HELL & HIGH WATER

Population-dense Kerala battles bravely a natural disaster made worse by the large-scale reclamation of wetlands and paddy fields and the degradation of its hills in pursuit of mindless urbanisation.
MAY THE INDIAN TRICOLOUR ALWAYS FLY HIGH

SALUTE TO MARTYRS & BRAVE SOLDIERS

August 15, 2018

Heartiest Greetings to the People of Haryana on the occasion of 72nd Independence Day

- Manohar Lal
Chief Minister, Haryana

Information, Public Relations and Languages Department, Haryana
www.prharyana.gov.in
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**Battling a deluge**

In a resolute display of resilience, Kerala’s government and civil society come together to face the challenge posed by the “flood of the century.”

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**On the Cover**

An aerial view of the floods in central Kerala showing people taking shelter on a bridge, on August 19.

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COVER STORY

BATTLING

AN AERIAL VIEW of the flood-hit areas of Kerala on August 11.
A DELUGE
In a resolute display of resilience, Kerala’s government and civil society come together to face the challenge posed by the devastation caused by the “flood of the century”, but as the floodwaters recede, issues such as land reclamation, rapid urbanisation and hill degradation come to the fore. **BY R. KRISHNAKUMAR IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM**

WITH TERRIFYING FORCE AND SPREAD THAT Kerala had not seen in nearly a century, the skies opened up in August, unleashing torrential rain and causing floods that left no part of the State untouched. The highlands, midlands and coastal plains, the three geographic regions of the State, were all devastated.

Heavy bouts of rain battered all 14 districts from the beginning of the monsoon in June, and grew in intensity after July, triggering catastrophic floods, a series of landslides and heart-wrenching scenes on the hills of the Western Ghats range, which runs along the entire length of the State.

Most stretches of the ghat roads and resorts, hotels, houses and other buildings and bridges on the slopes disappeared in the wink of an eye as tonnes of mud and rock and water slid down the denuded hillsides of Wayanad, Kannur, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Idukki and Pathanamthitta districts. Rescue efforts were hampered by the heavy rains, which rendered roads in many areas inaccessible.

Villages at the foothills, a number of them located near granite quarries, also bore the brunt of the rain. The rivers broke free, changing course in all directions under the darkness of those cursed nights, pulling down hillsides and ransacking entire communities.

In the heavily populated midlands and coastal plains, rivers in spate caused catastrophic flash floods and altered the geography at places, refusing to disappear, as if reclaiming their riverbeds and floodplains. On roads and bridges and inside homes and neighbourhoods, the rivers deposited tonnes of plastic waste and other garbage and thick silt and mud.

Much of Kerala went under water and thousands were forced to flee their homes. Water rose to the second floor of many households in cities and towns and the residents could only be rescued using boats.
Kerala is no stranger to floods but this was a disaster that had engulfed the entire State. The floods ravaged 77% of a total of 1,564 villages, directly affecting 54 lakh people out of the total estimated population of 3.5 crore.

The State government described it as “the most intense floods to hit the region in the last hundred years”. Almost all the 41 rivers that flow down to the Arabian Sea were in spate. Rivers changed course, dams overflowed and bridges collapsed. As road and rail systems were disrupted, transport came to a standstill. Conducting rescue operations through waterways became impossible because of the fast river currents. Bad weather prevented smooth functioning of helicopters; places were helicopters could land were all flooded.

For the first time in history, and barely two months into the monsoon, the reservoirs of all 82 dams of the State, including 34 major ones, became full between August 8 and August 10 and water had to be released from them one after the other within short intervals. An extraordinary excess of rain descended on almost all 14 districts in the four days from August 14 to August 17. “It was a kind of rain that led to a huge amount of [dam] storage within a very short period of time,” Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who led a massive rescue and relief operation from the front, said. Almost the entire additional inflow from the catchment areas of 82 dams, therefore, had to be released quickly to downstream areas.

According to the Chief Minister, there are three reasons why the disaster caused more problems in Kerala than it would have in other States. “One is the high population density: while the national average is 382, in Kerala it is 860. Second, over 10 per cent of the area in Kerala lies below sea level; 41 rivers flow into the Arabian Sea. There are 80 dams and separate catchments for each one of them. We need to understand these special features of the State in order to coordinate the relief operations well.”

Ironically, the past two years had actually been a period of scanty rain in Kerala. Summers were extremely hot and storage was very low in many reservoirs. There was the looming threat of drinking water scarcity in many cities, including Thiruvananthapuram.

**EXCEPTIONALLY HIGH RAINFALL**

However, from the beginning of the monsoon this year, rainfall was exceptionally high: 42 per cent above normal from June 1 to August 19, according to the Meteorological Department. While the departure from normal was 15 per cent and 18 per cent in June and July, respectively, Kerala received a staggering 164 per cent above normal rain in the August 1-19 period.

The five major dams run by the State Electricity Board all recorded “non-stop, extreme rainfall” from August 14 to August 17: Idukki, one of the highest arch dams in Asia, received 811 millimetres of rain; Pamba...
A flood of heroes

FISHING boats glided through flooded roads day and night, to destinations the boatmen never knew, and their fellows followed, neck-deep in water, searching for survivors in half-submerged homes.

Others combed lonely, silent lanes in dinghies and lifeboats, raising shrill, piercing cries of “Koooi!”, “Hooyi!”, “Is there anybody here?” — sounds which were music to the ears of desperate victims anxiously eyeing rising water levels from terraces or behind shut doors.

Elsewhere, scenes were reminiscent of the flow of refugees from conflict zones: long lines of ashen, haggard, worried and tense men and women, old and young, toddlers and pregnant women, wading through the floodwaters on bridges and roads. They were on “safe” terrain because their rescuers had struggled to measure up to the pitiless flow of floodwaters over walls, gates, roofs and abandoned vehicles, through nooks and crannies of urban jungles and reclaimed villages, or over sodden cliffsides threatening to tumble down.

Rescuers reached out to the thousands who were trapped or stranded across Kerala, with their lifebuoys and guiding ropes, as the skies opened up and the floodwaters rose and refused to recede for days.

Hundreds of Army, Navy and Air Force and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel were deployed, to work with the State Police and Fire Force to help those marooned in congested urban areas and in remote and hilly districts. Helicopters rescued stranded victims and dropped tonnes of food, water and medicines over entire localities cut off by endangered roads and bridges. Earthmovers, huge trucks, buses and houseboats were offered for service or were commandeered by district administrations. Hundreds of refugee camps were opened quickly, and a massive voluntary effort came into operation.

Fisherfolk from all parts of Kerala came in uninvