experiencing a shortage of manpower to fight COVID, the government announced that its offices would work with only 50 per cent staff and the rest would be reserved to fight the pandemic, for instance, in first line COVID treatment centres and quarantine centres.

As the number of locally transmitted cases rises, the rate of secondary and tertiary transmission is of grave concern. So are the increasing instances of infection among medical workers, shortage of testing kits, and delay in publishing test results that leads to delayed containment of infected people. An important issue the IMA and others have raised is the need to increase the number of tests done in the State.

As instances of triple lockdowns and community quarantines increase, the focus surely is on whether the State is finally seeing wide community transmission and how much is the virus spreading undetected. Meanwhile, the severe economic impact of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns on the people remain submerged, at least for now. □

# Districts in focus

The government, which refuses to make its fight against the pandemic inclusive, claims that the COVID-19 curve is flattening in Chennai. But it has a new reason to worry: the **rise in infections** in the districts.

BY R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN

TAMIL NADU'S COVID-19 CONTROL EFFORT continues to remain an exclusive show of the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and its government. This has proved inadequate to deal with the gigantic problem on hand, but the government is not inclined to make the struggle inclusive.

The government has steadfastly refused to involve in the effort the opposition parties or film stars, who have a massive following, or even former cricketers who are now part of the Indian Premier League (IPL). Chennai is home to one of the most successful teams in IPL, the Chennai Super Kings.

Nearly all political parties flagged this issue from March onwards, including Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) president M.K. Stalin and Makkal Needhi Maiam founder Kamal Haasan.

Most of these well-meaning suggestions have been met with derisive comments from the ruling party, in-

cluding Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswamy himself. He once asked Stalin if he was a doctor. His party spokespersons have asserted that no political party, including the DMK, has come forward with any worthwhile suggestions.

Until now, the Chief Minister has not even convened an all-party meet on tackling the pandemic, while all neighbouring States and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself have done so.

While Ministers have been complaining about the public's non-cooperation in safety measures such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing, the campaign to reach the message across to the people is almost exclusively handled by the Chief Minister and a few nondescript film personalities.

Although the Chief Minister has been featured in videos with public safety messages for the past few months, the message is yet to make a widespread impact.



**CHIEF MINISTER** Edappadi K. Palaniswamy laying the foundation stone for relaying of water pipelines from Salem to Attur, at Mettupatti in Salem district on June 28.



M. SATHYAMOORTHY

**TRIBAL RESIDENTS** keeping vigil at the entrance of a village, in Udhagamandalam on July 2. A COVID-19 case was reported in a neighbouring village.

The government has also refrained from imposing massive fines on violators of lockdown and other safety measures unlike its Kerala counterpart.

Clearly, the AIADMK's eyes are on the Assembly elections due next year.

Meanwhile, the number of COVID-19 infections continues to grow. Tamil Nadu accounts for about a seventh of all infections in India—over one lakh when the country crossed seven lakh infections on July 6—and the numbers show no sign of slowing down.

This has not prevented officials from claiming that the State's COVID-19 response had worked and that the infection rates had gone down in Chennai. There is a declining trend in Chennai, but there is not enough data to prove that the city has managed to flatten the curve.

In a videoconference with District Collectors on July 6, Chief Secretary K. Shanmugam placed more emphasis on controlling the infection spread in the districts.

Until now, of the 114,978 infections in the State, Chennai accounts for 70,017 (as of July 6). In July, the total infections in the State each day were 3,882 on July 1, 4,343 on July 2, 4,329 on July 3, 4,280 on July 4, 4,150 on July 5 and 3,827 on July 6. Of this, Chennai's share was 2,182 (July 1), 2,027 (July 2), 2,082 (July 3), 1,842 (July 4), 1,713 (July 5) and 1,747 (July 6).

It is clear that the number of positive cases in all the other districts combined was higher than that of Chennai on all days barring July 1: 2,316 on July 2, 2,247 on July 3, 2,438 on July 4, 2,437 on July 5 and 2,080 on July 6.

Officials are heaving a sigh of relief at this declining trend, but without proper stratified random sampling, it is not possible to come to the conclusion that COVID-19 cases in the city have actually fallen. Officials said that their optimism was based on two facts: firstly, Tamil Nadu was testing more than any other State, as a result of which more cases were coming to light, and secondly,

rural Tamil Nadu was still vigilant against the disease.

In many villages, an encouraging sign was that residents were watching out for any outsider coming in. "I visited five to six districts the last week. I saw that in many villages the entrance to the village was blocked with thorny plants or other barricades. For villagers to go out, there is a separate path in another part of the village," said a political functionary. An official said that unlike Karnataka or Telangana, Tamil Nadu was not prioritising the economy over its citizens' lives. Although there has been pressure on the Chief Minister to follow the model in these States and open up economic activity, he has refused to do so. While these are positive signs, critics said there are several basic issues on which the State has been floundering.

"It appears that the basic test-trace-isolate-treat model has been abandoned in favour of other modes in large parts of the State," said a former bureaucrat. "But the fact is that this model is relevant even now in districts where the infections are still fewer," he added.

A former public health official said that it was strange that the government delayed installing oxygen pipelines for all beds in hospitals. "This was a requirement from day 1. We are doing it after five months of experimentation," he added. Other such issues are of pool testing, which experts and commentators advocated in the media and directly to the government, and testing of people in fever clinics or camps. The Chennai Corporation did run camps early on, but they were few and far between.

The rise in infections in the districts is a cause for concern. With fewer resources than Chennai and hard-pressed for tertiary care, the districts will find controlling the infections a massive challenge.

July will, therefore, be critical for the State, even as the COVID-19 response remains a government-only show. □

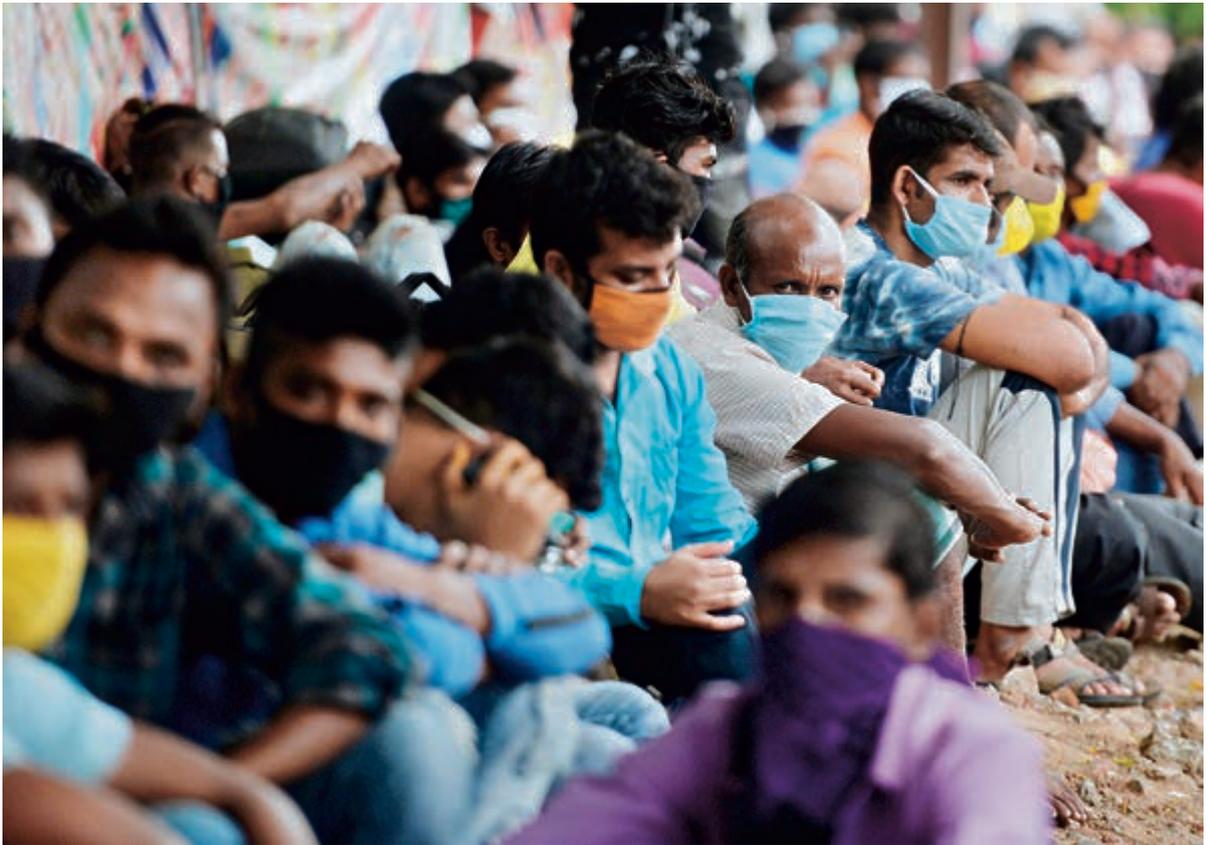
# Dangerous denial

Bihar and Jharkhand are apparently moving to the **community transmission stage**, with their governments and people throwing caution to the winds following the lifting of strict lockdown restrictions. BY **PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI**

BIHAR AND JHARKHAND HAVE SEEN A SPIKE in the number of COVID-19 cases since migrant workers started coming back home. Both the States are apparently moving towards the community transmission stage, but neither the governments nor the people seem to worry about it.

These States have followed a queer strategy to deal

with the pandemic. When there was a complete lockdown, they followed a strict regimen of testing, quarantining, contact tracing and treating. This resulted in fewer cases being reported until June 15. But once the unlock-down began, it was chaos again: testing became negligible, Bihar closed its quarantine centres, people in both States started crowding paan kiosks at street corners and



ARUN SANKAR/AFP

**STRANDED MIGRANT** workers waiting to board a special train to Bihar from the MGR Central Railway Station in Chennai on June 18.

spitting on the road, and crowds started thronging markets. People stopped wearing masks and remembering to maintain social/physical distancing. This resulted in a sudden spike in the number of reported cases. But the authorities in both States continued to boast about the excellent recovery and low mortality rates, attributing these to the strong natural immunity of Biharis/Jharkhandis and the benign influence of God. The ubiquitous claim is: “We are naturally gifted with a strong immunity system and God has also been kind to us.”

In Bihar, while there were 8,381 cases of infection, with 60 deaths, up to June 25, there were 12,140 cases, with 102 deaths, up to July 6. Significantly though, 9,014 patients have recovered, leaving the number of active cases at a moderate 3,028. This takes the State’s recovery rate to almost 74 per cent as against the national rate of 61 per cent. The State capital, Patna, once again, continues to be the worst affected city, with as many as 55 cases reported on July 6. So far, the State has tested 2,64,109 samples, which is too low for the State’s population.

### GOVERNMENT SHIFTS FOCUS

Surprisingly, ever since the restrictions started easing, the government has shifted its focus away from the coronavirus. The people also seem to have forgotten about the precautions or social/physical distancing norms. A glaring example of this was seen on June 17 at Paliganj in Patna district where a lavish wedding left the groom dead the very next day and hundreds of guests infected. Throwing caution to the winds, more than 400 guests attended the wedding. The groom, an engineer from Gurugram, already had a high fever, but nobody thought of getting him tested for COVID-19. When many guests started having symptoms, the authorities took note of that and got 400 samples tested. So far 111 persons have tested positive, and the infected include the videographer and the bandwalaahs. The district authorities say there was permission only for 50 guests.

People in Patna told this correspondent that life was back to normal in Bihar, with chaos in all public spaces, including markets and roads. The onset of the monsoon has compounded the problems, with streets getting flooded, large areas being submerged, and filth and squalor floating into homes. The scare of corona has taken a back seat. The government’s focus has shifted from managing the pandemic to discussing election preparations, which were flagged off with virtual meetings first by Union Home Minister Amit Shah and then by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar holds virtual meetings with party workers almost every day.

“Bihar is having zero testing, and I am afraid the State will soon have a corona explosion. Hundreds of cases are being reported every day, but the government does not seem to be bothered at all. If people are recovering, they say it is owing to strong immunity; if they die, they say it is destiny. Everything here is at the mercy of God,” said Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Manoj Kumar Jha, a member of the Rajya Sabha. “The government’s priority

should be saving people’s lives and improving the health infrastructure, but they are only worried about holding and winning the election,” he remarked.

### STRONG IMMUNITY OF JHARKHANDIS

Jharkhand has, except for the election preparations, almost a similar story. With the unlockdown in progress, life is back to normal with crowded markets and with people moving around without wearing masks, maintaining physical distancing or following COVID-19 protocols. Even though the number of cases is rising rapidly, the recovery rate is also good, thanks mainly to the naturally strong immunity of Jharkhandis. While the State had only 2,219 cases, with 13 deaths, up to June 25, on July 6 the corresponding numbers were 2,854 and 22. Of these, 2,068 patients have recovered, making the recovery rate an impressive 72.46 per cent, much above the national recovery rate. The State has only 766 active cases at the time of writing, making the authorities pat themselves on the back.

Government officials cite the case of Simdega district to buttress their point. Simdega, one of the 20 most backward districts in the country (according to the NITI Aayog), had become one of the worst affected. It has only one private hospital, one government hospital which is always understaffed, and no ventilator. The district had only 27 cases on May 29, when its migrants workers started returning. By June 8, it had 59 cases; all but two of them were migrant workers. By June 23, it had 348 cases, 119 of them active, and one patient had died. On that day it was declared the worst-affected district in Jharkhand.

The district authorities started strict testing, quarantining and treatment, which paid off. On July 4, though the district had reported a total of 353 (all but seven were migrant workers) cases, only five were active. It had achieved a recovery rate of 99 per cent and a low mortality rate of 0.3 per cent. In the week before July 4, the district reported only two new cases. “We simply followed the protocol strictly and managed to win the first round, but we need to be vigilant,” said a senior State government official.

But now people are becoming lax and this is what is worrying. “Nobody is wearing masks, no social distancing norms are being followed. People don’t seem to be aware that a pandemic is raging,” said Subodhkant Sahay, senior Congress leader and a former Union Minister. He too attributed the impressive recovery rate to Jharkhandis’ strong immunity. “Living amidst rich natural bounty and not mixing too much with the outside world is also a factor,” he said.

But medical practitioners from Ranchi are worried about the signs of community transmission in the State. Many of them who spoke to *Frontline* said people without any COVID-19 symptoms and without any travel or contact history were testing positive when they sought treatment for completely different ailments. “This definitely shows we are moving towards the community transmission stage and we need to be more careful,” one of them said. □

# Falling behind

Unable to make much headway in enforcing physical distancing, and with the number of COVID-19 cases **poised to rise exponentially**, the West Bengal government announces a rigid lockdown in all containment zones across the State. BY **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

WITH THE NUMBER OF COVID-19 CASES AND deaths rising at an alarming rate in West Bengal, frantic political activities with an eye on the 2021 Assembly elections, unchecked relaxation of the lockdown conditions and flagrant violations of physical distancing norms threaten to exacerbate the situation. On July 7, the State witnessed the highest single-day spike in COVID-19 fatalities for the fifth consecutive day, with 25 people dying in the last 24 hours. The total number of COVID-19 cases in the State stood at 23,837, with 7,513 active cases,

of which 850 tested positive in the last 24 hours. The total number of COVID-positive people who have died was 829, and of the total number of deaths around 79 per cent of the patients had co-morbidities.

As of July 7, among the new COVID-positive cases, 291 were from Kolkata, 189 from North 24 Paraganas, 74 from Howrah, 70 from South 24 Paraganas, and 50 from Malda. As an immediate measure, the State government announced a lockdown in all the containment zones in the State from July 9 onwards. According to its order,



SWAPAN MAHA PATRA / PTI

**A CROWDED ROAD** in Kolkata on July 8. During Unlock 2.0, people were seen to openly violate physical distancing norms and not adhere to basic precautions such as wearing masks despite the government's exhortations to do so.

there is to be “strict lockdown and the following activities, *inter alia*, may be closed in these areas: i) All offices government and private; ii) All non-essential activities; iii) All congregations; iv) All transportation; and v) All marketing/industrial/trading activities.... Residents of the containment zones may be exempted and prohibited from attending government and private offices....”

Earlier, in a drastic move to curtail the spread of the virus, the State had stopped flights arriving from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Nagpur and Pune to Kolkata until July 19. Following the State government’s request to the Centre, international flights to Kolkata, too, were stopped. On June 25, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had extended the lockdown in the State until July 31 with the “existing relaxations” in place.

However, for all its efforts, the State government was not able to make much headway in enforcing physical distancing or even necessary precautions such as wearing masks. With the relaxation of the lockdown and the reopening of offices, restaurants and shopping malls, people were seen flagrantly violating norms of physical distancing and not wearing masks. Local markets were as crowded as they were in the pre-lockdown days and there was overcrowding on public transport. The overall situation barely gave the impression that the State was in the midst of a pandemic.

Furthermore, with the Assembly elections due in 2021, political activities also intensified, with protests, agitations and processions regularly taking place in different parts of the State. “The Chief Minister extended the lockdown, but was the lockdown ever really in place?” asked Dilip Ghosh, Lok Sabha MP and president of the West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Finally, the State government had to issue a formal order making non-compliance of the norms to wear masks a punishable offence. The order, dated July 2, stated: “...violation in compliance of norms of physical distancing and wearing of masks shall attract penal action as per law.... Anybody found in public places or on road without wearing masks shall forthwith be asked to wear masks and in failure to do so should be sent back. However, necessary penal action should be taken for repeat offenders.” However the order seemed to do little to bring about any major change in the general attitude of a large number of people.

### SCARCITY OF HOSPITAL BEDS

With the number of COVID-19 cases poised to rise exponentially, a crisis of beds for coronavirus patients has already arisen in private hospitals. A highly placed source in the private health care industry told *Frontline*: “We are looking at a huge scarcity of beds. The State government has already appealed to the private sector to augment the bed capacity in the hospitals. Right now the occupancy rate in private hospitals would be 95-97 per cent.” Another source working for a well-known private hospital chain in the city admitted: “We are not able to accommodate even our own employees.”

Interestingly, as of July 7, of the 10,607 beds in

government hospitals, around 7,790 beds were lying vacant, and the overall occupancy of COVID-19 beds was a mere 26.56 per cent— facts that are hardly reflective of the grim situation in the State. “The fact is that nobody wants to go to government hospitals even though there are excellent doctors there. In a desperate situation people may have to go there, but those who will need critical care support may not find much help there,” said a source in the private sector.

In the same vein, a doctor who had worked both in the government and later in the private sector said: “There is a reason why the Ministers and politicians did not admit themselves in the government hospitals when they contracted COVID-19.” Of the 79 hospitals dedicated to treating COVID-19 patients in the State, 26 are government establishments and 53 are private. Besides, there are 32 other private hospitals that have COVID beds. The total number of people in the 582 government quarantine centres is 5,294, and the number of people presently in home quarantine is 38,614. West Bengal also has 106 “safe homes” with 6,908 beds. As of July 7, there were 311 patients in these safe homes.

### OPPOSITION’S CRITICISM

The State government has faced constant criticism from the opposition parties—the BJP, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Congress—for its apparent lack of transparency in handling the COVID-19 crisis and for allegedly suppressing facts.

The ruling Trinamool Congress has denied these allegations, claiming that West Bengal consistently uploads all its data on the government website. Senior Trinamool leader Om Prakash Mishra told *Frontline*: “West Bengal’s preparedness in taking on COVID-19 is an unprecedented thing. The recovery rate in the State is almost comparable with the very best in the country. We have been increasing our testing steadily. Ours is the only State where treatment for COVID is free and the rates in private hospitals are fixed (Rs.2,250 for the test, Rs.1,000 for the doctor’s consultation and Rs.1,000 for PPE). What West Bengal has been doing, the other States are now following.”

As of July 7, the discharge rate in the State stood at 66.24 per cent, with a total of 16,355 people discharged, including 555 in the last 24 hours. The rate of testing samples per million population stood at 6,246. The government also announced plans to set up a plasma bank for treating COVID-19 patients.

While the government has undoubtedly stepped up its testing in the last month, according to the eminent Kolkata-based physician Fuad Halim, it is still far from what is required. “In West Bengal, the testing is way behind the national average, which in turn is way behind the international average. We are already in the third position worldwide even with so few tests... we really do not know where we stand because of the lack of testing. There is no other alternative but to increase tests, identify the infected and isolate them,” Halim told *Frontline*. □

# The going gets tough

As more and more COVID-19 positive cases get detected outside quarantine centres in Odisha, the Naveen Patnaik government takes **stringent measures** to prevent community spread. BY PRAFULLA DAS

WITH THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 SHOWING no sign of abating, the Odisha government, which has been tackling the crisis since March by involving the public in a big way, is taking all possible measures to keep the situation under control. In terms of fighting the pandemic and rebooting the economy, July has been the harshest month for Odisha so far. A large number of

COVID-19 positive cases have been detected outside quarantine centres since the beginning of the month.

On July 7, the State saw the highest single-day spike of 571 positive cases; of these, 403 were in quarantine centres. The number of cases being detected outside quarantine centres has been one-third of the total number of the new cases.



BISWARANJAN ROUIT

**AT A QUARANTINE CENTRE** at Remuli in Keonjhar district in Odisha on July 7.



BISWANJAN ROUT

**HEALTH WORKERS** preparing to test people in a quarantine centre in Keonjhar district on June 25.

“Odisha is in a crucial phase in the fight against COVID-19 and hence it is very essential that we all obey guidelines and regulations issued by State government to contain the spread of COVID-19. Violation of the same would lead to strong action,” said Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik in a Twitter post on July 4.

Patnaik’s tweet was in response to one by the Superintendent of Police of Ganjam district which read: “In a case of viral video of a marriage procession inside a hotel prima facie it reveals that COVID guidelines have been flouted. A case has been registered at Gopalpur police station and two persons have been arrested. Investigation continues. We request all not to flout COVID guidelines.” Five persons, including the groom and his father, were arrested and two vehicles were seized.

With 2,621 cases, Ganjam district has emerged as a major COVID-19 hotspot in the State. The remaining 29 districts accounted for 7,476 cases as of July 7.

Khordha (1,029 cases) and Cuttack (855 cases) are two other districts that reported the most number of cases. The capital city, Bhubaneswar, is in Khordha. By the first week of July, 54 people had died and 6,486 of the total 10,097 cases had recovered in the State.

As the situation turned worse in Ganjam, the State government posted two Indian Administrative Service officers as Special Additional District Collectors in the Chatrapur and Bhanjanagar subdivisions of the district. The police, too, enhanced their presence in the district by deputing four officers of the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police and four more platoons. In early July, Ganjam lost four COVID warriors—two schoolteachers, a junior engineer and an anganwadi worker—who were on duty at different quarantine centres.

### HOSPITALS AS HOTSPOTS

Many hospitals in the State too have turned into hotspots. Between them, the Acharya Harihar Post Graduate Institute of Cancer and the SCB Medical College and Hospital, both at Cuttack, and the All India Institute of

Medical Sciences, Bhubaneswar, reported over 160 cases among patients, paramedical staff and doctors.

The fear of coronavirus also struck the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Post Graduate Institute of Paediatrics, Cuttack, following the treatment of a COVID-19 patient at a fever clinic located on its premises. The authorities recently sealed off a private hospital in Bhubaneswar, where 27 persons, including many of its employees, had been infected. The hospital had reportedly treated a patient without conducting the COVID-19 test.

In view of the surge in the number of cases, the State government has ramped up testing and started conducting rapid antigen tests in Ganjam, Bhubaneswar and Cuttack. Such tests will be conducted in other districts in the next phase. More than three lakh samples had been tested by the first week of July.

The State Health Department is also considering allowing private hospitals to procure antigen kits and screen people who are willing to get tested. The administration will fix a reasonable rate for the test. Efforts are also on to launch plasma therapy in four major hospitals in the State for the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

The Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress, however, alleged mismanagement in the quarantine centres of migrants who had returned to the State. Many of them had tested positive after coming home from the quarantine centres, the opposition parties alleged.

### VIOLATIONS DURING UNLOCK

In fact, in the initial weeks of the fight against the pandemic, the government had received wholehearted support from the people. But the number of violations increased during the unlock phases, resulting in more cases being detected among the local people.

The administration has also resorted to periodic shutdowns in many urban areas, including Berhampur, Cuttack, Bhubaneswar and Sambalpur. A two-day weekend shutdown is also being enforced in 14 districts until July end to prevent community spread of the virus.

Although the inflow of migrants from other States is on the decline, the State government has written to the Centre to restrict the number of passenger trains and flights from hotspot cities in the country to Odisha during Unlock 2.0.

The authorities, who successfully conducted the rath yatra of Lord Jagannath with restrictions imposed by the Supreme Court, have been limiting the entry of people into the thickly populated coastal town of Puri to prevent the spread of the virus.

Thanking the people of Puri and all those who took part in the smooth conduct of the rath yatra, the Chief Minister issued a video message on July 6 stating that Puri had shown the way to win the war against the deadly virus. Listing out three mantras of “sacrifice, self-restraint, and discipline” to win the fight against COVID-19, Patnaik urged the people to adhere to the norms of physical distancing, handwashing and wearing of masks to keep the virus at bay until a vaccine was launched. □

# GLOBAL CHAOS

The pandemic **rages unabated** across continents, from war-torn Yemen to the Balkans to Brazil and Peru to South Africa. Even as autocratic regimes see in it an opportunity to curtail freedoms, the economic burden imposed by lockdowns has led to popular protests in many countries. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

ANEES MAHYOUB/REUTERS



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHOWS NO SIGNS of ebbing. In fact, it has resurfaced in countries such as China, Australia, South Korea and even New Zealand, which had seemingly brought the spread of the coronavirus under control within their borders. Melbourne, Australia's second largest city, was sealed for six weeks in the second week of July. However, these countries have been quick to take strict remedial actions, as the numbers of those infected are comparatively few in relation to regional epicentres of the pandemic such as Brazil, the United States and India. South Africa, too, is emerging as a new regional epicentre of the pandemic.

The coronavirus has further complicated the dire

**A CEMETERY** for COVID-19 victims in Taiz, Yemen, on June 23. There are reports that Yemenis, already caught up in a Saudi-imposed war, are "dying like flies" as a result of the novel coronavirus.

situation in war-torn Yemen, which has been facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis for the last couple of years. The international community has virtually forgotten Yemen, even as Saudi warplanes bomb its cities and vital installations. There are reports that Yemenis are now "dying like flies" as a result of the novel coronavirus. Many hospitals were bombed and medicines are in short supply as a result of the Saudi-imposed war and eco-



HANI MOHAMMED/AP

**DOCTORS** attend to a COVID-19 patient in the intensive care unit of a hospital in Sanaa, Yemen, on June 14.

conomic blockade. The United Nations has warned that the death toll due to the virus could exceed the combined death toll so far as a result of war, disease and hunger. In the last five years since the war started, more than 1,00,000 Yemenis have died.

Cuba, Vietnam and China, which are run by Communist governments, have been able to cope with the pandemic much better than the rest of the world.

### **SPIKE IN THE BALKANS**

In the rest of the world, chaos prevails. The government of Serbia, which had ended its lockdown at the end of May and conducted parliamentary elections in the third week of June, has had to beat a hasty retreat as the virus resurfaced with a vengeance. Serbia was among the earliest European countries to lift lockdown restrictions and has now become the first country in the region witnessing popular resentment against its government's policies. After the lifting of restrictions, the centre-right government allowed massive election rallies. Masks and physical distancing were not mandatory. It also allowed football matches to resume in stadiums packed with people. The tennis champion and Belgrade native Novak Djokovic organised tournaments and has since apologised after he and his close associates tested positive for the virus.

President Aleksandr Vucic, whose party registered a landslide victory in the June parliamentary elections, ordered the reimposition of the national lockdown on July 7. The infection rate spiked in the first week of July, with the country of seven million registering more than 250 cases every day. The President's move angered the residents of Belgrade and other cities. Thousands of angry demonstrators tried to storm the parliament

building in Belgrade's central square on the night of July 7. The protesters and the opposition blamed the government for the spread of the virus but also demanded that a national lockdown, which had caused an acute economic slowdown, not be reimposed. Opposition parties have blamed the President for using the lockdown to further strengthen his autocratic rule. Vucic backed down the next day in the face of continuing violent protests and announced that the new lockdown proposals had been withdrawn. The opposition, having smelled blood, has now called upon the government to resign. The mass protests on the other hand could trigger another COVID-19 spike in the Balkans.

### **OUTBREAK IN BRAZIL**

Meanwhile, Brazil's President, Jair Bolsonaro, tested positive for the novel coronavirus in the first week of July. He had been tested thrice before in the last couple of months, but the results had been negative. Now his days of playing Russian roulette with the disease are over. Bolsonaro, who had once described the virus as nothing more dangerous than "a little flu", did not wear a mask in public or practice physical distancing, and was a supporter of the concept of "herd immunity".

Bolsonaro had said recently that the pandemic was like "seasonal rain" in which everyone would get wet. He told reporters that his was only a mild case of the virus and that his favourite drug, hydroxychloroquine, was enough to treat his fever. The effectiveness of the drug in treating COVID-19 symptoms has been debunked by the World Health Organisation and most scientific studies. Bolsonaro announced to the public the day after he took ill that the coronavirus symptoms had become minimal because of his regular use of the drug. It takes more than a week for the symptoms of the disease to fully manifest themselves. Bolsonaro still could find himself in the same position as British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had earlier been in—in an emergency ward with a ventilator by his side.

The illness did not, however, prevent Bolsonaro from vetoing a law that would have provided drinking water, disinfectants and a guarantee of hospital beds for the indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest, who are among the worst affected. The indigenous people, numbering around a million, live in remote areas that have no access to hospitals and medicines. Incidentally, while running for President, Bolsonaro had vowed to hand over large tracts of the Amazon to commercial interests, cattle ranchers and farmers.

Bolsonaro had been against imposing a lockdown when the virus started claiming thousands of lives in Brazil in March. He refused to change his mind despite his Health Ministers advising strict measures. Two Health Ministers were sacked in quick succession by the President even



ERALDO PERES/AP

**BRAZIL'S** President Jair Bolsonaro, who recently tested positive for COVID-19.

**A MASSIVE** public demonstration against the Serbian government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic in Belgrade on July 9.



as the pandemic ran riot in Brazil. The Governors of the states in the Federation, from both the ruling party and the opposition, decided to impose the lockdown despite the President's opposition. The Brazilian government has not ensured either mass testing or contact tracing. Even after testing positive for the virus, Bolsonaro repeated his earlier message on national television: "Life goes on. Brazil has to produce; we have to activate the economy."

Judge Renato Coelho Borelli of the Supreme Court of Brazil had recently warned Bolsonaro that he would be subject to a \$400 fine if he did not wear a mask in public. Wearing a mask in public is mandatory in Brasilia, the country's capital. The judge delivered his order after hearing a plea filed by a lawyer to draw attention to the President's disastrous handling of the pandemic crisis and the resulting institutional paralysis. Bolsonaro has lately started wearing a protective mask, because of the order from the Supreme Court, during his frequent interactions with his supporters. But a few days before he started showing COVID-19-like symptoms in early July, he was photographed having lunch with the U.S. Ambassador during the Fourth of July celebrations, with neither of them wearing masks.

With more than 1.6 million cases and more than 65,000 deaths by early July, Brazil is the second worst COVID-19 affected country after the U.S. Many experts believe that the death count has been massively under-reported. In the last six months, around 25,000 deaths in Brazil were attributed to acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). Last year, the deaths due to ARDS in the same period were around 1,800. By early June, the Bolsonaro government ordered the Ministry of Health to

stop releasing the numbers relating to deaths and the spread of the virus. Bolsonaro actually claimed that the numbers were inflated. The Supreme Court struck down the President's order and asked the Ministry of Health to continue to release the figures on a daily basis.

Despite the spiralling death rate, Bolsonaro wants the lockdown that many state governments have introduced to be lifted. Many evangelical church groups supporting the right-wing government have openly downplayed the importance of wearing a mask and physical distancing. Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has been even worse than that of his role model, U.S. President Donald Trump. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics reported that eight million workers had lost their jobs in the first three months since the virus hit the country in March. In early April, the Brazilian government allowed big corporations to suspend labour contracts and reduce worker's wages by up to 70 per cent. More than half the working age population in the country is now unemployed. Many of the big companies had closed down their factories citing "low market demand".

There were also protests and strikes in factories and offices which were working as the pandemic spread like wildfire. The employees complained about the lack of safety measures in the work environment, blaming both the government and their employers. Many companies had reopened by June, spreading the infection to hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. After Brazil, Peru is the second worst affected country in South America. The government in Lima, unlike its counterpart in Brasilia, was quick to implement a strict lockdown as soon as the virus crossed its borders. The lockdown was



MICHAEL SHEEHAN/AFP

**SOUTH AFRICAN** National Defense Force health practitioners arrive at Air Force Station, Port Elizabeth, on July 5 to help combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

imposed on March 16 and was in place until end June, one of the longest worldwide. However, the government failed in its efforts to curtail the infection and mortality rates. The number of deaths from the virus announced by the government in early July was over 11,000. Over 3,03,000 Peruvians have been infected so far.

Most Peruvians believe that the actual figures could be much higher. The average death rate in the first six months of the year has been far above the average recorded in previous years. The deaths in Peru are estimated to be 87 per cent higher than what would be expected in a normal year. Even the official figures are staggering. The number of fatalities in Peru caused by the novel coronavirus is half of what India has reported so far. India's population is 42 times bigger than that of Peru. Around 3,000 new infections are being reported every day in Peru. The mortality rate among health workers in the country has been especially high. The government announced an economic relief package worth \$26 billion. The package was to be distributed among employers so that they could keep workers on the rolls. The poor and the self-employed were promised cash transfers. But the government seriously underestimated the number of those living in poverty. Only 43 per cent of the population has a bank account, making cash transfers to the poor a difficult proposition; 70 per cent of Peru's population works in the informal sector. Around 3.2 million Peruvians have lost their jobs since the onset of the pandemic. The capital, Lima, is the worst hit. Around one-third of the country's population resides in the city, with most of them living in cramped and overcrowded neighbourhoods.

#### **SOUTH AFRICA**

South Africa continues to have the greatest number of COVID-19 cases in the African continent. By early July, more than 2,10,000 people were affected. Egypt was in

the lead with regard to the COVID-19 death toll. By the first week of July, Egypt's Ministry of Health had reported 3,343 COVID-19 deaths. The real numbers, like in most countries, are much more. Many Egyptian journalists and doctors have been arrested for reporting the true picture. There are reports of doctors and medical workers forced to buy protective gear spending out of their own pockets.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is also a cause for concern. The Nigerian government lifted the lockdown it had imposed in a matter of weeks. By the first week of July, the country had recorded 29,000 coronavirus cases and 635 deaths. Lagos, the commercial capital, has become the epicentre of the pandemic in the country, recording 44 per cent of the confirmed cases. According to media reports, many Nigerians do not believe that there is a pandemic afflicting the world and are reluctant to practice physical distancing and take basic precautions. The country's health system is in a dire situation anyway.

The number of deaths in South Africa had reached 3,300 by the beginning of July. Experts warn that the death toll could peak at 70,000 by the end of the year if the government does not get its act together soon. The surge in infections followed after the government lifted the lockdown it had imposed in the end of May. The economy was teetering and the government had few options left. Even before the pandemic hit, South Africa had one of the highest unemployment rates in the world and the economy was in recession. The pandemic has worsened the situation.

The South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has reiterated that the country will not reimpose a "hard lockdown", such as the one that was in force until May. Many South Africans were killed in police action for breaking curfew restrictions during the lockdown period; 76,000 soldiers were deployed initially to help the South African police force enforce lockdown restrictions. The number of soldiers has been reduced to 20,000 to help the police enforce COVID-19 restrictions that are still in force.

Even as experts claim that a COVID-19 vaccine will be ready only by next year, a recent report published in the London newspaper *The Telegraph* quoted Tom Jefferson, a senior associate tutor at the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine at Oxford University and Visiting Professor at Newcastle University, as saying that there was growing evidence that the virus had been traced elsewhere before it emerged in Asia.

In the last week of June, Spanish scientists announced the discovery of COVID-19 in samples of waste water collected in the country in March 2019. Italian scientists have found traces of the virus in sewage samples in Milan and Turin in December 2019, before the virus was detected in China. Jefferson believes that the coronavirus may have lain dormant throughout the world and emerged when environmental conditions were favourable for it to thrive. This also means that the virus can disappear as quickly as it arrived. □

# U.S.: Growing rate of disaffection

Despite a **surging second wave of COVID-19 infections** in several U.S. States, Donald Trump claims that the crisis is being handled well. He is hoping that the infection rate will become stable long before election day in November. But if the rate goes up, it is likely that Trump will dig deeper into the cultural wars and provoke more divisions. BY VIJAY PRASHAD

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SEEMS NEVER-ending in the United States, where a burst of cases from Florida to California threatens to send the numbers of infected well over the three million mark. Dr Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who is the point person for the fight against COVID-19 in the U.S., said that he would “not be surprised” if the U.S. saw 100,000 new cases every day. Florida, a new epicentre, saw 11,458 cases on one day in early July, and it is expected that more people might die of the disease in Florida than in China. Dan Gelber, Mayor of the city of Miami Beach in Florida, told FOX News: “We have a very serious health care issue. We have

over 1,400 people in our hospitals right now. Our intensive care is increasing. Our people on vents is increasing. We can’t just ignore that.” Florida’s authorities said that by early July 90 per cent of ventilators were used; there was simply no surplus capacity as the number of those infected continued to increase.

President Donald Trump has not taken the coronavirus seriously right from the time when he was first informed about it in January. He has consistently underplayed its severity, suggesting at each turn that the U.S. is doing better at containing the virus than anyone else. Such claims are evidence free, but Trump and his associates constantly repeat them. He has oscillated



PROTESTERS IN PHOENIX, Arizona, on June 23 waiting for the arrival of Donald Trump.

between blaming China for the virus and saying that the numbers are high in the U.S. because of high rates of testing; neither of these claims are true. As each day's infection totals outdid the previous one in early July (all above 50,000), Trump bragged that the unemployment numbers had fallen, saying that this "proves that our economy is roaring back". "The crisis is being handled," he said. "Some areas that were very hard hit are now doing very well." "Some were doing very well," he said regarding the disease, "and we thought they may be gone, and they flare up, and we're putting out the fires."

The out-of-control areas in the U.S. are mainly the Republican-controlled States of Arizona, Florida and Texas. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a close ally of Trump, has made it a priority to reopen the economy despite the challenges the spread of the disease have thrown up. DeSantis and other Republican Governors have made light of the guidelines of the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and of the virus and did not mandate an effective lockdown in the first place, which is why a new wave has broken out. It is this second wave of infections that has startled some of the Republican Governors, and they have now mandated the use of masks and urged people not to flout the basic rules of physical distancing. Although early cases seemed to be most dangerous for people over 60, the new wave of cases has struck younger people who, even when they recover, will suffer serious ailments for the remainder of their lives.

No antidote is available. Claims about herd immunity cannot be sustained as nowhere near 70 per cent to 90 per cent of the population has been infected (and such a high infection rate would mean overrun hospitals and many fatalities); furthermore, it is not clear that herd immunity would work because it is not clear whether the antibodies generated by the infection protect one from reinfection. Nor is there any sign of a vaccine any time soon. This means that the basic protocols of physical distancing will have to remain in effect for several months. As economic activity resumes, it will become imperative to take physical distancing measures seriously; only now, months into the pandemic, are political leaders in the U.S. accepting them. Only 17 of the 50 States mandate the use of masks in public, and Trump refuses to wear one on a regular basis (Vice President Mike Pence, who used to scoff at masks, is now regularly seen with one). A study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (University of Washington) says that if 95 per cent of the people in the U.S. wore face masks in public, 33,000 deaths could be prevented between now and October 1.

For Trump, his re-election prospects guide every action. He seizes upon any sign of buoyancy in the stock market or in the job market as a vote of confidence. The virus has dampened his enthusiasm, drawn him into political depression. His lack of understanding of the basic science is not relevant here; what motivates him is his understanding of the U.S. electorate and of how best to channel the crucial sections he needs into his corner. Standing for the idea of "freedom" is attractive to the

demographic sections that Trump will require to win in November. "Don't tread on me" is their libertarian slogan, which means in this case that they will not want to follow any government advice on social behaviour (including the use of masks). Across the country, such people have said that wearing a mask is a violation of their constitutional right to be free and that they are not to be muzzled like a dog; this is the kind of sentiment that Trump has galvanised into what is effectively a campaign slogan.

Economic indicators are mixed, but Trump is selective in his twitter feed; he exaggerates anything that shows that the U.S. economy is bouncing back. This amplifies the genuine sensibility in the country for a reopening; the modest cash transfer from the government is simply not near as good as the wages that millions of workers have lost. Rather than make a claim for a large cash transfer, Trump suggests salvation can be found through the end of the lockdown. This is at the heart of his impatience, the knowledge that if suffering continues to increase, he might not get re-elected.

#### UNINSPIRING CANDIDATE

Thus far, Trump's lead over his Democratic challenger, Joe Biden, is slim. Biden, a singularly uninspiring candidate, has nonetheless benefited in the polls from the suffering induced by the pandemic and by Trump's incompetent leadership in this period. But there is still time, and Biden's difficulties will only increase. His lukewarm response to the protests against the symbols of enslavement and the Confederacy show that he is at a great remove from the social movements of the times; his near absence from the conversation about COVID-19 leaves the field open to Trump's incredible statements. In early July, however, Biden surfaced with a strong speech against Trump. "You know the steps you've taken so far haven't gotten the job done," Biden said. "Fix the shortage of PPE [personal protective equipment] for our health care workers before you tee off another round of golf." But such jibes are not a daily feature, leaving Trump room to dance around with his own misleading statements. There is no effective challenge to Trump from the Democratic Party, which might defeat him in November because of his own startlingly poor leadership.

Typical of Trump, he oscillates between the sunshine of a recovering economy and the darkness of his cultural message. Rather than address the issue of the wave of police violence over the past several years, Trump has suggested, gloomily, that U.S. culture is under threat from liberalism and anarchism. This was the message of his Make America Great Again slogan. He returns to that theme, pointing fingers at those who have been bringing down statues of racists and accusing the activists of being against the traditions of the U.S. This is the sum total of Trump's message: open up the economy, close down culture. He hopes that the infection rate will become stable long before the U.S. citizenry casts its votes. But if the rate goes up, it is likely that Trump will dig deeper into the cultural wars and provoke more divisions in a country that is suffering from an unending pandemic. □

# Land struggle in the time of pandemic

The strong-arm methods adopted by rich farmers to force agricultural labour to work at lower wages following the pandemic-induced shortage of migrant workers **exposes the fault lines in rural Punjab**. The question of land becomes central again as the battle rages on caste and class lines.

BY GAURAV BANSAL



PTI

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS HIT PUNJAB, India's foremost agricultural State, like never before. Heavily dependent on migrant workers, primarily from Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, the paddy crop, which covers more than 70 per cent of the cultivated area in the ongoing kharif season, seems to be bearing the brunt of the crisis. This could have serious implications for national food security. Punjab is the second largest contributor of rice to the central pool, next

**A FARMER** working in a paddy field during Unlock 2.0, in Amritsar on July 2.

only to Andhra Pradesh. The shortage of migrant workers has exposed the deep fissures in Punjab's socio-economic fabric, along caste and class lines.

Transplanting, the ongoing agricultural operation, has been performed largely by migrant workers ever since rice cultivation began in the State in the 1960s.

Apart from costing far less, migrant workers are considered to be more efficient and specialised in performing this task. The pandemic-induced shortage of such workers means that this year's paddy crop is at risk, unless farmers are willing to pay far more for the locally available labour.

While “local” agricultural workers are available in plenty, the wages they demand are much higher than what is paid to migrant workers. For instance, wages for transplanting paddy ranged from Rs.2,500 to Rs.3,000 an acre last year (depending on the variety and the region); currently it is 50 per cent higher—between Rs.4,500 and Rs.5,500 an acre. The sharp increase in the cost of production, inadequately compensated for by the recently announced minimum support price (MSP) for paddy, means Punjab farmers are staring at a considerable squeeze on profits from paddy this year.

In response, farmers are employing various means to safeguard their profits and cope with the labour shortage. Across the State, farmers are renting transplanting machines that require far less labour and are also cost-effective. This is expected to give a fillip to the long-term adoption of direct seeding of rice (DSR) technology, implications of which are still not clear. Additionally, some farmers from the Doaba region, the area between the rivers Beas and Sutlej, are trying to woo migrant workers by arranging private vehicles and buses and by promising labourers sops such as liquor and food.

### COERCIVE LABOUR PRACTICES

However, another disturbing trend has emerged. There are reports that some farmers, particularly in the Malwa region, south of the Sutlej, are resorting to coercive labour practices to manage the situation. This includes unilaterally fixing wages for transplantation work at the same level or insignificantly higher than that paid last year; controlling the movement of workers by forbidding them to seek work outside the village or for a farmer outside the village; and, threatening workers with a “social boycott” and imposing hefty fines of up to Rs.1 lakh if they did not adhere to landowners’ diktats. Of course, Dalit labourers have been asked to bring their own utensils for food.

What explains this unevenness in the response of farmers from different regions in Punjab to a common problem—the shortage of migrant labour and a subsequent rise in the costs of production? A superficial reading of the situation may appear to suggest that these measures have been necessitated by farmers’ urge to safe-

TABLE 1  
Distribution of operational holdings,  
Punjab and India, 2015-16 (in per cent)

| Size Class           | Distribution of Area of Operational Holdings |            |
|----------------------|--|------------|
|                      | Punjab                                       | India      |
| Marginal (<1 ha)     | 2.35   | 24.16      |
| Small (1-2 ha)       | 7.34   | 23.19      |
| Semi Medium (2-4 ha) | 24.87  | 23.65      |
| Medium (4-10 ha)     | 43.76  | 19.96      |
| Large (10 ha+)       | 21.68  | 9.04       |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>100</b>                                   | <b>100</b> |

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India

guard their profits. However, a closer reading of Punjab’s political economy indicates that the high-handed reaction of farmers in Malwa Punjab in the wake of the pandemic has its roots in the shifting class and caste dynamics in the past two decades, particularly between Jat Sikh landowners and Dalit agricultural labourers. But first one needs to turn to Punjab’s political economy, which provides the context for the social dynamics.

Punjab has seen significant structural transformation in its economy since the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Structural transformation means the steady shift in the structure of workforce away from agriculture towards industries and services. The general trend observed in India is that of a stark mismatch between sectors. While gross domestic product (GDP) is increasingly concentrated in the services sector, agriculture still employs more than half of the workforce. Punjab, however, deviates from this broad pattern. In 2015-16, agriculture and allied activities employed only a quarter of work force in Punjab—compared to 44 per cent nationally. This implies that a larger proportion of the workforce moved away from agriculture in Punjab when compared with other parts of India. The industry sector employed just one-fourth of the workforce nationally, compared to one-third in Punjab. More importantly, the services sector in Punjab has been able to absorb workers released from agriculture, while the services sector in India as a whole is infamous for generating “jobless growth”. Unlike at the all-India level where services contribute 55 per cent of the gross value added (GVA) while employing merely 30 per cent of the workforce, in Punjab, services contribute 47 per cent to the GVA, while employing a more proportional 41 per cent of the workforce. In short, the labour force in Punjab is far more evenly distributed across the three sectors than in the rest of the country.

Despite the high, and increasing, share of services in its economy, agriculture remains the central axis of Punjab’s economy. This is because services and industry in Punjab are closely interlinked to agriculture. A majority of industries and manufacturing in Punjab are agro-based such as food processing and textiles and trade and transportation of foodgrains adds to the growth of the service sector in the State.

Who controls agriculture and farming in Punjab? Data show that big cultivators from dominant castes (primarily Jat Sikhs) contribute to a large share of agriculture in the GDP of Punjab. This class of big cultivators was the prime beneficiary of the

TABLE 2  
Proportion of agricultural  
workers in Punjab, 2011

| Region  | Average of agricultural workers to total workers (in per cent) |
|---------|--|
| Doaba   | 29.70  |
| Majha   | 34.05  |
| Malwa   | 42.25  |
| Overall | 35.59  |

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab 2019-20

Notes: Doaba region includes Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala and Nawanshehar  
Majha includes Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Pathankot and Taran Taran.  
Malwa includes Ludhiana, Sangrur, Barnala, Mansa, Bathinda, Ferozepur, Faridkot, Fazilka, Sri Muktsar Sahib, Rupnagar, Mohali, Fatehgarg Sahib, Moga and Patiala.



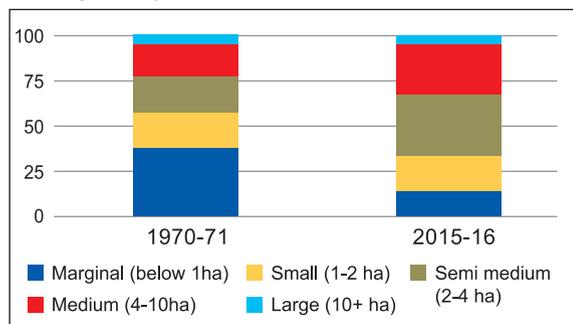
AKHILESH KUMAR

**A FARMER SOWING** paddy seeds using a direct seeding machine at Pannuan village on the outskirts of Mohali in Punjab on June 10.

Green Revolution technology. It has continued to amass wealth and opportunities, leading to the widening of inequality in the State. In 2002-03, Punjab had the highest inequality in rural land ownership; the gini-coefficient was 0.82, compared to the Indian average of 0.75. (The gini coefficient is a measure of inequality varying between 0, implying perfect equality, and 1, which implies highest inequality). This inequality in the ownership of land has been widening only in the last few decades (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

**Distribution of land by size class of operational holdings, Punjab** (in per cent)



Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab 2019-20

The inequality is starker in the case of operational holdings because rich farmers in Punjab have almost entirely captured the land lease in market by leasing in land from all sources, including from small and marginal landowners, termed as “reverse tenancy”. This is reflected in Punjab’s operational holding structure which shows that only 33 per cent of the holdings are small and marginal holdings, that is, below two hectares as compared to 86 per cent at the all-India level. More significantly, small and marginal farmers operate only 10 per cent of the cultivated area in Punjab, compared to the all-India average of 50 per cent (Table 1). Although it is true that Jat Sikhs also figure as small and marginal landowners along with other castes, the medium and big landowners are almost exclusively Jat Sikhs.

Given adequate state support and strong agricultural infrastructure, farming in Punjab has also been profitable. This is visible from a recent NABARD study which shows that agricultural households in Punjab, which are predominantly Jat Sikhs, had the highest average monthly income across States. However, profitability from agriculture has been under some stress in the recent period, reflecting the prolonged agrarian distress in the country.

At the other end of Punjab’s rural economy are Dalits, landless and manual workers, with a high degree of overlap between them. Dalits constitute a staggering 32 per cent of Punjab’s overall population and 38 per cent of its rural population, which are among the highest proportions across the States in India. In contrast, the all-

India share of Scheduled Castes (S.Cs) in the total population and rural population is roughly half of levels prevailing in Punjab. Despite this, the control of Dalits in Punjab over land and other means of production is almost negligible. In 2015-16, Dalits in Punjab owned just 6 per cent of all operational holdings, and 4 per cent of the area of all operational holdings. The corresponding all-India averages were 12 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively. These figures are striking because they show that while the gap at the all-India level between Dalits and caste Hindus is wide, it is wider in Punjab. Even among Dalits who own land, most of them are small or marginal holdings, and often of poorer quality, which makes cultivation less economically viable.

Thus, while the Green Revolution enhanced incomes of the landed Jat Sikhs—along with the merchants/commission agents who predominantly come from *Bania* and *Khatris* castes—Dalits and the rural poor have largely been excluded from the prosperity. Dalits, who earlier used to lease in small parcels of land, experienced widespread evictions in the 1970s and 1980s, which still continues. High land prices and rental rate for leasing in land continue to act as formidable barriers for Dalits in accessing land.

#### DALIT ASSERTION PHENOMENON

Dalits, particularly men, have been permanently leaving the agriculture sector altogether as they do not find employment even as agricultural labour. The high levels of mechanisation and in migration of labour from Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand has meant that an increasing number of “local” Dalits and manual workers (particularly male) depend on casual work in the informal non-farm sector in nearby towns and cities. They are in occupations such as transport, construction, loading/unloading work in grain markets, rice husking/shelling in mills and in agro-processing industries and providing services in restaurants and at weddings. There are important regional variations to this: The *Doaba* region shows higher level of non-farm employment opportunities because of being closer to the industrial and manufacturing hubs of Jalandhar and Ludhiana, while the Malwa region has been traditionally poor in generating non-farm employment (Table 2).

The declining dependence of Dalits on agriculture and hence on dominant Jat Sikh capitalist farmers for employment has had deeper socio-political implications. Scholars on Punjab’s rural economy such as Surinder Jodhka, Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, have pointed to the growing assertion of Dalits in the last two decades against the dominant landowning Jat Sikhs. This assertion has often been cultural. Dalits have set up separate Gurudwaras and *deras*, operating separate cremation grounds and proclaiming themselves as Ad-Dharmis or Ravidassias. They have thus indicated a distancing from Jat-dominated Sikhism and asserted their own separate claims over spiritual and cultural domains. More recently, Dalits have been able to collectivise and assert their right to the one-third share of village com-



AKHILESH KUMAR

**FARM WORKERS** from Sitamarhi, Bihar, who arrived in a chartered bus at the persuasion of a farmer, transplanting paddy seedlings at Deh Kalan village on the outskirts of Mohali on June 12.

mon lands leased out by gram panchayats, as notified in the Punjab Village Common Land Regulation Act of 1961.

As a result of the growing Dalit assertion, there have been increasing instances of caste and class conflicts in various villages of Punjab. Conflicts relating to Dalits’ share of panchayat land are particularly intense in the relatively agriculturally backward Malwa region, where, as shown before, non-farm employment opportunities are low and unable to absorb workers displaced from agriculture. A recent documentary titled “Landless” by Dalit film-maker Randeep Mandokke has explored these changing caste-class dynamics in rural Punjab.

A relatively small organisation called Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC), formed in 2014 and with a significant presence in the Malwa region, has been at the forefront of the Dalits’ struggle to reclaim control over their share of panchayat land through annual auction bidding. The leased land is then collectively cultivated by the Dalits in the village. The ZPSC has on its agenda the reduction in the ceiling on land ownership in the State, from the current 17 acres (one acre = 0.4 hectare) to 10 acres. It also seeks to redistribute the surplus land thus obtained among Dalits and landless households. However, their agitation is being continuously targeted and sabotaged by Jat Sikhs who field “dummy” Dalit candidates to bid at a higher price than Dalits collectivised under the ZPSC can afford.

The ZPSC has protested against this blatant rigging at the auctions and demanded that the auction bid happen in S.C. Dharamshalas (community centre) instead of panchayat bhawans, which are dominated by Jat Sikhs, and in the presence of district administrative officials. The ZPSC has demanded that Dalits be given land at lower than the market rental rate and on long-term leases of 33 years instead of bidding for the same land every year. A particularly noticeable feature of the struggle led by the ZPSC is the equal participation of Dalit women in the protest demonstrations. This is not surprising because they have disproportionately borne the brunt of repression and violence by Jat Sikh landlords.

Apart from rigging the auction bids, the dominant Jat Sikhs landowners have also resorted to violence and repression against this increased assertion by Dalits in the Malwa region. The Jat Sikhs’ close nexus with the police and the district administration has emboldened the upper castes. Landowners have prohibited Dalits from using village common grazing lands and restricted the collection of fuel and fodder from their fields. The increasing resort to gun violence on activists of the ZPSC reflects the imbalance in strength.

Therefore, it is not coincidental that Jat Sikh farmers predominantly from the Malwa region resorted to despotic labour control measures when local Dalit workers demanded higher wages for paddy transplantation. Indeed, this seems to reflect a continuity in the oppression and exploitation of Dalits who are trying to reclaim their rightful share over village common lands. Jat Sikhs are vehemently opposed to sharing land with Dalits, so much so that they do not even lease out their lands to Dalits.

This only affirms the fact that command over land still remains the cornerstone of socio-political control of Jat Sikhs over Dalits and other classes in rural Punjab.

The relationship between the landless Dalits and Jat Sikh landowners was already undergoing a significant transformation in the recent decades with the breakdown of ties of dependence and patronage. The despotic measures adopted by the Jat Sikh farmers is only likely to further sharpen the class and caste divide. The exercise of social power by dominant Jat Sikhs should not be understood as an isolated event, necessitated by the sudden disruption in their profits triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, it should be seen as being rooted in the larger dynamics of changing class-caste relations situated in the context of the wider crisis in Punjab agriculture. The resort to draconian means reveals the extent to which the Jat Sikh landowners are willing to go to in order to reassert social control over Dalits. Dalits, for their part, are less and less willing to submit. These control tactics have exacerbated the severe economic distress faced by Dalits, poor and marginalised during the lockdown due to mass loss of employment in the non-farm sector.

While the pandemic has exposed the fault lines in Punjab’s rural economy, it has also provided an opportunity to mend them. The crisis has brought to the fore many structural issues that need renewed emphasis—principally the widespread landlessness among Dalits and their assertion for their rightful share of panchayat land. The growth of grass-roots labour class organisations such as the ZPSC, which have been challenging the *status quo* successfully in many cases, offers important lessons. For one, it forces a revisit of the task of land and tenancy reforms, a task that has long disappeared from the policy and political agenda of the mainstream political parties, including Dalit political parties, despite its continued relevance and enormous potential to combat rural poverty (P.S. Krishnan, *Frontline*, September 13, 2019).

What is striking is the fact that there is hardly any political manifestation of the assertion of the Dalits of Punjab. Neither the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) nor any other party with a mass base among Dalits has addressed the material aspirations of Dalits, which is manifestly centred around the land question. Instead, Punjab politics continues to be dominated by the landed and trading elites, through either the Akali Dal or the Congress, or marginally by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It appears that politics as circumscribed by the trappings of electoral politics has limited the Dalits’ ability to access political power that addresses their core demands. It is obvious that neither Dalit exclusivism nor identity politics offers an escape from this trap. The simmering tensions in the countryside prevailing in the wake of the pandemic offers the context for a wider social and political alliance that is based on egalitarian principles, in which the land question is brought centre stage. □

*Gaurav Bansal is an economist based in Bengaluru.*

# Undoing land reforms

The Karnataka government's decision, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, to introduce an amendment Bill to make it **possible for non-agriculturists to buy agricultural land**, triggers protests by opposition parties and farmers' bodies. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

ON JUNE 11, THE KARNATAKA CABINET headed by Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) approved a policy decision that seeks to make major changes to the Karnataka Land Reforms Act (KLRA). There has been widespread opposition to the move by farmers' bodies, Left organisations and opposition parties in the State. The KLRA, which originally came into effect in 1961, was radically amended and implemented in 1974 during the chief ministership of the zealous reformer Devraj Urs. Tenancy was abolished and ceilings on landholdings were significantly reduced. These changes, aimed at redistributing surplus land to tillers, marked a watershed in Karnataka's agrarian scenario.

According to a press briefing by Revenue Minister R. Ashok and Law Minister J.C. Madhuswamy, the State Cabinet approved a proposal to repeal Sections 79 (A), (B), (C), 80 and amend Section 63 of the KLRA. They said that the proposed amendments would be introduced in the monsoon session of the Legislative Assembly. But farmers' representatives fear that the amendments may be passed through an ordinance, the route taken for many pieces of legislation over the past two months in Karnataka. The proposed changes will dilute the vision of social justice that was enshrined in the 1974 legislation.

The changes will make non-agriculturists eligible for purchase of agricultural land. Dr T.N. Prakash Kamardi, former chairperson of the Karnataka Agricultural Price Commission, says this will pave the way for "de-peasantisation" and "corporatisation" of agriculture in Karnataka (see interview on pages 62-63).

Section 79 (A) of the KLRA says that the non-agricultural income of a person (or family) intending to buy agricultural land cannot exceed Rs.25 lakh; Section 79 (B) stipulates that only a person whose ancestral profession is farming can acquire agricultural land; Section 79 (C) says

that punitive action can be taken for falsifying eligibility in order to purchase agricultural land. Section 80 makes it clear that agricultural land cannot be used for non-agricultural purposes. The State government intends to amend Section 63 of the Act to raise the ceiling of landholdings for an individual and a family from 108 to 216 acres. Clearly, the proposed changes will have serious consequences on ownership patterns of agricultural land.

In an interview published in the Kannada newspaper *Praja Vani*, Ashok stated that a 45-year-old legislation was preventing "youth interested in agriculture utilising modern agricultural technologies from entering the agricultural field". He went on to argue that "rich people have purchased agricultural land after bribing officials over the past 45 years and after these amendments, this will stop". There is some truth in Ashok's statement as 83,171 cases have been registered for violations of Sections 79 (A) and (B) of the Act.

Citing the examples of neighbouring States such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra where non-agriculturists can buy agricultural land, he asked whether farmers in these States had become landless. He said that those opposing the proposed amendments were like "frogs in the well who are opposed to any change".

In an interaction with the media, Yediyurappa claimed that "the amendments will improve the condition of farmers and help the State in attracting investments".

In a letter to the Chief Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, Siddaramaiah of the Congress, said his party would be forced to start State-wide protests if the government did not drop the proposed amendments. "If these amendments are passed, corporate companies can easily buy agricultural land," he wrote. Former Minister Bandeppa Kashempur of the Janata Dal (Secular) also



M.A. SRIRAM

**MEMBERS OF** the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha, a farmers' organisation, burnt a draft of the proposed amendments to the Karnataka Land Reforms Act of 1961, in Mysuru on June 13.

opposed the move: "We have 75 lakh farmers in Karnataka, of whom 55 lakh are small and marginal farmers with landholdings of one to five acres. Instead of improving the lives of these farmers who are somehow eking out a living on these small parcels of land, how correct is it to facilitate the sale of their lands? Is it justice to sacrifice farmers' interests for the sake of capitalists?"

T. Yashavantha, State committee member of the Karnataka Pranta Raitha Sangha and a mulberry cultivator based in Maddur, has been coordinating State-wide protests against the move. He said that the proposed amendments would "destroy the very nature of the land reforms legislation in Karnataka". "The State government has already amended Section 109 of the Act, facilitating easy sale and purchase of agricultural land for industrial use, in April. With this Cabinet decision in June, agricultural ownership will completely change in Karnataka," he said. "Between June 27 and 31, around 100-200 farmers gathered in front of gram panchayat

offices across the State. We were unable to organise a massive protest because we are in the midst of a pandemic," he explained.

Representatives of 16 farmers' organisations in Karnataka have come together to oppose the move. In a letter, they requested Governor Vajubhai Vala to not give his assent to the amendments. Among the signatories were representatives of apex farmer organisations such as the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha and Karnataka Pranta Raitha Sangha. The letter pointed out that with migrant workers returning to their villages, the government should strengthen programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme instead of pushing "people into drudgery by proposing these draconian laws via the ordinance route".

One of the signatories, A.R. Vasavi, is a social anthropologist who has closely studied agriculture in Karnataka. She wrote: "The recently proposed amendment to Karnataka's land reform Act that seeks to make land available to all, in terms of facilitating new economies and opportunities, is myopic and misleading. It overlooks the extent to which land markets are susceptible to speculation and the extent to which big-capital can override the long-term interests of small-holders." □

# ‘Most farmers oppose this’

Interview with **Professor T.N. Prakash Kammardi**, former chairman, Karnataka Agricultural Prices Commission. BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

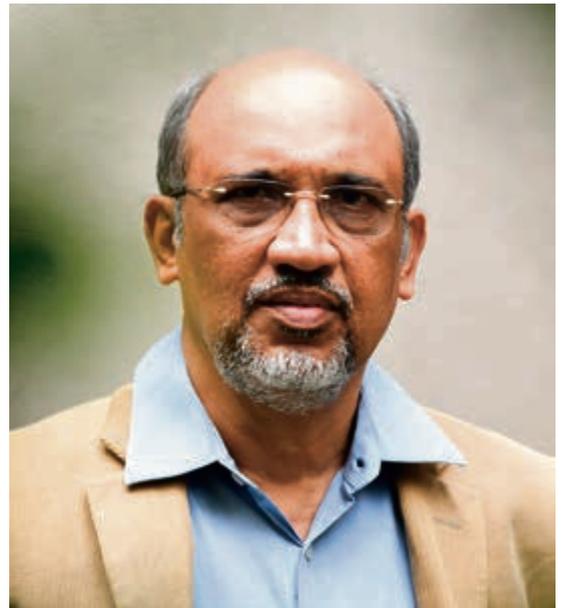
PROFESSOR T.N. PRAKASH KAMMARDI, former chairman, Karnataka Agricultural Prices Commission, and retired professor of Agricultural Economics from the University of Agricultural Sciences, Bengaluru, cautions that the proposed changes to the Karnataka Land Reforms Act (KLRA) will pave the way for large-scale “de-peasantisation” and corporatisation of agriculture in Karnataka. Excerpts from an interview.

## What was the intention behind the passage of the historic land reforms act in Karnataka in 1974?

Karnataka has been a pioneer in introducing several radical reforms and progressive policies and programmes pertaining to the agricultural sector. The land reforms Act passed in 1974 under Chief Minister Devaraj Urs was a prominent piece of legislation. It was the result of struggles led by veteran socialists such as Shantaveri Gopala Gowda and Dinakara Desai and agitations such as the Kagodu Satyagraha of 1951 in Shivamogga district, in which Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan participated. The intention of the Act was to free the agriculturist from exploitative feudal practices where the landlord would lease out land at a high rate of rent. The core idea of the law was that the person who tills must be the owner of the land, and that is prerequisite for growth in agriculture. That is why land reform legislations have been referred to as the “mother of all reforms”.

## Now that the State government has made it clear that the KLRA will be amended to allow non-agriculturists to purchase agricultural land, what will be the consequences?

The move will facilitate companies, businessmen and others with abundant [black] money to purchase hundreds of acres of land, inaugurating a corporate agricultural model analogous to crony capitalism, across villages in Karnataka. The company will grow rich and increase its assets at the cost of hundreds of farmers who will



SUDHAKARA JAIN

become landless. With the government capitulating to the neoliberal policies of Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank, it is clear that the farming community will get “depeasantised” and become landless on a large scale.

As it is, the State’s farmers kept 21 lakh hectares of land uncultivated as fallow land. According to a study done by the Karnataka Agricultural Prices Commission, of those who had left their land fallow, 61 per cent were small and marginal farmers. If you look at this data from a caste perspective, 55 per cent of the farmers belong to backward castes and minority communities and 21 per cent belong to Dalit and tribal communities, together termed AHINDA [the Kannada acronym for minorities, Backward Classes and Dalits] communities. These poor farmers keep their land fallow as succour for times of

“Previous instances of amendments made to the land reforms Act show that farmers have not benefited from such moves.”

crisis and migrate to cities to work as labourers. If the proposed amendment is passed, they may not be able to withstand pressure from the land mafia to sell off.

There are claims that farmers will benefit from the move and that they are even eagerly waiting for the proposed amendment. Previous instances of amendments made to the land reforms Act, however, show that farmers have not benefited from such moves.

**When you talk about previous experiences, are you referring to 1995 when H.D. Deve Gowda, who was the Chief Minister of Karnataka, amended the KLRA to allow companies and business firms to purchase vast quantities of land for floriculture?**

Yes. In 1995, the Janata Dal government amended Article 109 of the KLRA to allow companies or a business firm to acquire up to 108 acres of land for floriculture. Consequent to this amendment, hundreds of acres of land around Bengaluru were acquired by such companies, which then commenced hi-tech poly-house floriculture.

In the context of these large-scale land transactions, the Department of Agricultural Economics of the University of Agricultural Sciences in Bangalore [now Bengaluru] conducted a study to determine whether this actually benefited farmers. In Doddaballapur [a taluk in Bengaluru Rural district], around 750 acres of land were used to set up 14 hi-tech floriculture units. Eighty-six per cent of the farmers who had sold their land were poor farmers belonging to Dalit communities. Even if the price of an acre of land was more than Rs.1 lakh, on an average a farmer received not more than Rs.40,000. This amount was paid in three to five instalments over a period of three years. Local politicians who were often the middlemen in almost all these land transactions pocketed half the sum that was due to the farmers.

In this polyhouse hi-tech farming, excessive pesticides and fertilizers were also used, which polluted the soil and groundwater, harming the environment. The results of that study should stand as a warning for farmers against selling their land to private companies.

**According to statements from senior members of the State government in Karnataka, many farmers are in favour of the proposed amendments to the KLRA. What do you have to say about this?**

I disagree with this assessment. I can say this confid-

ently because an independent survey was recently undertaken by us to ascertain farmers' views on several issues, including the proposed amendment to the KLRA and the ordinance amending the Agriculture Produce Marketing Act. [The APMC was amended on May 14, allowing private companies to directly purchase agricultural produce from farmers.] Our survey sought responses from 1,500 farmers across 31 districts, and respondents included farmers across all ages, classes, educational backgrounds, castes, and irrigation status of their lands.

The majority of farmers opposed this move, with only 33 per cent in favour of the government's proposed changes in the agricultural sector. If we further break down this data, 64 per cent of farmers who were graduates, 77 per cent of those who had irrigated landholdings, 67 per cent of Vokkaliga farmers in the Old Mysore division and 73 per cent of farmers belonging to the AHINDA communities opposed the changes. Surprisingly, only 37 per cent of Brahmin and Lingayat [castes which traditionally support the BJP] farmers supported the move. Further, 59 per cent of the respondents disagreed strongly with the manner in which these major changes in the agricultural sector were being thrust upon farmers via the ordinance route, precluding discussion and consultations. Three constituent organisations of the wider Sangh Parivar, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch and the Krishi Prayog Parivar, have also opposed these changes.

**What will be the social consequences of this proposed change in the KLRA?**

In Karnataka, we venerate Basavanna who famously said that “Kayakave Kailasa” [Work is Worship]. If we understand this in the right spirit, agriculture is not merely an occupation for farmers but the route to a meaningful life. That is why Karnataka's poet laureate Kuvempu described farmers as “Uluva Yogi” [Ploughing Yogis]. The socialist Ashok Mehta described the entire working culture of farmers, which is in sync and in harmony with their surroundings, as “culture of soil”. The fulfilment of these cultural aspects of a farmer's life would lead to Gandhi's concept of “Gramaswarajya”.

The Central government has contributed to the abysmal plight of farmers by not declaring an adequate support price for agricultural commodities. Instead of improving the functioning of the APMC, a government-controlled, democratically elected body, this regime is dismantling its entire structure under pressure from large companies and vested interests.

Owing to these anti-farmer policies and the government's apathy, we are already losing approximately 1.5 lakh acres of food-producing land in the State every year. This will definitely have repercussions on food security and self-sufficiency in food production. While politicians may not be able to grasp all this, hopefully, the radical peasant movement nurtured by the veteran socialist Professor. M.D. Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka will be able to recognise the severe social consequences of these moves towards privatisation of agriculture. □

# Marketing privatisation

Farmers in Madhya Pradesh are critical of the two recent Central ordinances relating to agriculture and of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan for not helping them in their hour of crisis. BY ANANDO BHAKTO

TWO RECENT ORDINANCES PASSED BY THE Central government relating to agriculture have attracted criticism from farmers' bodies across India, which fear that the move is aimed at benefitting big companies and will deprive them of the minimum support price (MSP) for their yields. Farmers in Madhya Pradesh are no exception. If procurement of their produce at a fair MSP is stopped, as the new policies apparently aim to do, farmers would be faced with a livelihood crisis.

The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Ordinance, 2020, and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Ordinance, 2020, were approved by the Union Cabinet on June 3 and promulgated by the President on June 5.

The government maintains that these ordinances are aimed at creating a conducive ecosystem for private investment in agriculture. Proponents of the ordinances say that it will promote transparent and barrier-free inter-State and intra-State trade and commerce of farmers' produce and that they need not depend on the physical premises of markets or deemed markets.

Abhimanyu Kohar, spokesperson of the Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangh, however, says that farmers' experiences have been starkly different. "The objective is to hand over the farm sector to the free market. Earlier, our produce was under the purview of the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee [APMC], but now any private player can directly purchase crop from growers. The government is silent on the question of whether these private players will be mandated to follow the MSP norms," Kohar told *Frontline*.

He said that farmers had suffered staggering losses because of the lockdown, and the experiences of farmers in Madhya Pradesh, where Chief Minister Shivraj Singh

Chouhan was in a hurry to implement the new guidelines, showed that there would be a further erosion of fair practices in selling crops.

Rishiraj, a farmer based in Narsinghpur, said farmers had failed to get the MSP for wheat, mung bean (moong) and black gram (urad) during the lockdown. He alleged that officials in charge of the government mandis or procurement centres forced farmers to accept their terms. "Throughout the lockdown, the farmers were harassed and inconvenienced. When I went to sell black chickpeas [*chana*] at the mandi, they were using large strainers, so that half the crop would fall through. This was a broad daylight loot, but who do we complain to? I was forced to sell the black chickpeas at Rs.4,000 per quintal as against its MSP of Rs.5,500," Rishiraj said over the phone. He said the new ordinances would spur fraudulent practices and encourage liaisons between corrupt government officials and private players. During the lockdown, most farmers in the State sold wheat at

Rs.1,500-1,600 per quintal as against the MSP of Rs.1,925 per quintal.

Taking a potshot at Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who markets his agricultural background to shore up his support base, Rishiraj said the leader was nowhere to be seen while they struggled during the lockdown. "Wheat is harvested in March and sold in April. The unplanned lockdown meant that we could not harvest it in time. There was no diesel available in Narsinghpur. The labourers were stuck in their villages as there was strict prohibition of inter-village movement," he recounted.

He said that the disruption of the wheat cultivation cycle was likely to land farmers in massive debt traps. "We buy seeds, manure and other essentials on debt. The delayed harvest meant that neither could we repay the debt nor did we have cash to prepare for the next crop." Despite the MSP for mung bean being Rs.6,950 per quintal, Rishiraj and other farmers in the State were forced to sell it at Rs.5,000 per quintal.

## END OF APMC SYSTEM

A conversation with farmers in different districts of Madhya Pradesh showed that they suspect that the government was under pressure from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to stop procurement on MSP. Kohar pointed out that under the first ordinance, the Central government was planning to create a system of "one country, one agricultural market". "The Central government has removed the condition that the first sale of agricultural goods has to be in the APMC yard. And purchase outside the APMC market will not attract any tax or duty. This means that the APMC market system will gradually end as taxes and other charges will continue to be levied in the APMC system," Kohar said.

The Central government has not given any guarantee that the purchase of farm goods by an individual having a PAN card, or a by company or a supermarket will be at or above the MSP. Farmers fear that when the crops are ready, big companies will form cartels, deliberately bring down the prices of the produce, purchase it in large quantities and sell it at higher prices later.

Trilok Goti, a farmer in Dewas, strongly criticised Chief Minister Chouhan for failing to help farmers in any way, be it in harvesting crops or in selling the produce. "The lockdown has devastated vegetable growers. There was neither arrangement for transportation nor buyers. The government made no arrangement for storage, and the crops rot in the fields," Goti said. He drew attention to the suicide of a vegetable grower, Narendra Singh Sendhav, in the nearby village of Abhaypur, as his onion crop was wasted and he had no money for the next crop.

Goti sold mung bean at Rs 3,500-4,000 per quintal, way below the MSP. "Shivraj Singh Chouhan says he is a farmer's son. But all our pleas during the lockdown fell on deaf ears even as our crops were wasted or sold at low prices," he rued.

Farmers point out that the second ordinance will encourage contract farming, leading to a situation wherein big companies will do farming and farmers will be relegated to the status of labourers in their own fields. Kohar explained: "Through this ordinance, the Central government wants to impose a Western model of agriculture on our farmers, but the government forgets that our farmers cannot be compared to Western farmers because the land-population ratio in our country is entirely different from that in Western countries."

He added: "The government must remember that in our country, farming is a means of livelihood while it is business in Western countries. Experience shows that contract farming leads to the exploitation of farmers. Last year, the PepsiCo Company in Gujarat sued the farmers for several crores. The case was later withdrawn due to opposition from farmers' organisations. Under contract farming, before sowing the crops, the companies promise to buy farmers' goods at a fixed price, but when the crop is ready, the companies ask the farmers to wait for some time and later the produce is often rejected as being defective or rotten."

However, with impending byelections in Madhya Pradesh (necessitated following the death of two sitting MLAs and resignations of 22 MLAs), Shivraj Singh Chouhan has been marketing what he calls his pro-poor and pro-farmer initiatives. "We have deposited Rs.40,000 crore into the accounts of the poor in Madhya Pradesh under different schemes. We made arrangements to buy farmers' produce even in this crisis. [Former Chief Minister] Kamal Nath did not pay insurance premium. I paid the premium as soon as I formed the government and deposited Rs.2,990 crore of insurance into farmers' accounts," he recently said.

But for farmers like Rishiraj in central Madhya Pradesh, the government-sponsored crop insurance scheme known as the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana exists only on paper. "I haven't heard of anyone who benefitted from the Prime Minister's crop insurance scheme. What I do know, however, is that last year's bonus on wheat and soybean are still due. The government is obliged to release a bonus of Rs.160 per quintal on wheat and Rs.500 per quintal on soybean over and above the MSP. But there's no sign of it," Rishiraj said. □



HARVESTING BLACK GRAM in Jabalpur on June 13.

PTI

# Silence of the looms

A combination of labour shortages, liquidity crunch and absence of demand seems to be **spelling doom for Surat's textile trade**, until recently an economic powerhouse. BY ANUPAMA KATAKAM

THE FIRST BLOW WAS DEMONETISATION; then came the Goods and Services Tax (GST); and now the COVID-19 crisis seems to be the final blow. Surat, known as India's cloth city, was somehow able to limp back to health after the first two. But the third looks like one that may drive the thriving textile hub to the point of no return.

Surat's powerloom sector, which accounts for as much as 80 per cent of the country's man-made fibre production and almost 100 per cent production of synthetic sarees and dress materials, has been able to resume just 10 per cent of its usual capacity since the lifting of lockdown curbs. From conversations with textile traders and industry associations in the city, *Frontline* identified the two prime reasons for the strain in the textile market: shortage of manpower caused by the exodus of migrant workers and the State government's flip-flops on rules and regulations regarding the industry's operations during the COVID crisis.

Surat's Rs.50,000-crore powerloom and textile units are among the highest employment and revenue generators in the country. After agriculture, it is considered the second most important economic activity. Industry experts say that if this sector is struggling, it means the larger economy is also in trouble. The current crisis calls for two corrective steps: a boost for small businesses after a three-month lockdown and, more importantly, labour policies recognising that migrant labour is the backbone of this industry.

In an appeal to the Union Ministry of Textiles in May, the Federation of Surat Textile Traders Association demanded that textile traders be put into the MSME (micro, small and medium scale enterprise) category. They are not categorised as MSMEs mainly because they are not considered manufacturers. However, in view of the hardships caused by the COVID crisis, the Central government included textile traders (with conditions) in the Rs.3 lakh crore MSME revival package announced in

**CORPORATION OFFICIALS** and policemen stand guard outside the Surat Textile Market, which was sealed following a spike in COVID-19 cases, on July 6.

May. Textile association leaders say this move will provide them temporary liquidity. But it is not part of any long-term policy. They say that this is a good time for a policy review by the Central government, with particular attention to Surat. Repeated representations have been made over the years for a change of policy, but nothing has come of them.

Surat's textile traders are unique in that they function as weavers, dyers, embroiderers, printers and traders. A single company can sometimes handle the entire production/manufacturing line. Yet they remain traders by definition, and therefore their businesses do not qualify as MSMEs.

Rakesh Kunjwani, the owner of Neelam fabrics in Millennium market, said: "In early June, the government permitted the opening of many multi-storeyed textile market buildings. Yet, each time a COVID-19 positive

case is detected, they seal the building, which means at least 5,000 shops have to stay shut. Opening and closing shops often is causing inconsistency. We cannot do business like this."

## SHORTAGE OF LABOUR

Kunjwani said that very few workers had stayed back, and many units were making do with unskilled local labour just to finish off the stock of fibre that could rot during the monsoon. "Our businesses are running not even up to 10 per cent of our capacity. We are small businesses with an average annual turnover of Rs.5 crore. At this time, just before the festival season begins, we usually struggle to keep up with consignments."

Surat deals primarily in man-made fibre (MMF). There are 185 towers located on a 1.5-km stretch of its arterial ring road. Each building has an average of 5,000 to 7,000 shops; there are some 65,000 registered traders. The tremendous activity that in normal times unfolds daily in these shops is a mark of the city's staggering scale of business.

Kunjwani says that the once bustling textile markets—that had thousands of workers involved in hectic activity, packaging, cutting, lifting—now wear a desolate look. The colourful bales of fabric, the sound of tempos, labourers carrying heavy material shouting to get others out of the way, are all missing. "I hardly see 20 people when I walk to my shop. Obviously, it will take time, but without labour we are facing a bleak future," he said.

Champalal Bothra, general secretary of the Federation of Surat Textile Traders Association (FOSTTA), estimated that production was currently at 10 per cent of full capacity. At its peak, Surat produces four crore metres of fabric a day. The daily turnover is pegged at

Rs.150 crore. The textile city houses seven lakh looms, 1.10 lakh embroidery machines and nine industrial estates that have thousands of weaving, dyeing and printing mills. Businesses in Surat operate on long-term credit and consignment basis. FOSTTA estimates that Rs.5,000 crore is stuck in credit, and the liquidity crunch naturally means there is little capital to start work with. Another concern is the paucity of raw material caused by the lockdown. A combination of labour shortage, liquidity crunch and absence of demand was spelling doom for the industry, Bothra said.

Bothra explained that Surat's textile industry was multilayered, employing approximately 14 lakh workers—80 per cent of them migrants from Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. They work in the loom units—dyeing and processing, embroidery, cutting, tailoring, packaging and transportation. Around three lakh women work from home, doing small embroidery jobs. "Unless the workers return, the industry cannot resume," Bothra said. "We have heard contractors are sending buses for labour. Until now, I have not seen any visible signs of people returning."

With Surat turning into a COVID hotspot, it is unlikely workers will even want to return soon. Besides, the State government is not encouraging "reverse migration" out of the fear that movements across State borders may lead to a surge in infections. Bothra said people would not be coming back until the trains started running again.

## NO CAPITAL, NO MATERIAL

The weavers, who are drained of working capital, do not have fresh material. Also, as Bharat Gandhi, chairman, Federation of Indian Art Silk Weaving Industry, pointed out, demand is much reduced. "What was once considered a necessity is now being seen as a luxury. People will still need clothes and fabric, but we predict the demand for fashion goods will reduce substantially," he said.

Montu Jain, a trader in J.J. Market, said: "It is a critical situation which is getting worse. We work on long-term credit and on a consignment basis. We are mostly small businesses. If the situation does not improve many units will shut down. We have to learn to live with the virus and continue working. If we followed proper hygiene protocols strictly enforced by the state, the markets would have resumed."

He also explained that physical distancing was hard to maintain in this industry because the shops were small, usually measuring 10 feet by 10 feet. Workers work crowded together in the corridors sorting and packing material. But he felt that practical working protocols could be worked out: workers might work in shifts and material could be sent directly for printing.

Jain said that Surat traders would need to innovate and reinvent themselves in a situation marked by poor demand and lack of export opportunities. "Business has to be approached differently. For instance, units have begun making material for PPEs [personal protective equipment], textile for masks and other medical require-





VIJAY SONEJI

**A TEXTILE MERCHANT'S** shop in Surat, a file photograph. The thriving textile trade of Surat has virtually come to a halt amid the COVID-19 crisis as it deals with reduced demand and a shortage of labour.

ments,” he said. In its appeal to the centre, FOSTTA sought support mechanisms to get the industry back on its feet. They asked for interest waivers, reduction of GST on certain items, Mudra loans for traders, a two-year freeze on MMF imports, a cargo terminal to encourage exports, and a skill development programme for women.

### REVERSE MIGRATION

According to industry reports, close to 35 lakh migrants left Surat and its surrounding industrial zones in April and May. Initially, migrants were reassured by their employers that work would resume and the companies would look after them. However, as the lockdown kept getting extended, the situation deteriorated and the migrants started heading back home. Eyewitnesses say that in the initial weeks of the lockdown, Surat saw tragic scenes of thousands of workers wandering in the streets without food or shelter. The government set up food camps, but the numbers were overwhelming, and the larger problem of workers wanting to return to their villages was not solved.

On two occasions, workers came out on to the streets demanding that arrangements should be made for them to travel home, and their protests turned violent. This finally forced the State and Central governments to act.

“Shramik” trains carried back lakhs of migrants to their villages. Although the State says talks have begun with the northern States about sending trains for a reverse migration, social workers who helped migrants return believe it will take time. One of them said: “The trauma many suffered in getting back would have scarred them. I saw people with bleeding feet walking on the highway. How will they trust the State again? Besides, what if there is a second wave and another lockdown is declared? The sad reality is that they will eventually return because opportunities are scarce in their home States. Until that happens, Gujarat will pay the price for neglecting them in their time of need.”

Habibullah Mehmood Ansari, a zari (gold embroidery) worker from East Champaran in Bihar, had to be coaxed into recounting his painful experience: “I got on a train after paying Rs.1,500. That was the last of my salary. I had no money when I reached home. Now I am looking for agricultural and MGNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] work. If I do not get work, I might have to come back to Surat, but not for now. I prefer to be in my village.” Asked whether labour contractors had approached him, Ansari said someone did call but he was not interested. □

# Talking peace

After weeks of tension India and China agree to expedite **disengagement of the troops** stationed along the LAC and desist from taking any unilateral action to change the status quo. BY **JOHN CHERIAN**

IN early July, India and China once again signalled their intention to keep the dialogue process going in order to try and defuse the tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A few days after the “surprise” visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Ladakh and the combative speech he made there, the “Special Representatives of India and China on the Boundary Question”, after a telephone conversation, agreed to find an amicable solution to the face-off. The last round of meetings between the two Special Representatives, Chinese Foreign Minister

Wang Yi and Indian National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval, was held in December 2019.

It is reported that China had been requesting Special Representatives-level talks and activation of other top-level diplomatic and military channels after the June 15 incident which resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley. For reasons that are yet unclear, the Indian government took its time to respond. It is reported that Doval was indisposed and was in self-quarantine from the middle of June. The Indian side kept insisting that diplo-

matic and military channels, including the Working Mechanism for the Consultation and Coordination on India-China Affairs (WMCC), were sufficient to defuse the situation along the LAC. The Indian side apparently wanted the nationalistic pot to boil for some time. The Prime Minister, meanwhile, went to Ladakh and further heated up the rhetoric against China.

Thankfully, better sense prevailed finally. New Delhi and Beijing announced on July 6 that the Special Representatives had a two-hour-long telephone conversation a day earlier. The Indian External Affairs Ministry, in a statement following the announcement, said that both countries had agreed to expedite complete disengagement of troops stationed along the LAC and pledged to desist from taking any unilateral action to change the *status quo*. It said that the Special Representatives agreed that it was necessary to “ensure at the earliest complete disengagement of troops along the LAC and de-escalation from India-China border areas for full restoration of peace and tranquillity”.

The statement said that the NSA and the Chinese Foreign Minister had a “frank and in-depth” exchange of views on the recent developments in the western sector of the LAC. The two sides agreed to be guided by the consensus reached by their respective leaders (Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping) at their meetings in Wuhan, China, in April 2020 and Chennai, India, in December 2019



**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi addressing Indian soldiers during a visit to Nimu, Ladakh area, on July 3.

PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU/AP



#### NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISER

Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi ahead of the 21st round of India-China border talks at Dujiangyan city in Sichuan province of China, on November 24, 2018.

that “differences, should not be allowed to become disputes”. The Special Representatives, according to the statement, agreed to continue with their conversations to “ensure full and enduring restoration of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas in accordance with bilateral agreements and protocols”. It was agreed that while the WMCC and the military commanders on both sides could engage with each other to discuss border issues, the two Special Representatives would have the final authority on approving an agreement.

If both sides stand by the commitments made in the first week of July, the tensions along the LAC can be defused within a short period of time despite the deep scars left on the Indian psyche by the June 15 incident. The Chinese side has agreed to defuse tensions despite Modi’s speech placing the blame exclusively on the “expansionist” policies of Beijing. Military and strategic experts in India had described Modi’s speech as an indication that the government was preparing for a tough military response.

Modi had said in his speech that the era of expansionism was over and that history was proof that “expansionists” had either lost or perished.

Addressing the Indian Army’s 14 Corps, better known as the “Fire and Fury” corps, he said that “the enemy has seen your fire and fury.... The weak can never accomplish peace, the brave do.” Modi had reiterated that the infrastructure work the Indian military was undertaking along the LAC would continue “speedily”. He emphasised that the funding for border infrastructure had “gone up by three times”.

#### CHINA’S REACTION

Beijing was quick to react although it was obvious that Modi’s belligerence was meant for domestic consumption. “China has demarcated its boundary with 12 of its 14 neighbouring countries through peaceful negotiations, turning land borders into bonds of friendly cooperation. It is groundless to view China as ‘expansionist’, exaggerate and fabricate its disputes with neighbours,” the spokesman for the Chinese embassy in New Delhi said in a statement. Modi had also claimed in speeches he delivered at an all-party meeting and in the “Man ki Baat” radio programme he hosts that India had won the fight in Galwan and no territory controlled by India had been ceded.

With the Prime Minister claiming that no Indian territory had been lost, the Chinese side had a further reason to de-escalate. The face-off with India has not been front-page news in China as Beijing is more pre-occupied with the military threat that the United States is posing in its backyard. The spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry had been stating since early July that both sides were engaged in negotiations “for lowering the temperature through military and diplomatic channels” and that “no party should engage in any action that may escalate the situation at this point”. The spokesman warned India against making another “strategic miscalculation” and said that the priority for the two countries was to focus on “the historic mission of national development and rejuvenation”.

The statement released by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on July 6 following the breakthrough made in

the talks between the Special Representatives said that the consensus reached with India to withdraw troops from the border should be implemented as soon as possible. This is another indication that the Chinese side does not want any further escalation along the LAC. The statement acknowledged that bilateral ties were facing a “complex situation” but stressed that both sides should adhere to the “strategic judgment that they do not pose a threat to each other”.

It emphasised that both sides welcomed the recent military- and diplomatic-level talks to resolve the situation along the LAC. Wang had spoken to his Indian counterpart, S. Jaishankar, during the Russia India China (RIC) meet in June. They also held a virtual meeting of the WMCC on June 25. At the same time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry statement once again blamed India for the flare-up on the LAC. “What happened on the western border between China and India in the Galwan Valley is very clear. China will continue to effectively defend its territorial sovereignty and continue to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas,” the statement said. Unlike in the Indian statement, there was no mention in the Chinese statement about maintaining the “*status quo*” in the contested pressure points.

The statement from Beijing also underlined the importance of “correctly guiding public opinion, maintain and promote normal exchanges and cooperation between the two countries, avoid practice of expanding and complicating disputes, and jointly safeguard the overall situation of China India relations”. This was a reference to the jingoistic and hyper-nationalist tone adopted by leading functionaries of the Indian government after the June 15 incident.

The banning of 59 mobile apps developed by Chinese companies and the exclusion of Chinese companies from telecom and road projects have disturbed Beijing. Some Indian Cabinet Ministers and politicians have also started blaming

China for the spread of the coronavirus.

At a meeting between the Indian and Chinese military commanders, Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, commander of the Leh-based 14 Corps, and Major General Liu Lin, commander of the South Xinjiang Military Region, on June 30, it was agreed that de-escalation would first take place in the “friction areas” where the two sides had serious physical clashes and would be followed by the withdrawal of forces from “depth areas” such as Depsang. Doval and Wang have approved this agreement. Both sides are emphasising the need for a phased and step-wise de-escalation process. Following the Doval-Wang agreement, a four-kilometre-wide “buffer zone” will be created with the two armies retreating 2 km each.

India and China are aware that the disengagement process is easier said than done. But things seem to have got to a good start. Indian Army sources have confirmed that China has started moving its forces back in the four contested standoff points: Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs and Pangong Tso. The disengagement process, according to most military experts and analysts, will take some time. Doval and Wang are due to hold talks again by the end of July to assess the progress made. Before that, there will be a meeting of the Joint Secretary-level WMCC on border issues to discuss the implementation of the Doval-Wang agreement

#### **TROOPS MASSES ALONG LAC**

Meanwhile, thousands of troops remain massed on both sides of the LAC backed by sophisticated weaponry. The Indian government has apparently changed the rules of engagement after the June 15 incident. According to reports, Indian soldiers patrolling along the LAC are no longer banned from carrying weapons. A shooting incident has the potential to spiral out of control. The Indian side is aware that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is in a much stronger position in the area.

Anyway, most military experts agree that if push comes to shove, the

Chinese army today is in a much stronger position than it was in 1962 and China’s economy is five times the size of India’s. China is armed with more advanced conventional and nuclear weapons than India. In the long, harsh winter it will be very costly to maintain the 30,000 extra troops India has rushed to the LAC.

India, meanwhile, is trying to further strengthen its military strike power by persuading Russia, France, Israel and the U.S., from whom the bulk of the country’s armaments imports are sourced, to fast-track war material. The Defence Acquisition Council has earmarked \$4.4 billion for the procurement and manufacture of armaments. The government has approved the emergency purchase of artillery rounds for the ultralight howitzers from the U.S. Israel has agreed to supply Spike anti-tank missiles. It is bonanza time for arms dealers as India once again goes on a weapon-buying spree.

The Russian government has agreed to rush the sale of 33 advanced fighter jets—21 Mig-29s and 12 Su-30 MKIs. It also agreed to upgrade the 59 Russian-made jets in the service of the Indian Air Force (IAF). The Indian government wants Russia to speed up the delivery of the S-400 air defence missile systems. The deal was clinched when Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Russia to attend the 75th Victory Day Parade in Moscow, which was held in June to commemorate the triumph of the Soviet army over Nazi Germany at the end of the Second World War.

China did not comment on the deal though it may not be happy about the timing, coming as it did when the PLA was standing eyeball to eyeball with the Indian Army along the LAC. China is Russia’s biggest client as far as the purchase of defence weaponry is concerned. The two countries have been geopolitical allies for decades now. India, on the other hand, has veered closer to the West. Russia played an important role in getting India to be a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Moscow, Beijing and New Delhi interact

closely also in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the RIC (Russia-India-China) grouping.

While Russia has been trying to defuse China-India tensions, the U.S. has been busy stirring the pot. With President Donald Trump deciding to seek re-election on a decidedly anti-China platform, it is not surprising that the U.S. has rushed to blame China for the incidents that took place along the LAC in May-June. The U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, was quick to issue a statement labelling China as a “rogue actor” after the June 15 incident.

Pompeo has been in touch with Jaishankar frequently in recent months. His latest telephone call, according to reports, was at the end of June. He reiterated the U.S.’ support for India in the current standoff. According to reports, Pompeo offered to share military intelligence about Chinese troop movements along the LAC with the Indian government. He had earlier issued a statement welcoming the ban on 59 Chinese mobile apps.

Mike Meadows, White House Chief of Staff, told Fox News that the U.S. was not “going to stand by and let China or anyone else take the reins in terms of being the most powerful, dominant force in this region, or anywhere else”. He said the U.S. military “stands strong and will continue to stand strong, whether it’s in relationship to a conflict between India and China or anywhere else”.

The Indian political establishment hopes that if it joins the U.S.-led alliance against China, the West will provide preferential market access to India for Modi to realise his pipedream of converting India into a \$10 trillion economy.

Even as India was locked in a bitter standoff with China along the LAC, the Trump administration stayed the issuance of H-1b visas, whose major beneficiaries are Indians. It was also not happy with India’s latest defence deals with Russia. Besides the U.S., the only country openly supporting India in its latest standoff with China is Japan. In South Asia, even Bhutan has chosen to keep quiet on the issue. □

# Bravado is no substitute for business

The Narendra Modi government's move to ban all things Chinese is likely to aggravate conditions for the pandemic-hit economy. The pursuit of **national self-reliance** requires a **blueprint** that maps out how to achieve it over the long term, with the state playing a key role in the process. China offers lessons, which India could profit from. BY V. SRIDHAR

AN angry man cannot use his brains fully. So goes an old Tamil saying that aptly and succinctly sums up the Narendra Modi government's moves in recent weeks to banish all things Chinese. Since the tragic clash in the Galwan heights, the Centre, followed by several State governments, has raised formally, and informally in some cases, unprecedented barriers on trade and investment from China.

Not just ubiquitous Chinese goods, such as mobile phones, which have captured the Indian mass market in recent years, but even Ganesha idols made in China face a ban. In an atmosphere where emotions have been fanned by a frenzy that has forced everyone to want to appear more patriotic than the next person, hurdles that exclusively target investments by Chinese companies have been put in place. The ban on 59 Chinese apps has taken the war into cyberspace (see story on page 79), and several infrastructure projects that Chinese companies are cur-

rently implementing are in danger of being abandoned. Shipments at Indian ports and airports have been held up merely on the strength of informal whispers. As the war cries get louder, trade and economic ties appear to have gone into the chiller, hardly a confidence-boosting move if normalising India-China relations is the intent.

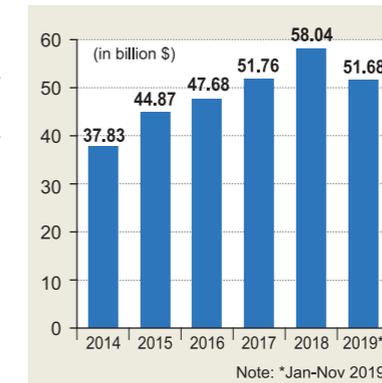
But amidst the frenetic calls for revenge, it is time to ask whether bluster and bravado can substitute for the years of grunt work that the pursuit of national self-reliance demands. Most importantly, it appears that India can learn much from China on how to go about building national self-reliance. Vitriolic anger, even if by faux patriots, is hardly

conducive to the search for serious alternatives to the economic policies that have been pursued so far. Instead, a cool assessment may well require jettisoning the burden of economic liberalisation that forced India to depend on the kindness of strangers. Above all, it requires a willingness to learn from China, especially from its three-decade-long economic transformation that has won it global markets while it built capability that was based on the hard-nosed pursuit of national self-interest.

## IS DECOUPLING FEASIBLE?

The calls for India to decouple from China have to be placed in the context of India's growing dependence on not just China but other countries in the past two decades. Two-way trade between India and China has grown spectacularly in the last two decades. Both imports and exports were worth just a few billion dollars 20 years ago, but while exports have been more or less on a plateau since 2009-10, imports have grown dramatically. For instance, in just four years since 2014, imports surged 25 per cent while exports remained almost stationary (see figures). China accounts for almost 15 per cent of

FIGURE 1  
India's trade deficit with China



India's imports, compared with less than 5 per cent 20 years ago. Although imports fell somewhat in 2019, this is likely to have resulted from the significant slowing down of the Indian economy.

The burgeoning import bill reflects India's dependence on China in several key areas. Chinese power equipment producers, for instance, have invaded the Indian market in the last decade. The prolonged economic boom in China enabled them to develop economies of scale that producers elsewhere in the world could not dream of, which has resulted in much lower prices. Chinese producers of bulk drugs, or active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), have replaced European sources of supply in the last decade.

## DRUGS TRADE

Biswajit Dhar, an economist who teaches at Jawaharlal Nehru University, pointed out that Western multinationals' insistence on supplying drug formulations, on which they could command higher profits, instead of the raw materials made things easy for Chinese companies. The dependence on Chinese imports in areas such as vitamins is particularly heavy. Dhar said that almost 90 per cent of the APIs for antibiotics and vitamins were sourced from China. "How can this kind of heavy dependence be replaced in a hurry?" he asked. In fact, a week after "strict" instructions were issued to authorities to stringently check on imports from China, the restrictions on imports of pharmaceutical products

and supplies meant for large companies such as LG, Samsung, Toyota and Honda were rolled back. On June 22, Customs officials in Chennai and Visakhapatnam put all shipments from China on hold, on the basis of the ludicrous information of the possible "illegal imports of narcotics". Clearly, the back and forth reflected a government that was operating in "act now, think later" mode.

## INDUSTRY VOICES

The dependence extends to sectors such as chemicals, fertilizers, plastics, auto components, electronics and a wide range of consumer goods (see Figure 3). A recent media report highlights India's extreme dependence on China. It indicates that India sources 90 per cent of the ubiquitous point of sale (POS) devices that facilitate digital payments from China.

In the past two decades, Indian companies have come to rely heavily on components from China. Bajaj Auto, for instance, which imports alloy wheels and vehicle transmission parts from China valued at about Rs.1,000 crore annually, can turn to other sources but that would take time. Rajiv Bajaj, its managing director, recently said the process "would be long-drawn and not overnight". Auto industry sources said that even though sourcing from China involved higher transportation costs plus a 10 per cent duty, it still worked out about 15 per cent cheaper than sourcing domestically. That margin is not trivial in an industry that has been reeling under a crisis that that started well before the pandemic (*Frontline*, September 13, 2019). Quite apart from imports, Rajiv Bajaj also stressed the point that Indian companies that needed global exposure simply could not avoid experiencing China at first hand. "As a global company, we need experiences from various markets in order to complete our understanding," he told a business daily recently. "It doesn't matter whether we make or sell. For that reason, I don't see us [Bajaj Auto] moving away [from China] as of now." Although in-

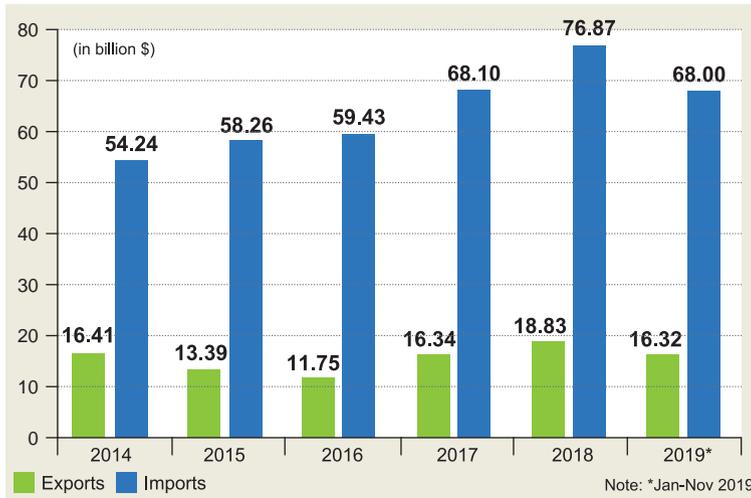


NATHAN LAINE/BLOOMBERG

**HUAWEI'S FLAGSHIP STORE** in Paris, on July 7. Huawei is the world's largest telecommunications equipment provider, way ahead of companies such as Nokia, Ericsson and its Chinese rival ZTE.

FIGURE 2

**Indian exports to and imports from China**



dustry spokespersons agreed that India needed to reduce its reliance on single-country sources, especially in the wake of the pandemic, they said that the process would require measured steps, not a knee-jerk response.

T.K. Ramesh, managing director of Ace Micromatics, a medium-sized company that specialises in machine tools, said that dependence on China needed to be “measured and take into account our own vulnerabilities”. He said that his company, which has a base in China, was unlikely to be affected adversely because China’s reliance on India was “minuscule” in the context of its overall trade. Ramesh, who travels regularly to China, said: “The pace at which changes have happened in that country is simply amazing, and there is much that we can learn.”

China’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has grown 40-fold in just three decades. Not surprisingly, this rapid growth has spawned several global giants such as Huawei in telecommunications network equipment, Tencent in social media, Alibaba in e-commerce and DJI in recreational drones. China did not become the world’s factory overnight. It adopted a long-range strategy that not only enhanced national capabilities through innovation but also scattered its products and services across the world. Just two examples would suffice to illustrate this. The first is of Huawei, the

global leader in the cutting-edge 5G technologies, which is under relentless attack by the Donald Trump Administration. The second, is of how Chinese capabilities in railway technologies were enhanced over three decades, which has enabled it to become the unchallenged global leader in “bullet” trains. Each case, each of a different class of infrastructure, highlights the extreme focus that China has been able to provide while making investments in the realisation that the eventual spin-offs from them would provide wide and valuable returns to society.

**THE HUAWEI SAGA**

Huawei is the world’s largest telecommunications equipment provider, way ahead of companies such as Nokia, Ericsson and its Chinese rival ZTE. Ironically, the United States lacks a telecom stalwart after a wave of deregulation beginning in the 1980s wiped out American equipment producers, the last to fall being Lucent Technologies. The U.S., under Trump, has been reluctant to let China get ahead and has stepped up its campaign against the Chinese company, telling allies that Huawei’s equipment is not secure.

Huawei is completely unique, indeed the odd man out in the world of capitalism. It earned revenues of \$123 billion in 2019, by far the largest for any telecom company in the world. The company was foun-

ded in 1987 by Ren Zhengfei, a former senior officer in the People’s Liberation Army. It started with the manufacture of switches, later started to build its own networks and still later started offering consulting services to clients across the world. More recently, it has ventured into the consumer market by making its own hand-held devices, where it has successfully challenged established players such as Apple and Samsung. It employs 194,000 workers worldwide, of which almost half are engaged in research and development.

Although Huawei established its U.S. base only in 2001, it soon started drawing fire from the U.S. establishment, aided by U.S. private telecom companies that either did not have the stomach to resist pressure or were fearful of being overrun by Huawei. Critics of the company often refer to a lawsuit of 2001 by Cisco and another by Motorola, alleging “theft” of intellectual property as evidence of its sharp practices, but what is ignored by partisans is the fact that both American companies later settled the matter out of court, which implies that these serious charges were never proved. Later, in 2005, a report by Rand Corporation alleged that Huawei had “deep ties” with the Chinese government and military.

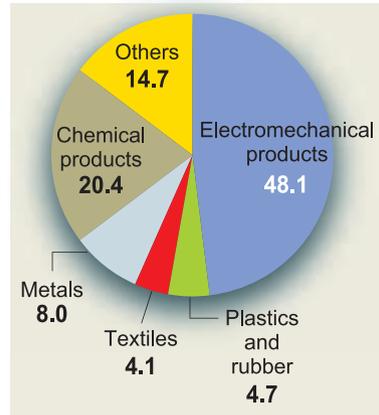
What makes Huawei completely unique, quite apart from its size and stature, is its corporate structure. Huawei is entirely owned by 104,572 company employees, including Ren, and more than 3,000 retired employees. Employees need to satisfy certain eligibility criteria to become stakeholders in the company. Ren believes this unique shareholding structure fosters the “wolf culture”—each for all and all for each—that the company likes to promote as its core philosophy. Shareholders actually invest in the holding company in which Ren himself owns just 0.94 per cent, the remaining 99.06 per cent belonging to all other shareholders. All shareholders are eligible for dividends, but employees eligible for share allotments as reward for their performance have to pay for the shares. In fact, this is a source of

revenue for the company, which is renowned in the world of business for the manner in which it ploughs profits back into the business. In 2019, the company spent more than 15 per cent of its revenues on R&D, making it among the topmost investors in R&D in the world. By then, the Shenzhen-based company had more than 85,000 patents in its kitty. Another interesting facet of Huawei's structure is that it has a rotating position for its chairperson, which means that at any given time there are actually three leaders available to the company.

This unique structure obviously facilitated the transformation of the company from a humble seller of telephone switches to a global leader in 5G technologies. Unlike its other rivals, Huawei did not have shareholders demanding a larger slice of dividends. Quite apart from not having to distribute all profits immediately to greedy shareholders, this also enabled the company to patiently explore markets around the world. Huawei typically allows a company in a foreign country to try its products for free before the company commits to buy, a practice no other rivals offer.

The U.S. establishment and the media allege that Huawei's ability to offer much lower prices than competitors emanates from the close links and support it draws from the Chinese government. However, impartial observers have pointed out that Huawei's ability to source parts, components and services that go into its products in-house instead of depending on third parties, as most rivals do, is what makes the Chinese company's products much cheaper. It has responded to the security bogey raised by the U.S. by allowing its operations in countries such as the United Kingdom to offer its equipment for open testing. These practices have enabled it to not only penetrate the mass mobile telephony market such as those in Africa where it dominates but also to reach out to high-end markets for 5G services that are still only starting to roll out. The moral of the story for India and Indian entities is that leadership,

FIGURE 3  
Indian Imports from China (2018-19)



against heavy and mounting odds, is only possible through innovation, not only technological but also through corporate structures that enable companies to swim against the tide.

#### INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN ENGINE

In 2008, in the wake of the global financial crisis, China rolled out its largest-ever fiscal stimulus package. More than \$586 billion was injected into projects for the construction of houses and for major infrastructure such as railways, highways and airports. These investments played an important role in expanding domestic demand, increasing employment and stimulating economic growth. While some of this resulted in the growth of non-performing portfolios of banks and in excess capacity, these investments addressed the immediate problem of collapsing demand. More pertinently, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, China's stimulus package significantly dwarfs the efforts of the Modi government. This year so far, the Chinese government has announced investments amounting to a whopping \$4.9 trillion. Note the key difference: these are projected investments, not loan waivers, relief measures, tax waivers or subsidies provided to industry as is the case in India.

The strategic thinking that underpins Chinese infrastructure efforts is best highlighted by the manner in which it has completely

overhauled its rail network since the 1990s (*Frontline*, October 13, 2017). While the Modi regime made much of its efforts three years ago to build the country's first "bullet train" project—about which it prefers to remain silent these days—China adopted a completely different approach. Instead of seeing building of high speed rail (HSR) as marquee projects, it placed these in the context of a complete overhaul of its entire rail infrastructure that was based on a three-decade vision. As a result of its step-by-step approach, starting in the early years of the century, China has completely transformed its rail networks. Separate pathways for goods and passengers was the first step, followed by a speeding up of all trains. It is only later that it started HSR projects, but even here it has established itself as the undisputed global champion, proven by the fact that a whopping 60 per cent of all HSR systems are in China. Armed with technologies it built during the course of this expansion and using ruthlessly the bargaining chip that the enormous scales of its expansion plans gave it, the Chinese government forced multinationals to share technologies in order to play in China. Early entrants such as the train-set manufacturers Mitsubishi, Alstom and Siemens were allowed into China only if they accepted these conditions. And in a recession-hit global market, where else in the world could they sell their wares?

#### CHINESE ROLE IN INDIA'S INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING

Biswajit Dhar believes decoupling from China is not feasible in the short run. "But if India starts working on a strategy today, it can possibly be achieved a few years down the line." Indian policy, he said, "has become hostage to the neoliberal mindset". "Building self-reliance is not a plug-and-play kind of a thing; we need to strategise." He said that this entailed first mobilising domestic resources to build indigenous capabilities—even more critically the "building blocks" that facilitate expansion of national capacity. "What we need is an industrial policy that

brings together various elements, including technological capability,” he said. A national framework that ensures competitiveness on a dynamic scale requires a functioning innovation system.

However, India’s complete dependence on foreign entities to do this has reached the point where they even build infrastructure in the country. “Look at the number of infrastructure projects involving Chinese companies, several of which have been cancelled in the last few weeks,” said Dhar. “Is it not ironical that while the Indian government has adamantly refused to be a part of the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI], an international project to build infrastructure across continents, Chinese companies are implementing infrastructure projects in India?”

It is interesting how China has engaged with globalisation. This is highlighted by the manner in which it engaged with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) after joining it in 2001. “When you look back on what China did step by step before and after it joined the WTO, you realise what needs to be done here,” said Dhar. China accepted the “most onerous” terms when it joined the WTO. “Of course, we had a theoretical understanding of what would be required to build a strong and resilient manufacturing sector, but China actually did this, and in such a short time.” Dhar said that the word “dynamic” seemed to mean something else in China. “They announced a manufacturing policy in 2015, which stated that they aim to become the leading manufacturing nation in the world by 2049. One does not know whether to laugh or cry when super patriots here proclaim that they will junk Chinese stuff and turn *atmanirhar*, whatever that means.”

Three decades of liberalisation has effectively rolled back capabilities that were built in India. For instance, the extreme dependence on foreign sources of supplies for pharmaceuticals is a recent phenomenon that coincides with liberalisation. Dhar points out that Jawaharlal Nehru’s “great quality as a leader to anticipate India’s needs” was re-

sponsible for the establishment of a chain of public sector companies—promoted by States and the Centre—which resulted in indigenous bulk drug production capabilities. “But after liberalisation, these were deliberately allowed to turn sick, resulting effectively in the chopping off of the leg on which the Indian pharmaceutical industry was standing,” said Dhar. Initially, imports came from Europe, but after China joined the WTO, imports started flowing into India from China. “Not insignificantly, this was also the time India sharply reduced import tariffs on manufactured goods,” observed Dhar. The difficulties now being faced by each of the sectors that is now significantly dependent on imports from China can be traced to steps that caused the sacrifice of national self-interest at the altar of neoliberalism.

The Indian story of dependence goes side by side with the story of liberalisation. Basically, the neoliberal logic urged governments to drop tariffs and not interfere with free trade. The argument was that the question of price settled all other questions. The attitude of policymakers was, if someone else somewhere else can make something at a cheaper price, why bother to make it at all? “In reality, not a single country in the world has succeeded by following this prescription,” argued Dhar. “Domestic enterprises need to be nurtured. India failed miserably in this. Today, we are paying a price for this folly.”

One of the first sectors to be exposed to unfair competition was the power equipment sector, most notably exemplified by the Enron fiasco of the 1990s. And the company that suffered the most as a result was the public sector equipment manufacturer Bharat Heavy Electrics Limited (BHEL). The company, which had even found innovative technologies to handle the relatively high ash content of Indian coal in its boilers, has been emasculated by the torrent of imports, most notably from China, in recent years.

India had a string of public sector electronics companies, too, virtually



RAFIQ MAGBOOL/AP

**IN A DRUG-MANUFACTURING UNIT** on the outskirts of Mumbai, a file photograph. Chinese producers of bulk drugs, or active pharmaceutical ingredients, have replaced European sources of supply in the last decade.

in every State, until the early 1990s. Companies such as Bharat Electronics Limited and Keltron made the country’s first TVs. These companies also used to make the first push-button phones. In 1996, after India signed the Information Technology Agreement at the WTO, all tariffs on IT products were phased out, which effectively killed the fledgling domestic industry.

**SHIFTING SANDS OF GLOBALISATION**

The Indian government’s attitude and response to globalisation, reflected in its dogged pursuit of a liberal economic policy, appears to not take into account the shifting dynamics in global trade and investment. The periodic crises that have rocked significant proportions of the global economy—the Mexican peso crisis of 1994, the East Asian financial crisis of 1997, the 9/11 crisis of 2001, the 2008 global financial crisis, the crisis

in the eurozone and, finally, the ongoing crisis caused by the pandemic—has resulted in a growing unease with globalisation. In fact, the first serious doubts that triggered the calls on countries to “decouple” from global production chains started after the 2008 global crisis. Many economists started arguing that countries ought to focus on generating internal demand, something that only China appears to have earnestly followed. In effect, they were pointing to the fact that the “China model” of producing for the world market was *passee*.

The anaemic growth of the world economy, reflected in the equally insipid growth of global trade, has forced countries into the realisation that an export-led strategy is not the road to salvation. Dhar pointed out that trade as a proportion of GDP of many countries started declining after 2008. This, he said, meant two things: one, that countries were relying less and less on global trade and value chains and, two, that countries were focussing inward. “This was happening to countries as well as industries operating from within them,” he pointed out. He said that in sectors such as electronics, for instance, there had been a significant

“cooling down” of these value chains in the last decade.

Soon after COVID-19 hit China, key officials in the Modi government started the chorus of how India could replace China as a production hub for the world. Referring to the significant changes in the nature of the global value chain in the last decade, Dhar said: “There is a difference between what India is doing, or trying to do, and what other countries are doing.” Since the 1990s when globalisation accelerated, every international crisis has also raised doubts about the trajectory, effects and the future of the globalisation process.

Dhar said that India was never in a position to climb onto the global chain. All it has done in the last several decades is source from the chain without ever developing its own strengths. All the free trade agreements (FTA) India has signed in recent years have only allowed foreigners access to Indian markets without getting India access to markets overseas, argued Dhar. “The problem is that we do not have any products to sell in these countries that are produced competitively.” He believes India’s ambitions of emerging as a regional hub are “fanciful”. Even without the advantage of preferential tariffs, which is what FTAs provide, China has been able to overrun global markets, he said. “If India joins the RCEP [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership], which would set preferential tariffs for partner countries, it would prove disastrous because whatever is left standing in India would also be wiped out.”

He pointed out that India’s recent decision to restrict Chinese investments would have been incompatible with membership in the RCEP. Of course, remaining outside the RCEP club would also be incompatible with the professed aspirations to become a regional economic hub. “No country can become a hub simply because it wishes to. It needs to have the wherewithal to become one and, clearly, India simply is not in the same league as many other countries,” Dhar said. “You cannot

flex your muscles if you don’t have any.”

This inward-looking realisation is what has promoted countries around the world, most notably barring India, to embark on a significant economic stimulus to domestic economic agents. In fact, since 2008 China, too had been making an effort at “balancing” its growth strategy, especially in a situation when the global demand for its products has been slack. But instead of withdrawing from global engagement, it rolled out the BRI, an ambitious decades-long project involving many countries across the world and particularly in the neighbourhood, where India remains the sole spectator.

The Modi regime’s pursuit of a bizarre form of “nationalism” that is specifically anti-China not just infeasible, it is plainly illogical. “India ought to just maintain the status quo instead of adding further to the confusion and distress caused by the pandemic,” argued Dhar. The stray noises from the establishment about Indian intentions of pursuing a path of import substitution are fraught with serious problems. How will this be financed? If foreign capital is expected to do this, that is even more questionable, said Dhar. His studies point to the fact that the manufacturing sector accounts for just 20 per cent of all foreign direct investment into India. “India does not have the resources, the technologies nor the ecosystems that would enable the fulfilment of such aspirations,” he said.

The Modi regime is now stranded on the high horse of jingoism it has mounted. It cannot forsake its avowed commitment to its very own version of neoliberalism that is embellished by the warped version of *swadeshi* that is woven into its genetic make-up. Yet, its ideological predilections prevent it from pursuing the only sensible course available to it: fostering indigenous capability with the state playing a key role in the process. The move to ban all things Chinese was the easy step. Dealing with the chaos in its aftermath will be a wholly different ball game. □

# App ban as bluster

The ban on 59 Chinese apps is a **knee-jerk reaction** that can only have adverse consequences for the Indian digital ecosystem. It is unlikely to promote self-reliance nor does it lay the ground for indigenously developed Indian platforms. BY **SHRINIDHI RAO AND JAI VIPRA**

IN a move that India's Information Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad described as a "digital strike", Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a press release on June 29 banning 59 Chinese-owned apps. Most of them are obscure names in the world of apps, but the list also includes the wildly popular TikTok among the few other recognisable apps.

Far from being a considered and clever act of retaliation, the ban appears to have been a knee-jerk reaction without either justification, reasoning or even an awareness of its consequences. It is not clear why these apps were targeted while other Chinese-owned apps were left out. It is also not obvious how banning them helps India's sovereignty or data protection as the government claims.

## RECKLESS MOVE

The decision might be ineffective as a response to the India-China border dispute, but it is not without economic and legal consequences for India. Some of the banned apps employ a significant number of people in India. TikTok has an Indian workforce of about 2,000. While the e-commerce firms in the list—Shein, Club Factory and Romwe—employ fewer people in India, a large ecosystem of warehouses and transport services with their attendant workers depends on these firms. About 30,000 Indian sellers offer goods on Club Factory, for instance. Moreover, the

procedure for blocking these apps has drawn attention to the existing Indian legal framework governing the ecosystem in which apps function. Considerations of freedom of speech and expression have been recklessly ignored, especially as the ban has been rushed through in an opaque fashion. Indeed, the Indian action offers a sharp contrast to how China has fostered local innovation, not as a "reaction" to an external threat but as a deliberate means of fostering indigenous capability in this critical realm of innovation

This is not India's first decision against China in the digital sphere, and it will certainly not be the last. In July last year, the government closed a customs loophole that allowed Chinese e-commerce firms to send products marked as gifts to India, bypassing the duties on foreign products. This May, in a move aimed at China, the government declared that investment from India's border countries could no longer take the automatic route and would need its approval. These moves had already forced Chinese e-commerce companies to pare down their operations in India. TikTok was banned for a brief while in April 2019 for allegedly failing to moderate content.

Any future action taken in the digital realm is likely to have larger

**DURING A PROTEST** in Jammu on July 1 against Chinese President Xi Jinping.

economic impacts. India is considering following the example of the United States and its allies in keeping Huawei out of their 5G networks. It could crack down harder on Chinese venture capital funding to Indian technology start-ups, and it could prevent Chinese technology companies such as Alibaba from functioning in India. One must foreground the economic consequences of these actions taken ostensibly for reasons of sovereignty and security. Many businesses sell online, use enterprise software for business management, work with large digital

datasets, advertise on social media platforms, list themselves on business aggregator platforms, and so on. Measures that restrict the functioning of certain digital service providers will affect all users, including businesses, of these service providers. For example, a ban on Alibaba Cloud will affect every business that uses its data storage and computing facilities and will reduce competition in this segment. A ban on Chinese funding would affect established Indian apps such as Paytm. In a larger sense, rejecting Chinese technology enables U.S. technology to dominate the Indian market. Domestic alternatives have not developed enough to fill the vacuum on their own.

The lack of domestic alternatives is not without reason. Leadership in the global technology race or even self-reliance in digital technology does not result from piecemeal measures. U.S. technology firms became global market leaders with the supportive ecosystem of Silicon Valley, abundant funding and positive spin-offs from publicly funded U.S. universities and the defence establishment. The evolution of the Internet is itself a prime example of such an advance. Chinese technology firms, too, grew in a protected mar-

ket with a proactive government and public investment. India has the advantages of having a large technically qualified workforce and a potentially large domestic market, but these advantages will not be of any use unless they are backed by strategic efforts to create a digital ecosystem.

Digital sector leadership does not happen as a matter of chance. It needs a large talent pool for technological innovation, which means public investment in technology education. It needs public investment in digital infrastructure such as broadband to make sure that public services remain public. The Kerala Fibre Optic Network Project, which aims to provide high-speed Internet to two million families, is a good example of such an investment. A private company can easily monopolise fast broadband provision as has happened in the U.S., where some States even disallow local governments from building a public broadband network. Digital leadership also needs a regulatory system that is one step ahead of the sector and a government that has clearly defined development priorities. Why is it that most of India's digital agricultural start-ups focus on agricultural marketing and not on helping farmers assess soil health for optimal sowing and harvesting? Why does India have a deluge of fintech start-ups that promote easy lending but not a digital overhaul of Life Insurance Corporation of India products to create value for policyholders of India's biggest life insurer in new ways? A government truly focussed on using technology for the benefit of people would dwell on these questions.

Crucially at this juncture, a leading technology industry can only be built by understanding that a platform structure is unavoidable in the digital sector under current conditions. A digital platform is like a multi-sided market. It facilitates interactions among two or more different categories of actors, such as users, buyers, sellers, advertisers and developers. If left alone, a sector involving platforms tends towards monopolisation because of network

effects. This is the phenomenon whereby after a platform collects a critical mass of users, more users generate even more users, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is because platform users derive value from other platform users, and platform services are made better with more users on board. Facebook is more enjoyable if more of your friends are on it, and Amazon provides better value if more brands sell on it. And, as one or two leading platforms accumulate users and get even better, their competitors will drop even further behind unable to gain market share.

## NEED FOR REGULATED PLATFORMS

The quest for digital supremacy or self-reliance, then, is largely a quest for platform monopolies unless regulation ensures the break-up of platform layers so that monopolies are not allowed to develop. This may create different kinds of efficiency but will necessarily involve giving up existing efficiencies. If we are to accept and promote platforms, we should be open to regulating them more democratically because they are monopolies. This means that as the government (correctly) reserves the right to ask for data and source code disclosures from digital platforms, it must not stop there. The people most affected by digital platforms should be involved in determining platform regulation.

For example, the government could make it easier for platform workers such as Swiggy delivery personnel to set a platform policy. This is not an idle demand, especially because Swiggy's workers have alleged that the platform's algorithms are tuned to deprive them of "incentive" wages. Moreover, regulations could create capabilities in municipal bodies to govern transport platforms such as Uber or they could ensure that educational technology platforms are developed in consultation with teachers' organisations to suit the needs of public education. Such measures would justify the call for public investment to support digital platform development, while assur-



ing society that government support for private initiative is conditional on the delivery of public benefits.

Instead, the Indian government has not even attempted to create a digital ecosystem that would use technology to fulfil developmental priorities. It has not introduced any democratic regulation of monopoly platforms or taken steps to break any digital monopoly. It has not created any large public enterprise that uses platformisation for social good. Its “self-reliance” amounts to a cosying up to Reliance to privatise more public value through platforms along with U.S. investment, and the latest ban on Chinese apps.

Defending the app ban on geopolitical grounds is not tenable either. The Ministry of Home Affairs has claimed that the apps enable compilation of user data by “hostile elements”. Similar arguments are used to keep Huawei out of 5G networks, including claims that it supposedly has back doors that allow it to access personal information. It is also pointed out that Chinese law makes it mandatory to share information if the Chinese government seeks it.

If the Edward Snowden leaks have taught us anything, it is that no country is beyond installing and using back doors. One of Snowden’s revelations was that the U.S. government had planted back doors in Cisco equipment meant for export. Such risks exist with any member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the U.S.—regardless of their domestic laws, which they seem all too willing to flout. India’s own track record with privacy is nothing to be proud of. Regarding data sharing with the government, India’s latest draft e-commerce policy requires companies to submit data to the government when asked. The draft policy has a broad definition of e-commerce companies that seems to include social media and search platforms that depend on advertising for revenue. If the government really wants to protect people’s data and privacy, banning Chinese technology is a

distraction. Instead, it needs to build privacy-protecting infrastructure and equipment domestically that is open to independent auditing, and it needs to enact data protection legislation.

#### LEGALITY OF THE BAN

In 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the right to privacy was fundamental to all citizens and extended unequivocally to data and that the duty now fell on the government to implement this through legislation. The Draft Personal Data Protection Bill, which is pending before a Joint Parliamentary Committee, has provisions that cover cross-border data transfers by foreign entities that operate in India and prescribes certain minimum security requirements. The Bill provides a clear blueprint for data security and privacy practices in India. Importantly, it also ensures that any state action in this regard be consistent with the constitutional right to free speech and free trade. The text of the draft Bill also makes it clear that any and all actions of the government should satisfy the standard it lays down for reasonable restrictions to these rights and freedoms.

The government’s power to block or ban a Web resource is derived from the Information Technology Act of 2000 and the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules of 2009. All blocking orders typically originate from three sources, so to speak: (i) from the nodal officer or designated office appointed by the appropriate authority, (ii) by the order of a competent court and (iii) in exercise of emergency provisions under Rule 9 of the Blocking Rules. Previous examples of court-ordered blocking include the ban on pornography and cases where social media websites were ordered to remove posts that violated copyright.

This is quite possibly the first instance where multiple applications having been banned through the emergency functions of the government under the Blocking Rules. Rule 9 dispenses with the requirement of a



B. VELANKANNI RAJ

committee meeting to review the resource in question in an “emergency” situation. In such a situation, the data security and privacy concerns raised by the government are not adequately tested before the blocking order is issued. Emergency is not defined in this legislation, and little clarity is available in the text of the provision itself. There is, however, a reference to Section 69A(1) in the text of Rule 9, which states that the (Central) government is empowered to take necessary and expedient steps to block a Web resource “...in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognisable offence relating to above,...”.

Sovereignty, security and the preservation of public order are wholly subjective considerations that are left to the complete discretion of the government to determine. The seemingly arbitrary decision to ban the 59 apps is given legitimacy by the emergency provision but clarity on its application is necessary—whether by an unbiased court or through a much-needed overhaul of the Blocking Rules.

When we look at the series of events and general atmosphere in the country over the last six months,

**SWIGGY DELIVERY PERSONNEL** waiting at the Koyambedu market in Chennai on April 10 to pick up vegetables for delivery. The government could make it easier for such platform workers by setting platform policy.

it is clear that the decision to ban Chinese apps was not, as certain sections of the media would have us believe, “sudden”. In the wake of the pandemic, everyday lives are acutely dependent on the Internet, which is facilitated by the freedom and ease of use that many foreign-origin Web resources afford us. It is critical that the government strengthens the legal frameworks that support IT infrastructure and businesses so that they can function seamlessly in such a situation. Instead, the ban sabotages this objective during the pandemic when the role of such platforms has become even more critical.

Apart from concerns that there has been no proper legislative or regulatory framework for the ban, the *ad hoc* nature of the decision raises many more questions than it can hope to answer. There is no clarity on the duration of the ban, such as whether it will be withdrawn if and when the situation at the border improves. Neither is there any indication whether such bans or restrictions will also apply to other apps, not necessarily Chinese, if they violate norms relating to accessing

Indian data. The negative economic impact of restricting Chinese investment in Indian companies, the recent restrictions on imports and investments from China and other such measures may well prove catastrophic to a market that is already reeling under the fallout of the pandemic. There is a strong and unmistakable Chinese presence in sectors that have managed to stay afloat despite these exigent circumstances. The government must urgently revisit the impact of this line of policy on companies and individuals who are still decidedly Indian and contributing directly to the Indian economy.

Does this mean that the technology sector should be entirely left alone? Obviously not. The government ought to be able to make strategic decisions to preserve national autonomy in the sector. It ought to play a role in fostering and developing public digital infrastructure. The lack of strategic thinking is why this ban cannot be considered giving China “a dose of its own medicine”.

Those who have welcomed the ban argue that India has only emulated China. It is true that China im-

posed a great firewall, but it did not just impose bans. Instead, such moves were accompanied by extensive public investment in the digital technology sector. The Chinese government invested a great deal in extending high-speed Internet coverage throughout the country, including in rural areas. It established industrial parks and incubators and spent unprecedented amounts of money on the research and development of new technologies, including through global scientific collaboration. These investments were made with a 10-year plan (2015-25) for high-tech industries in mind. All this generated enough confidence to attract foreign investment as well. Public welfare was put centre stage in many ways: China’s city governments have harnessed big data analytics for public purposes such as air quality monitoring and for renewable energy generation. China is now in the process of removing all foreign hardware and software from government offices, a move it can confidently make because it has already developed domestic capabilities and alternatives.

If India wants to achieve digital autonomy, it must understand the Chinese model before it even attempts to emulate it. It cannot achieve what China achieved if it follows a haphazard course of privatisation, showmanship and selective application of the law. Of course, it must not follow the Chinese model blindly; it ought to appreciate that censorship is not a desirable goal and that global economic conditions have changed. India ought to aim at global digital engagement but on its own terms. But setting terms on the global stage requires Indian entities to demonstrate their capability on that stage, for which the state needs to play an active role. Most importantly, the government ought to realise that it takes more than mere bluster to become genuinely self-reliant. □

*Shrinidhi Rao is a lawyer at a Delhi-based firm. Jai Vipra is a technology policy researcher focussing on the economics of platforms in the Global South.*



C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

# A soft blow against China

Using **economic weapons** to temper China's stand on the border question will not be easy for India. The presence of Chinese firms in a relatively inconsequential area such as mobile apps was an easy and convenient lever for it to use.

**I**N a surprise move, the Indian government has decided to ban the use of 59 Chinese mobile apps, some of which, such as TikTok and UC Browser, are extremely popular in India's consumer digital space. A report in *The Wall Street Journal*, quoting estimates made by Sensor Tower, said that the banned apps had been the target of 4.9 billion downloads in India since January 2014, including 750 million so far in 2020. The move was widely interpreted as being part of India's response to the disturbing developments along its border with China, and as a means to pressure China, even as India strengthens its military positions and negotiates for restoration of the status quo.

India, of course, has not presented this as an act of economic retaliation to evidence of incursion by China into its territory. Rather, it has justified it as a means of preventing

the companies owning these apps from undermining the sovereignty and integrity of the country, and of "stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users' data in an unauthorised manner to servers which have locations outside India." Given the allegations of close links of Chinese companies with the government at home and even the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the action appears to be part of a larger security response to a perceived threat from a neighbour whose influence in the region has increased significantly.

In fact, for some time now, and for what appear to be larger strategic considerations, the government has put China's economic and trading presence in India under watch. Allegations of dumping by or aggressive behaviour of Chinese investors and contractors have been common. This has, more recently, translated into very specific policy action, with

occasional imposition of anti-dumping duties and of non-tariff barriers in the form of quality control orders or other regulations. In April, for example, foreign direct investments (FDI) originating in neighbouring countries were taken off the automatic approval list, even where permitted. The release from the Department of Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) announced: "An entity of a country, which shares land border with India or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated in or is a citizen of any such country, can invest only under the government route." Specific government permission, and therefore monitoring, was made mandatory. Given the relative importance of investment inflows from India's neighbours, it was clear that this was directed at Chinese investors, private and official, who were seen as picking up equity in

Indian companies at discounted prices as growth slowed and the COVID-19-induced economic crisis struck.

## ECONOMIC OFFENSIVE

But now comes evidence that such defensive economic action will be widened to include offensive measures. Besides banning popular Chinese apps that have overwhelmed India's digital space, despite India's claim of being a software power, reports have it that the government is planning to dissuade private telecom operators and the state-owned telecommunication companies MTNL and BSNL from purchasing hardware from Chinese firms (especially Huawei and ZTE) to upgrade their networks. Chinese players are also to

be kept out of Indian highway projects, including participation through the joint venture route.

While these and similar measures are being discussed in the corridors of government, "Track 2" efforts seem under way outside government, with a campaign for boycott of Chinese goods and for policies that impose restrictions on imports from China. As of now, the emphasis is on appealing to popular patriotism, with the government facilitating a boycott by requiring e-commerce firms to publish the country of origin on all the goods sold through their web marketplace.

These economic responses in the face of growing diplomatic and military tensions between the two countries have raised a number of

questions. One is whether these moves are merely symbolic or would actually hurt China enough to encourage it to hold back, engage in negotiations on border issues and arrive at a settlement acceptable to India. Another is whether India, too, would lose as a result of these measures, and whether the cost of deploying such instruments would hurt an economy that has clearly lost momentum. The answers to these questions would determine whether, together with the announcement of the Atmanirbhar (self-reliant) Bharat drive, these responses targeted at China would put India on a trajectory that reverses the trade liberalisation and open economy agenda adopted by successive governments since 1991. That trajectory

PRAKASH SINGH / AFP



**A DEMONSTRATION** urging Indians to boycott Chinese mobile apps and products, in New Delhi on June 30.

would possibly be supported by sections of business that are looking for protected spaces in the domestic market. Though the ban on apps will not immediately significantly hurt the profits of Chinese firms, it will check their advance to dominance in the Indian market that is being seen by all as being the next frontier digital market (after China), given the size and demographic profile of its population, and the low levels to which data costs have been pushed by cut-throat competition. The result has been proliferation of ownership of smartphones, increase in Internet use and the growing popularity of e-commerce. According to ByteDance, the company that owns TikTok, that app was being used by at least 120 million Indians every month. While those numbers were yet to translate into revenues and profits, the potential is immense, especially given the collateral advantage that these so-called “tech firms” have in collecting and collating data.

Moreover, Chinese giants such as Alibaba and Tencent have been investing heavily in Indian start-ups, betting on their success and the returns from appreciation of equity values that was expected to bring. So, if kept out of India’s digital market, Chinese firms are likely to be significant losers.

That said, the loss of an Indian presence would not be the end of the world for all Chinese firms, which have grown to global scales based on business at home, have strong control over the large home market, and have other jurisdictions to diversify into. It affects more the likes of Huawei, which was banking on becoming the world leader in 5G technology, and which is being kept out on security grounds from many developed country markets. The absence of Chinese firms in India’s Internet space would also not hurt China’s economy much, though its mercantilist ambition, already being thwarted in the United States and elsewhere, would suffer a minor dent. Even if the fortunes of tech firms are seen as influencing China’s strategic stance, it is unlikely that loss of the Indian market would force

According to ByteDance, the TikTok app was used by at least 120 million Indians every month.

the Chinese government to bend on what it declares to be issues of national sovereignty and integrity.

For India, extending its economic response to the military stand-off to include trade in goods is the challenge. There is a reason for the government choosing the Internet arena to launch its China offensive. Given the structure of merchandise trade between India and China, it is far more difficult for India to counter China there. The sharp spike in India-China trade over the last decade or so has seen India’s imports from China rising much faster than its exports to that country. The net result is that in 2019-20, when slowing growth brought down imports from China, India ran a deficit of \$48.7 billion in its trade with China, which, adding exports and imports, totaled \$81.9 billion. When growth in India was better and trade buoyant, its China trade deficit stood at \$63 billion in 2017-18 and \$53.6 billion in 2018-19.

This deficit, it could be argued, strengthens the case for trade sanctions against China, as that would bring down imports and reduce the shortfall relative to exports. But India’s imports reflect not just China’s competitiveness in the Indian market vis-a-vis domestic and third country suppliers. It is also indicative of India’s dependence on China, not just for cheap final products but crucial and reasonably priced intermediates and capital goods. China accounts for close to 15 per cent of India’s exports, and is an important

supplier in areas such as mobile phones, telecom, power, and pharmaceutical intermediates. Two categories of imports, “Nuclear Reactors, Boilers, Machinery & Mechanical Appliances” and “Electrical Machinery, Telecom Equipment, Audio & Video Recorders, account for 50 per cent of imports from China, and “Organic Chemicals” for another 12 per cent. Close to 50 per cent of India’s electronics imports originate in China, with that dependence rising to around 66 per cent in the case of pharmaceutical ingredients. India’s dependence on Chinese supplies is not just large but also heavily concentrated.

#### SOARING DRUG PRICES

These imports are not all easily substituted from other sources. The consequences of such dependence were experienced recently. Thus, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down production facilities in China, drug prices rose in India and producers expressed concerns about shortages of crucial intermediates. Together with delays in customs clearance of imports from China in recent times, critical drugs, such as the blood thinner Heparin, are in short supply and have turned more expensive, so much so that the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) has allowed a one-time price increase of 50 per cent in the ceiling price of Heparin injection used in treatment of those infected with COVID-19.

All this suggests that a sudden reduction in imports from China can be disruptive, and is likely to influence government thinking, leaving aside the possibility that China would appeal against what it considers discriminatory protection against its goods at the WTO. So while the military and diplomatic stand-off would be difficult to resolve, using economic weapons to temper China’s stand would not be easy either. The presence of Chinese firms in a relatively inconsequential area such as mobile apps was, for the India government, an easy and convenient lever to use. Finding more such levers could prove difficult. □

# Desperation and diversion

The BJP's **political strategy** as COVID cases continue to rise is to divert attention from the pressing concerns of the people on the public health and economic fronts. BY **VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN**

ON July 5, India overtook Russia to become the third country with the most COVID-19 infections in the world. Only the United States and Brazil were ahead of India on that date. Three days later, by July 8 evening, the country recorded yet another grievous milestone, with the highest single-day spike of 24,879 COVID cases. For nearly a fortnight before this, the daily average of new cases has been 20,000. Several State governments, including those in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Telangana, went back to total or near-total lockdowns stating that this was the only recourse they had at the moment to contain the spread of the disease. But, throughout this period, no proactive intervention or focussed management initiative came from the Union government. In fact, these initiatives were conspicuous by their absence.

When asked about this, senior officials in the Union Home and Health Ministries said that right from Lockdown 4.0, the government had been driven by the perspective that combatting COVID-19 was primarily the responsibility of State governments. A senior Health Ministry official working closely with the Prime Minister's Office told *Frontline*: "It is this perspective that has prevailed through the last week of June and early July when the daily



**PRIME MINISTER** Narendra Modi while dedicating a 750 MW solar project in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, to the nation via videoconferencing from New Delhi on July 10.

average of cases has consistently been around 20,000. There is no point in discussing the merits and demerits of such an approach now. Only time will tell whether this was right or not. Very many parts of the world, including economic powerhouses like the U.S., are throwing up a comparable high average of new cases on a daily basis. And in such

countries too, Central governments have left the COVID combat to regional and local bodies and are focussing more on rebuilding the economy. The leadership of our government also seems to be following the same approach."

In their public pronouncements during late June and early July, the leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP)-National Democratic Alliance government, particularly Prime Minister Narendra Modi, steadfastly refrained from addressing the alarming situation in relation to the surge of COVID-19 cases. For the better part of June, the Prime Minister had to deal with India's face-off with China on the border areas in eastern Ladakh. The long negotiations carried out at the diplomatic and military levels by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence in this period were supplemented by the Prime Minister's trademark pep talk in different forums. First, it was through his "Mann Ki Baat" radio programme and later, on the ground, during a "confidence-boosting visit to Ladakh and interaction with the soldiers". In between, the government imposed a ban on 59 Chinese apps in the digital space. Modi-centric media hailed this as a "massive digital surgical strike".

#### ECONOMIC PITCH

After all this, the first week of July witnessed some concrete de-escalation in the India-China face-off, with troops on both sides shifting back marginally from their earlier positions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In this context, Modi started making one pronouncement after another on "major economic pursuits and projects". On June 9, barely hours after India had recorded its highest single-day spike, Modi addressed a conference titled "India Global Week 2020", organised by India Inc, a London-headquartered media house. The central point of his address was that "green shoots" of recovery were visible in India's economy. He added that India remained "one of the most open economies in the world" and that global firms should unhesitatingly venture to invest in the country.

Modi went on to identify sectors that global companies could look at. These ranged from agriculture to defence and space, evidently following the massive sellout delineated by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the name of COVID relief package ("An empty package", *Frontline*, June 5, 2020). He said:



KAMAL KISHORE/PTI

**BJP NATIONAL PRESIDENT** J.P. Nadda in New Delhi on July 4.

"We are laying a red carpet for all global companies to come and establish their presence in India. Very few countries will offer the kind of opportunities that India does today. There are many possibilities and opportunities in various sunrise sectors in India.... There are also investment opportunities in the defence sector. With relaxed FDI [foreign direct investment] norms, one of the world's biggest militaries invites you to come and make products for it. There are more opportunities now for private investment in the country's space sector. There is also a market of millions of digitally empowered aspirational thinkers. Imagine the kind of products you can make for them."

Referring to the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) slogan he had coined amidst the multiple lockdowns that began on March 24, he asserted that the idea was to link domestic production and consumption with global supply chains. "Atmanirbhar Bharat is not about being self-contained or being closed to the world, it is about being self-sustaining and self-generating," Modi said.

A day later, on July 10, inaugurating a massive 750-megawatt solar power plant in Madhya Pradesh's

Rewa, Modi went back to the idea of self-reliance and asserted that India must work towards reducing import dependency on solar panels and related equipment. "We need to speed up our production capacity of solar modules... and solar batteries should be made in India. We need to speed up all work in these areas." Political and economic observers perceive this emphasis as something directly linked to the recent India-China military conflict and the battle that ensued in the trade and digital spaces. According to Union Power Minister R.K. Singh, until last year, one-third of Indian power infrastructure requirements were imported from China.

Following the Prime Minister's lead, other BJP Ministers and leaders of the NDA constituents have been in recent times repeatedly focussing on issues relating to economic revival. One thing they constantly highlight is that the country's pharmaceutical sector has played a crucial role in providing access to affordable medicines all through the pandemic. They have also been reiterating Modi's views that India has an important role to play in producing and scaling up

supplies of a COVID-19 vaccine as and when it is discovered.

### **SCEPTICISM ON GROWTH**

Economic affairs experts, however, view this show of confidence and optimism by sections of the ruling dispensation with scepticism (see story on page 72). Writing in *Indian Express* on how India's management of lockdowns aggravated the virus infection, Kaushik Basu, former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President at the World Bank and currently C Marks Professor at Cornell University, pointed out that "the IMF has predicted India will end up with a growth rate of -4.5 per cent in 2020, which will be the lowest growth India has seen since 1979. India's growth, which had already been on a steady downward trajectory for two years before the pandemic, has now dropped even lower. There was an expectation that capital would move out of China because of the pandemic, and India would be a beneficiary. But that has not happened. The big beneficiary seems to be Vietnam and a few other nations, and, ironically, China seems to be holding back a lot of its foreign investment. The unemployment rate in India in May climbed to an astonishing 23.5 per cent, compared with Brazil's 12.6 per cent, the U.S.'s 13.3 per cent and China's 6 per cent. China's official data on unemployment needs to be taken with caution, I hasten to add. But that does not detract from India's disproportionate poor economic performance and the fact that this price was paid for no purpose."

Basu went on to explain how the management of lockdowns impacted the spread of the virus and consequently the economy. "Quite how this policy disaster happened will take time to uncover. But one thing has now become clear. The way in which the lockdown was executed, the lockdown itself became the source of the virus' spread. By having people huddle together, infecting one another, and then having the same people travel hundreds of miles, the pandemic has been made much worse than it need have been."

Ground-level reports from dif-

Sensational controversies generated by BJP leaders seem to be part of the effort to divert attention.

ferent parts of the country, including Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous State, underscore the travails of the common people, especially the marginalised sections of society, as a consequence of the unscientific imposition of the first lockdown and the mismanagement of the situation thereafter.

### **DIATRIBE AGAINST CONGRESS**

The BJP leadership seems to have grasped the implications of these perspectives put forward by economic affairs specialists like Basu and the feedback from the ground. Sensational, at times ridiculous, controversies generated by BJP leaders, including party president J.P. Nadda, seem to be part of their desperate effort to divert attention from the ordeals inflicted on the people by the galloping pandemic and its economic impact. At one point, they even went to the extent of challenging former Congress president Rahul Gandhi's "moral and political authority" to question the Modi government on the India-China imbroglio on the grounds that he had not attended a few meetings of the Standing Committee of Parliament on Defence. This "attack" was led from the front by none other than Nadda.

This was followed by an eviction notice issued to Priyanka Gandhi, Congress general secretary and Rahul Gandhi's sister, to vacate the government bungalow allotted to her in central Delhi. However, this did not generate the level of hue and

cry that was expected because Priyanka Gandhi responded immediately to the notice expressing her readiness to vacate the house.

However, senior leaders of the Congress, including Ghulam Nabi Azad, Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, deplored the government's action as a clear case of "vendetta". Azad pointed out that the classification of threat perception of Priyanka Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi remained in category "Z", along with that of Congress president Sonia Gandhi and former Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh and H.D. Deve Gowda. "Their threat perception remains the same, though the protecting agency has been changed from the SPG [Special Protection Group] by a stroke of the pen. So, in many ways, it is a kind of cheap and petty trickery, a manipulation that has been done by the government," Azad said.

Commenting on the overall situation, Samajwadi Party president and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav said that that the whole effort was aimed at diverting attention from the pressing concerns of the people and a debilitating economy. "Big, but hollow proclamations on economic prospects without any basis on facts and the actual situation abound at one level even as hundreds of thousands of people despair without food and medical attention across the country. Supplement this with diversionary and sensational controversies on one issue or the other. This is the modus operandi that has been followed by the BJP leadership."

He was also of the view that these desperate tactics were getting more and more exposed as has been proved by the frenetic actions and intemperate statements of BJP leaders, from Nadda to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Akhilesh Yadav, however, said that the physical limitations imposed by the pandemic were, in a way, saving the BJP and State governments run by it and at the Centre from forceful expressions of public resentment on mismanagement of public health concerns and economic challenges. □

# BJP's blueprint for Odisha

The BJP is **deploying all the tricks of the trade** to capture power in Odisha, which has been under Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's sway for over two decades now. BY **PRAFULLA DAS**

BHARATIYA Janata Party (BJP) cadres in Odisha have been upbeat ever since the party replaced the Congress as the main opposition in the State Assembly in the 2019 elections. Now, with the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, in office for the fifth consecutive term, the BJP is hopeful of ruling the State in the future.

The party had gained ground in the gram panchayat elections held in February 2017 itself when it emerged as the second largest party in Odisha, after the BJD. The Congress came third.

A constituent of the two-party ruling coalition with the BJD in Odisha from 2000 to 2009 until they parted ways, the BJP kept strengthening its base for eight years. Being in power at the Centre, it had resources which the Congress lacked.

Since its significant victory in the panchayat elections, a host of its top leaders and Central Ministers visited the State, with the Modi-Shah duo taking the lead. However, its all-out efforts to defeat the BJD in the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections held simultaneously in 2019 did not succeed. Naveen Patnaik proved to be unassailable despite a "Modi wave" in the wake of the Pulwama attack (in Jammu and Kashmir in February 2019 in which 40 Central Reserve Police Force personnel got killed in a suicide attack) and the Balakot sur-

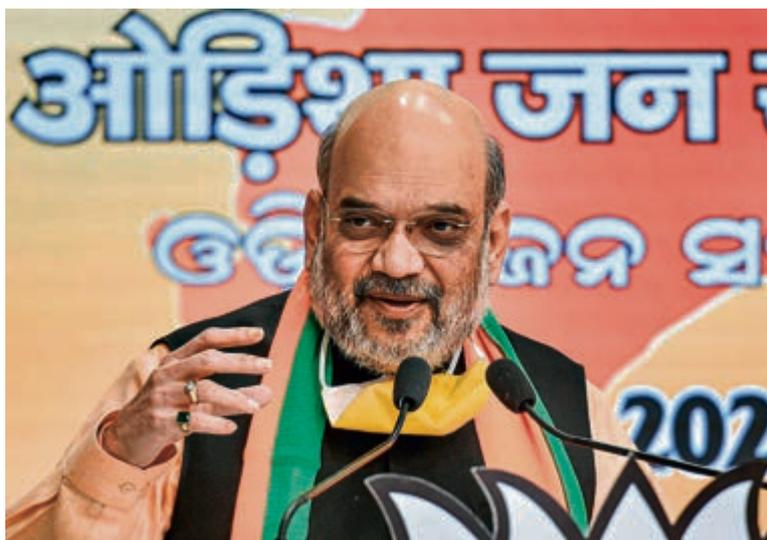
gical strike (in Pakistan which India conducted later that month).

In many constituencies, particularly those adjoining the Hindi-speaking States, people voted for the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections and the BJD in the Assembly elections. This resulted in the BJP winning eight of the 21 Lok Sabha seats in the State, up from its tally of one in the 2014 elections. The BJD's number of seats went down from 20 in 2014 to 12 in 2019. The Congress, which won six seats in 2009 contesting against the BJP and an alliance of the BJD, the Left parties and the Nationalist

Congress Party, could not win a single seat in 2014, but it managed to win a seat in 2019.

In the 147-member State Assembly, while the BJD succeeded in maintaining its supremacy with 113 seats, the BJP won 23 seats and the Congress nine.

The BJP has been trying to strengthen its base since the BJD snapped ties with it ahead of the 2009 elections. The impressive increase in the BJP's vote share in 2019 (38.4 per cent in the Lok Sabha elections and 32.5 per cent in the Assembly elections) against the BJD's



**UNION HOME MINISTER** Amit Shah addressing the Odisha Jan Samvad virtual rally in New Delhi on June 8.

ATUL YADAV/PTI



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**CHIEF MINISTER NAVEEN PATNAIK** watching the rath yatra at his office in Bhubaneswar on June 23. The BJP claimed to have played a major role in facilitating the conduct of the festival.

42.8 per cent and 44.7 per cent respectively has bolstered its confidence.

Although both the BJD and the BJP were bitter enemies until the 2019 elections, the latter managed to win the BJD's support to ensure the victory of its nominee in the Rajya Sabha elections in the State a few months later. It was widely believed that the BJD was going soft on the BJP with the objective of ensuring the smooth flow of funds from the Centre to the State.

In the changing political climate, the BJD is no longer opposing the Centre's moves as it used to so as to protect Odisha's interests. Be it the Centre's decision to auction coal mines or the fuel price hike, the BJD has not uttered a word of protest.

The BJP too has stopped questioning any of Patnaik's moves and confines itself to raising issues of public concern. Knowing well the extent of the people's devotion to Lord Jagannath of Puri, it recently tried its

best to claim credit for the conduct of the rath yatra in the town.

Although the yatra was held with restrictions imposed by the Supreme Court order in the context of COVID-19, the BJP claimed to have played a major role in facilitating the festival's conduct. "Considering the urgency and importance of the matter, it was placed in front of a vacation bench of the Supreme Court and the hearing took place this afternoon, which paved the way for the important decision by the Supreme Court," Amit Shah tweeted on June 22, a day before the yatra. While addressing a Jan Samvad virtual rally on June 8, he also had asked the party cadres to make Odisha a "garh" (bastion) of the BJP .

What is making the BJP brim with confidence? Party insiders believe they can comfortably win the next elections by roping in some Congress heavyweights and BJD dissidents in the run-up to the elections to further enhance its vote share.

Meanwhile, the BJD has started strengthening its organisation by appointing senior leaders in crucial party posts and allocating them different responsibilities in order to maintain its popularity.

The process was initiated on July 1, the day the Bahuda Yatra (return journey) of Lord Jagannath was held in Puri.

The BJP strongly believes that the BJD has been winning elections because of Patnaik's leadership. He is now 73 years old, and the BJP believes that there is no other leader in the party who can step into his shoes. Apparently, the BJP also has plans to engineer a split in the BJD Legislature Party.

Patnaik has told the media in the past that the people of Odisha will choose his successor. Whether the people will elect him again or choose his successor before the BJP succeeds in its plan will depend on the move the veteran leader makes in the times to come. □

# Insidious campaign

A group of Hindu sants has filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking the **abrogation of a legal provision** preserving the status of each place of worship belonging to any religion as it existed

on August 15, 1947. BY ZIYA US SALAM

IT is early days but a silent, unannounced build-up has started for the “liberation” of the Hindu places of worship in Mathura and Varanasi that were allegedly razed in medieval times to raise mosques in their place. Obviously encouraged by the Ayodhya verdict, a group of Hindu sants is now taking the litigation route seeking abrogation of a section of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, that preserves the status of each place of worship of any religion as it existed on August 15, 1947.

The Act was passed at the height of the demand for the construction of a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Masjid. Its aim was to quash all debate around the mosques in Varanasi and Mathura at a time when the Hindutva brigade was chanting the slogan “*Ayodhya to sirf jhanki hai, Kasi, Mathura baqi hai*” (Ayodhya is a mere teaser; Kasi and Mathura are still left). The position of Hindu sants who are opposed to this provision is based on a view of history that stresses the role of Muslim invaders as iconoclasts and desecrators of

**A JANUARY 2019** photograph showing construction work in full swing near the Kashi Vishwanath-Gyanvapi mosque complex at Varanasi for a corridor connecting the temple to the river. The levelling of houses, shops and small temples for the project gave rise to fears that the mosque might become a possible target for demolition.

Hindu places of worship. They have approached the Supreme Court to correct the perceived injustice.

This position flies in the face of the 2019 Ayodhya verdict itself, which stated that “law cannot be used as a device to reach back in time and provide a legal remedy to every person who disagrees with the course which history has taken”. But that has not dissuaded the sants from calling for a fresh look at the Act.

The Vishwa Bhadra Pujari Purohit Mahasangh, based in Lucknow, filed a petition in the Supreme Court through Advocate Vishnu Jain in June, seeking directions to declare Section 4 of the 1991 Act as *ultra*

*vires*. The petitioners insisted that the remarks made in the Ayodhya verdict were mere observations without any judicial force as the Places of Worship Act was not under challenge in that case.

“The impugned Act has barred the right and remedy against encroachment made on religious property of Hindus exercising might of power by followers of another faith,” the petition contended.

The sants have alleged that the Act prevents Hindus from seeking redress for their grievances in civil courts and from invoking the jurisdiction of High Courts under Article 226 of the Constitution. They allege

that Hindus are discriminated against because they are not able to have the religious character of endowments, temples and mutts restored if these were encroached upon before August 15, 1947.

“The Parliament by making an impugned provision has without resolution of dispute, through process of court, abated the suit and proceedings, which is *per se* unconstitutional and beyond its law-making power,” the petition said.

The 1991 law permits the maintenance of the “religious character” of holy structures in the form in which they existed when India got Independence on August 15, 1947. The law is not unidirectional. It prohibits conversion of any temple into a mosque and vice versa.

## JAMIAT STANCE

The Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind has filed a plea that the court should not entertain the sants’ petition. Advocate-on-Record Ejaz Maqbool filed the plea on behalf of the Jamiat’s president, Arshad Madani. The plea stated: “At the outset this application is being filed to oppose the present writ petition, so that this court is pleased to not issue notice in the present petition. It is submitted that even issuance of notice in the present matter will create fear in the minds of the

Muslim community with regard to their places of worship, especially in the aftermath of the Ayodhya dispute, and will destroy the secular fabric of the nation.”

The Jamiat plea said that the Mahasangh petition was based on the assumption that Section 4 of the Places of Worship Act, 1991, “validates the alleged illegal and barbarous action of invaders who had converted the Hindu places of worship by restricting rights of Hindus”. It pointed out that the sants’ petition sought to indirectly target places of worship that were at present of a Muslim character. The Jamiat also pointed out that the Places of Worship Act applied to all places of worship and was not limited to any one community.

It added that the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act was enacted to fulfil two purposes. First, it prohibits the conversion of any place of worship and in doing so speaks to the future by mandating that the character of a place of public worship shall not be altered.

Second, the law seeks to impose a positive obligation to maintain the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947. The Jamiat plea said that the court recognised these purposes in its recent judgment in *M. Siddiq versus Suresh Das*, popularly known as the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi verdict, which noted that the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, protected and secured the fundamental values of the Constitution.

“Ultimately this court concluded that the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, imposes a non-derogable obligation towards enforcing our commitment to secularism under the Indian Constitution. It was further observed that it was legislative instrument designed to protect the secular features of the Indian polity, which is one of the basic features of the Constitution,” the Jamiat stated.

It said the Places of Worship Act was intrinsically related to the obligations of a secular state and reflected India’s commitment to the equality

of all religions. Speaking to *Frontline*, Arshad Madani said: “After the Babri Masjid verdict, sectarian powers have felt emboldened. But they cannot be allowed to play with the intrinsic pluralist ethos of the nation. We have approached the Supreme Court to protect historic mosques, many of which could be on the wish list of bigoted elements. Already, there have been media reports of fresh activity in the vicinity of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi with land around the mosque being levelled and smaller temples demolished to pave the way for a grand Kasi Viswanath temple. If not stopped today, these elements will not stop at anything. They have in the past laid claim to the Taj Mahal too.”

Madani felt the Mahasangh petition was part of a larger conspiracy to gradually lay claim to more Muslim places of worship and disturb communal harmony.

“We got to know through Gulzar Ahmed Azmi, secretary, legal cell, about the move by the sadhus to approach the Supreme Court. He suggested we should oppose their petition immediately. Accordingly, advocates Shahid Nadeem and Akriti Chaubey proceeded to prepare the case following an online consultation with Advocate-on-Record Ejaz Maqbool, who then filed a plea seeking impleadment on behalf of the Jamiat. He requested the court not to admit the plea by the sadhus,” Madani said.

Madani pointed out that social media was already being used to spread fake news about many other mosques allegedly built after demolishing temples.

The Jamiat’s plea contended: “There is a list of numerous mosques which is doing the rounds on social media, alleging that the said mosques were built allegedly by destroying Hindu places of worship. Needless to say that if the present petition is entertained, it will open floodgates of litigation against countless mosques in the country and the religious divide from which the country is recovering in the aftermath of the Ayodhya dispute will only be widened.” □



RAJEEV BHATT

# Sathankulam: Terror in uniform

The custodial torture and deaths of a father-son duo in Tamil Nadu rip apart the **police's image**, while the judiciary makes unprecedented interventions in a bid to deliver justice. BY **ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

“THE police should not take the law into their own hands and misuse the same in an uncivilised and inhuman way.” These were the words of Justice O. Venkatchalam, the Principal and Sessions Judge of Chidambaranar district (since renamed Thoothukudi), in his detailed report in 1994 to the Supreme Court on police atrocities against the Dalits of Nadunalumoolaikinaru, a village near the now-infamous Sathankulam where the father-son duo of P. Jayaraj (60) and Bennix (31) was killed in custody on June 19.

The Supreme Court, in response to a writ filed by the then district secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Mallika, had appointed the Sessions Judge as its Inquiry Commissioner to conduct an investigation into the police atrocities committed against the villagers on January 28, 1992. He recommended that in future no officer involved in the atrocities be given sensitive posts that might entail dealing with marginalised people.

The judiciary often had to intervene to uphold the sanctity of the Constitution and ensure justice whenever the State and its agents violated human rights and dignity.

Despite such strictures, criticisms and judicial interventions, the police force in the State has not mended its ways, as was evident from the



**P. JEYARAJ** (60), right, and his son Bennix (31), who died in police custody on June 23.

cold-blooded gunning down of 13 unarmed protesters during the protest against Sterlite Industries' copper smelter plant in Thoothukudi (2018) and from dozens of firings, extrajudicial executions, rights violations and cases of custodial tortures and deaths in the past three decades.

## CRACKS IN THE IMAGE

A positive image has been studiously built around the Tamil Nadu Police over the years. It is perceived to be a modernised unit trained in scientific and intelligent methods of investigation and law enforcement.

The people of Tamil Nadu are repeatedly told that peace prevails in the State thanks to the police. This carefully constructed image has

cracked after the custodial deaths in Sathankulam.

Timber trader Jayaraj and his son Bennix, who owned a mobile phone shop in Sathankulam, were arrested by the Sathankulam Police on the night of June 19 on the charge of violating the lockdown restrictions imposed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The police allegedly beat them up and remanded them to the Kovilpatti Sub Jail, where both died after two days. It is the first time ever in Tamil Nadu that two persons from a family (father and son) died of injuries sustained at a police station. The crime was so beastly that a shocked Sathankulam town erupted in anger against the police. Leaders of political parties,

rights activists and celebrities expressed their anguish over the incident. Activists found in the incident a parallel to the murder of George Floyd in the United States and trended the custodial deaths at Sathankulam with a hashtag globally.

### JUDICIAL INTERVENTION

Even as the State government was dithering on taking action against the police officers at Sathankulam, the higher judiciary intervened, as it did in the case of Nadunalumoolaikinaru.

This is the first case of police brutality in the recent past in which the judiciary, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, took over the investigation *suo motu*.

The two-member bench of Justices P.N. Prakash and B. Pugalendhi asked the Kovilpatti Judicial Magistrate to conduct an inquiry and submit a report. On the basis of the report, the judges concluded that there was *prima facie* evidence to slap murder charges against the accused police officers under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and entrusted the investigation to the Tamil Nadu Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department (CB-CID).

The court, in an unprecedented move, went a step further and suggested that the police could book cases against its own officers under that IPC section. In such cases earlier, the judiciary would mostly confine itself to an advisory role and issues related to compensation for the victims. In a few cases, it had recommended appropriate action against errant officials and the state for their acts of commission and omission.

Henry Tiphagne, a lawyer and founder of the Madurai-based rights organisation, People's Watch, said: "That the High Court Bench *suo motu* took up the case, monitored it on a daily basis and told the investigating agency, the CB-CID, one of the wings of the Tamil Nadu Police, that there was *prima facie* evidence to book the accused under a specific section of law, are unparalleled in the judicial history of the State."

In another unusual move, both the judges spoke on the phone to S. Revathy, a woman head constable of the Sathankulam police station who had testified against her senior colleagues, to allay her fears.

She reportedly told the judges that she feared for the lives of her two

daughters and husband. She has now been provided with round-the-clock security. "It is an irony that a police constable has to seek protection from her own colleagues," said Henry Tiphagne.

The bench, in another unprecedented move, asked the Thoothukudi District Revenue administration to take over the Sathankulam police station to prevent "disappearance of evidences". The revenue officials took charge of the station in the last week of June until the CB-CID took over the investigation. Later, it was restored to the district police.

"This is the first ever judicial direction in the country since Independence wherein a police station has been brought under the Revenue Department's control—a matter of shame for the Tamil Nadu Police," said Henry Tiphagne.

It was also the first reported case of a judiciary-appointed magistrate being "intimidated and ridiculed" by the policemen themselves inside the police station when he went there to conduct an inquiry on the orders of the High Court. The magistrate has recorded the sordid events in his report to the bench.

And, for the first time, a petition



PTI

**AT A PROTEST IN SOLIDARITY** with the custodial death victims in Sathankulam on June 28.

has been filed before the Supreme Court against the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister in connection with the lockup deaths.

### FRIENDS OF POLICE

The CB-CID has decided to investigate Friends of Police, a four-member group of volunteers that “assisted” the police in Sathankulam in various activities, for its alleged involvement in the case. However, G.I. Lourduswami, the State administrator of a group of the same name, said that that they did not belong to his organisation but were “volunteers” enlisted by the local police for COVID-19-related work.

Prateep V. Philip, Director General of Police of Civil Supplies (CID), founded the group in 1993 when he was Superintendent of Police, Ramanathapuram district.

The controversy over Friends of Police took a different angle when activists and a few political parties alleged that the volunteers of the group at the Sathankulam police station had links with Seva Bharathi, a wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). Seva Bharathi’s Tamil Nadu State secretary, Rabo Manohar, denied this accusation and warned against what he termed “such propaganda”.

On July 8, on the basis of a report from the Tamil Nadu DGP, the State government banned Friends of Police.

### SHEER EGO AND BRUTALITY

Certain sections of the media have attributed caste, communal and



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**VANITHA**, whose daughter Snowlin was killed in the firing on Sterlite protesters, consoles Selvarani (left), Bennix’s mother, in Sathankulam.

## A dubious record

TAMIL NADU has a long history of police brutality and torture. Here is a list of a few of the most notorious cases:

- Muthukulathur Keelathooval firing in 1957
- The hunting down of many youth in North Arcot and Dharmapuri districts under the pretext of anti-naxalite operations in the 1970s
- Police firing on Chennai Marina fishermen in 1985
- The rape of Padmini after the murder of her husband in the Chidambaram Annamalai Nagar Police station in the 1980s; the rape of 19-year old Rita Mary at the Gingee Sub Jail in 2001
- Atrocities on the tribal people of Vachathi by police and forest department officials in 1992
- Gruesome atrocities against hapless tribal villagers by the Special Task Forces of both Tamil Nadu and Karnataka during their hunt for the forest brigand Veerappan for more than a decade since the early 1990s until his death in 2004
- Atrocities against Dalits in Kodyankulam in Thoothukudi district in 1995
- Police firing on fishermen in Thoothukudi town in 1996
- Gundupatti violence in Dindigul district in 1998
- Tamiraparani-Mancholai tea estate violence in Tirunelveli in 1999
- Police firing in the Chennai Central Prison in November 1999
- Police atrocities in Sankaralingapuram village in 2001
- The Paramakudi police firing on Dalits in 2011
- Police firing on Sterlite protesters in Thoothukudi town in 2018

Besides these cases, many extrajudicial killings of

alleged history-sheeters and Maoists, apart over 100 custodial deaths (since 1996), have taken place in three decades since 1990.

Another dubious distinction was the case of 24-year-old Parvathy, the first woman to die in custody in an all-women police station at Thoothukudi in July 1994 where she was brought for an inquiry after a domestic dispute.

Ironically, the very concept of all-women police stations was mooted in 1992 by the then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa with the aim of protecting women.

Most of the victims of police brutality happen to be persons belonging to the minority communities, Dalits and other marginalised sections of society.

### SUPERCOPS ON CELLULOID

Tamil cinema has a notorious tradition of celebrating extrajudicial action by police officers. Blockbusters such as *Walter Vetrivel* starring Satyaraj, *Kakka Kakka* and *Singam* starring Surya, *Saamy* starring Vikram, and Kamal Hassan’s *Vettaiyadu Vilaiyadu*, among other films, have glorified trigger-happy policemen as supercops.

One of the sub-inspectors indicted in the Sathankulam custodial deaths, Raghu Ganesh, was even known as “Komban” Raghu among colleagues and the public. He was known to be “aggressive” like the eponymous character in the movie *Komban*. There are exceptions such as *Visaranai* by Vetrimaan, which realistically portrayed custodial brutality.

*Ilangoan Rajasekaran*



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**AT THE HOUSE** of Sathankulam head constable S. Revathy, who has been given police protection after she turned witness in the custodial deaths case.

political reasons to these custodial deaths, but sources in Sathankulam, Peikulam and Thoothukudi told *Frontline* that neither caste nor religion nor politics played a significant role in the episode.

A look at the caste backgrounds of the police at the Sathankulam station showed that no single caste or religion predominated. The officers belonged to caste groups as varied as Reddy, Yadav, Pallar (a Scheduled Caste), Pillai and Nadars (both Hindu and Christian).

Friends of Police also consisted of Hindus and Christians. “No single caste or religion is dominant in the station, a fact that rules out any casteist angle to the incident,” said an advocate who was Bennix’s friend.

Sathankulam is an area where Nadars are predominant and other caste groups such as Maravas, Yadavs, Pillais and Reddies are not in significant numbers.

Although Nadars follow Hinduism and Christianity, they are socially and culturally inter-related and prefer to come under a common Nadar identity.

“A few Hindutva groups of late are trying to drive a wedge between them. But since it is a trading community, it resists such evil manipulations,” said Stalin, president of the Peikulam Traders Association. Peikulam is a tiny suburban village near Sathankulam. He ruled out any political angle in the deaths. Many sources in Sathankulam said that the police officers in Sathankulam were “just plainly corrupt and arrogant”.

An autorickshaw driver in Sathankulam said: “Anyone taken to the police station for an inquiry would be manhandled. They run the police station like their fiefdom. Their writ runs large. These officers encouraged the sand mafia and illicit distillers. That many cases of police brutality have started surfacing now is a clear indication of how vicious the enforcers of law in Sathankulam were.”

A few cases of custodial tortures and deaths reportedly involving a few police officers of Sathankulam are being taken up for fresh investigation. The body of a youth named Mahendran, who belonged to a village near Sathankulam and who allegedly died of torture after interrogation at the station in connection with a case, has been exhumed.

Mohan, a field-based activist of People’s Watch, Thoothukudi, who has been pursuing the case, told *Frontline* that the officers had turned wild with rage when Bennix dared to prevent the policemen from assaulting his father.

“In the scuffle, he reportedly pushed a police constable aside and raised his hands to prevent another officer from assaulting him. These acts of resistance were enough to infuriate them,” he said.

He added: “They do not like anyone questioning their authority. The deaths of father and son at Sathankulam were unfortunate. They questioned the police inside the station. Any acts of resistance, the of-

ficers saw, were an affront to their unbridled authority and power.”

Henry Tiphagne said: “It is a sheer brutal manifestation of their ego that stemmed from unbridled power and authority. It never tolerates any form of dissent.”

With the CB-CID pursuing the case diligently and also arresting five more police personnel of the Sathankulam police station on murder and other related charges on July 7—taking the total to 10—the CBI sprang a surprise.

Responding to the Tamil Nadu government’s request on June 29, it swiftly appointed Vijay Kumar Shukla, Additional SP, CBI, New Delhi, as the investigation officer for the case.

The CBI issued an order from New Delhi transferring two cases registered at the Kovilpatti East Police Station to it for investigation. These cases were referred by M. Shankar, Jail Superintendent, Kovilpatti Sub Jail, at the Kovilpatti Police station following the deaths of father and son in custody on June 22 and 23.

Meanwhile, legal experts have alleged that Sathankulam Judicial Magistrate B. Saravanan remanded Jayaraj and Bennix to judicial custody without applying his mind, which, they said, led to their custodial death. The magistrate did not evaluate their health conditions before passing the remand orders, they said and have sought action against the magistrate for “judicial impropriety”.

Social activists also demanded action against the Sathankulam government hospital doctor Vennila, who allegedly issued medical clearance certificates to Jayaraj and Bennix prior to their remand. The victims of state violence prefer the judiciary over commissions of inquiry appointed by the State government. “As these commissions mostly endorse the State’s role in any incident, the victims largely prefer the intervention of the judiciary to get justice,” said an activist.

If such crimes against humanity are not to occur in future, the police must be humanised and depoliticised. □

# Unwelcome airport

The Maharashtra government has started the process to build a greenfield airport in Chandrapur district even though that will result in the loss of a virgin reserve/protected forest and

a vital tiger corridor. BY **LYLA BAVADAM**

WHEELS within wheels and shadowy politics. That is what one comes across in the villages of Vihirgaon, Murti, Morwa and Kanharigaon in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region. And at the centre of it all is a proposed greenfield airport at Vihirgaon and Murti in Chandrapur dis-

trict, which will result in the loss of a virgin reserve forest and a vital tiger corridor and pose a danger to a sanctuary that has been proposed in the neighbourhood.

The proposal to build an airport in Chandrapur goes back to 2014. It was only in 2018 that the State gov-

ernment gave the nod for the project in the two villages, which are about 40 kilometres away from Chandrapur city. At the time, the General Administration Department issued a notification appointing the Maharashtra Airport Development Corporation (MADC)



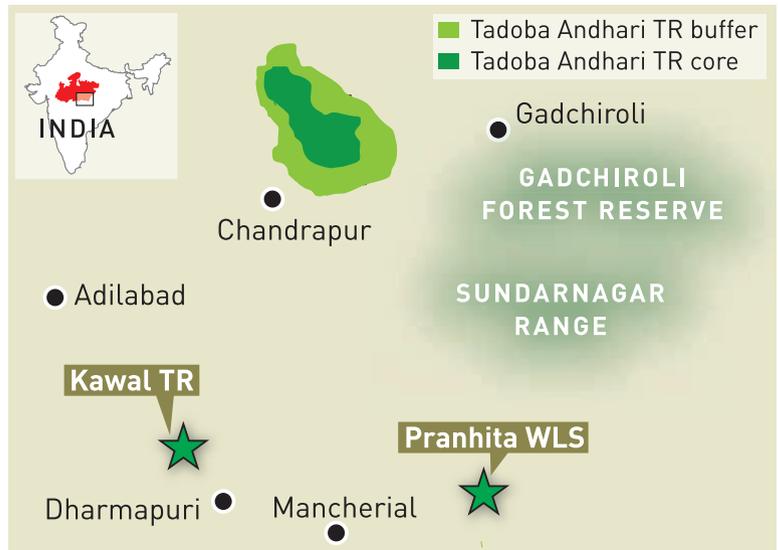
S. HARPAL SINGH

**THE ENTRANCE** to the Kawal Tiger Reserve at Pandavapur in Nirmal district, Telangana. Because of the interconnectedness of ecosystems, the Kawal and Indravati Tiger Reserves in Telangana and Chhattisgarh respectively will also feel the impact of an airport in Chandrapur.

the nodal agency for the project. The government had approved 134 hectares of land it owned to be handed over to the MADC and sanctioned Rs.46 crore to acquire 187 ha of private land. The plan was to first develop an airport capable of handling Q-400 planes (basically, turboprops for shorter flights), then expand it so that it could handle A-320s and, ultimately, make it an international airport.

Murti and Vihirgaon are in Rajura taluk, which is known for its dense forest with a healthy population of wildlife such as leopards, tigers and sloth bears. In fact, the region has the highest density of tigers in India. The 2015 census of tigers found that 120 of Maharashtra's 170 tigers were in Chandrapur district. Good conservation measures resulted in an increase in their numbers in 2018 to 312, the majority of them in Chandrapur. The famed Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve buffer zone is just 38 km away, the Chaprala Wildlife Sanctuary is 32 km away and the proposed Kanhargao Wildlife Sanctuary is next to the airport site. In fact, Vihirgaon and Murti are both part of the tiger corridor according to a report of the Wildlife Institute of India. Because of the interconnectedness of ecosystems, the Kawal and Indravati Tiger Reserves in Telangana and Chhattisgarh respectively will also feel the impact of an airport in Chandrapur.

All these wildlife areas will be severely affected by the construction of an airport though a cost-benefit analysis dated January 14 submitted to the MADC by an independent assessor it hired says otherwise. The analysis, which took into consideration various parameters for a period of 50 years, claims that the "total benefits [of the project are] Rs.4,93,993.809 lakh. Total losses [are] Rs.1,97,264.15 lakh. Hence Benefit/Cost Ratio =  $493993.809 / 197264.15 = 2.5042$ . Thus the project gives Benefit/Cost Ratio. The monetary returns of the project are positive over the environmental losses." An activist was dismissive of this analysis, saying: "This is the old method of calculating the value of a forest.



The Supreme Court has already set up a committee to find the environmental value of a forest and a wildlife corridor, which is far more than this."

The office of the Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF) at Chandrapur has already said that the project can go ahead with certain conditions. As many as 3,817 trees could face the axe while 75 ha of forest land, comprising 47 ha of reserved forest and 28 ha of protected forest, could be handed over for the project. Despite such safe-sounding words like "reserved" and "protected", there is actually no real protection for the forests. If "procedure" is followed, a forest can be de-reserved and the land used for any purpose. Procedure, in Maharashtra, means that the CCF refers a proposal with his recommendations to the Nodal Officer who, in turn, will send it to the Forest Department and then it will go to the Regional Empowerment Committee (REC), which will decide whether the forest land can be diverted for non-forestry purposes.

The REC has six members, including three representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). On paper that makes it seem as if there is some hope for the forest, but recent political trends being what they are, the NGO appointees are usually just "rubber stamps", as a wildlife activist put it. Worse still, according to a source in

Chandrapur, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) apparently makes these appointments. The airport proposal is currently with the REC, which is expected to give it the go-ahead.

According to documents with *Frontline*, S.V. Ramarao, CCF, Chandrapur Circle, and Gajendra Hire, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Central Chanda division, Chandrapur, have given their clearances, but there are some puzzling contradictions. In a site inspection report dated March 20, Ramarao gave his "okay" to the project after having visited the site a month before he submitted his report. He says that the land the MADC has asked for is "unavoidable and barest minimum". He also says that the site is "important from wildlife point of view" since rare and endangered species such as the "Tiger, Sloth Bear and other herbivorous animals move through the area". Despite saying this, he goes on to make the point that the "sensitivity of the forest is not affected due to project" and remarks that "it is part of Tiger corridor Grid No. 248 (Vihirgaon & Murti... as per Wildlife Institute of India's report in Tiger Corridors of Eastern Vidarbha Land scape". Further down, the CCF avers: "No violation of the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 is noticed." He ends by saying: "The proposal is recommended for giving approval under Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. Mit-



NAYAN KHANOLKAR

**A TIGRESS WITH HER CUBS** at an artificial waterhole created by the Forest Department in the greater Tadoba landscape in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra, a file photograph.

igation measures as suggested by Wildlife Institute of India as it is a tiger corridor.” In his report, the CCF asks that the following measures be taken: wildlife habitat loss be compensated for, tiger/wildlife movement should not be affected and compensatory afforestation of 1,000 saplings a hectare on degraded forest land in Chandrapur district be carried out.

About 12 km outside Chandrapur city, near Morwa village, there is an airstrip that small private planes and helicopters use. When there is an existing airstrip with basic facilities, it seems unreasonable for the government to pursue a greenfield airport project, which, as the term implies, means starting from scratch. Why is this airstrip not being developed into a commercial airport? Why is the government choosing the long, hard road of dealing with opposition to the proposed site and the even longer road of environmental destruction when it has a ready solution?

For those who live and work in the area, the most obvious question is why a thriving ecosystem that is home to the endangered tiger should be destroyed when there is an alternative site for the airport. Some people even question the need for another airport since Nagpur, only 150 km away, already has one. But given that Vidarbha has not received the infra-

structural support that other areas have, the counterargument says another airport will help the local economy. The CCF, too, makes this point in support of the airport: “It will lead to economic development of the backward region of the Vidarbha area.”

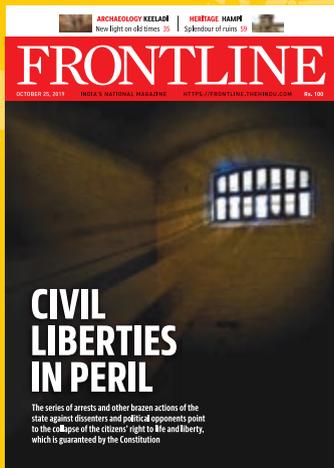
Another critical reason to change the site of the greenfield airport is that it is in the vicinity of the proposed Kanhargaon Wildlife Sanctuary. Geographically, the lush forests of Kanhargaon offer tigers a link to move between the Kawal Tiger Reserve in Telangana, the Indravati Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh and the Chaprala and Pranhita Wildlife sanctuaries in Gadchiroli, and it is also a link to the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Kanhargaon has a resident population of 10 tigers, four of which are female, so it is a crucial tiger-bearing area. A 2015 survey by the Wildlife Conservation Trust found that the forest also had 23 leopards. The increase in wildlife can cause human-animal conflicts, and that is another reason why Kanhargaon should be declared a sanctuary, for which, right now, there is an in-principle approval. It is imperative that the sanctuary be created and made inviolate.

Resistance to the sanctuary also comes from another flank. Many years ago, the Forest Department handed over the forests of Kanhar-

gaon to the Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra (or FDCM; mockingly referred to as the Forest Destruction Corporation because its activities centre around exploiting forests). The revenue from the FDCM, which is primarily from logging, could amount to Rs.20-22 crore annually. The proposed sanctuary will have an area of 210 sq. km. Most of this is under felling by the FDCM now. If Kanhargaon is granted sanctuary status, then it will no longer be in the hands of the FDCM, and so it will cause a considerable loss of revenue for those who have benefited thus far. However, a deal is apparently being worked out to give compensatory logging sites to the FDCM in some other area.

Sudhir Mungantiwar, Minister for Finance, Planning and Forests during 2014-19 when the Bharatiya Janata Party was in power, put up a spirited opposition to the creation of a sanctuary at Kanhargaon. It was only in December 2018, when former Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis gave the green signal for the in-principle approval for the sanctuary, that Mungantiwar backed down.

But all is not yet lost. The greenfield airport project requires three clearances: forest, wildlife and environmental. It is still at the first stage. Wildlife activists say they will resist the project when wildlife clearances are considered. □



# READING FRONTLINE IS A REWARDING EXPERIENCE

**Gift for 6 Months Subscription**



Wildcraft Sling Bag

**Gift for 1 Year Subscription**  
(Option available)



Wildcraft Laptop Bag

**Gift for 2 Years Subscription**  
(Option available)



Wildcraft Trolley Bag

**Subscribe Now!**

Terms and conditions: a) The gift for the respective subscription, will be sent to the address given for the magazine subscription and the expected time of delivery is upto a maximum of 6 weeks from date of subscription. b) Multiple subscription is also available. If the same person wants to subscribe 2 or more subscriptions to the same address, every subscription will be offered a gift. c) To have a closer look at the gifts and read the T&C for this offer, please log onto [www.thehindugroup.in/subscribe](http://www.thehindugroup.in/subscribe).

**Cover price ₹ 125**

| Periodicity | No. of Issues | Rate @ Cover Price(Rs.) | Free Gift                                      |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------------|--|
| 6 months    | 13            | 1625                    | Wildcraft Sling Bag                            |
| 1 Year      | 26            | 3250                    | A. Wildcraft Laptop Bag (or) B. AT Back Pack   |
| 2 Years     | 52            | 6500                    | A. Wildcraft Trolley Bag (or) B. AT Duffle Bag |
| Overseas    | 26            | 100 USD                 | NA   |

| Subscription Rate (Without Gift) | Discount % |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| 1150                             | 29%        |
| 2085                             | 36%        |
| 3750                             | 42%        |
| NA                               | NA         |

To subscribe online, visit [www.thehindugroup.in/subscribe](http://www.thehindugroup.in/subscribe).



### SUBSCRIPTION ORDER FORM

New Subscription     Renewal (Subscription No. \_\_\_\_\_)

For subscription, please fill the form, sign and send it to Circulation Department, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai, Chennai – 600 002. E-mail: [customercare@thehindu.co.in](mailto:customercare@thehindu.co.in) Toll-Free No.: 1800 102 1878

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

Pin: \_\_\_\_\_ District: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

Landline: \_\_\_\_\_ Mobile: \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

I am remitting ₹ \_\_\_\_\_  for 6 months     for 1 Year     for 2 Years

Gift Selected: For 6 months  A | For 1 Year  A (or)  B | For 2 Years  A (or)  B

I am opting the subscription offer without Gift

By  DD/Cheque Number - in favour of THG Publishing Private Limited., (Add ₹10 for non-Chennai cheque)

DD/Cheque Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: ₹ \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

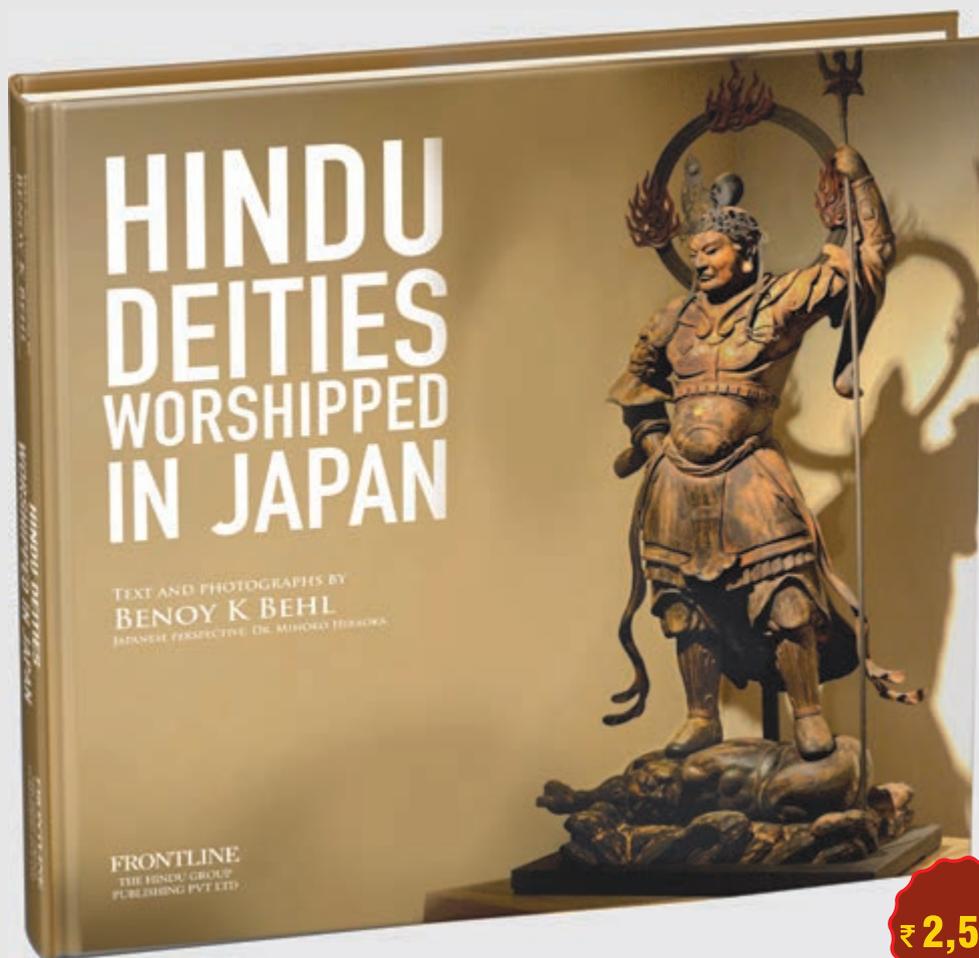
Bank: \_\_\_\_\_

Branch: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature with date: \_\_\_\_\_



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



₹ 2,500\*



A SPECIAL PUBLICATION FROM

**FRONTLINE**  
LEADING THE DEBATE SINCE 1984

BOOK YOUR  
COPY ONLINE



To book your copy, Visit: [publications.thehindugroup.com/bookstore](https://publications.thehindugroup.com/bookstore)  
For bulk booking, e-mail: [bookstore@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bookstore@thehindu.co.in) For any enquiries call: 1800 102 1878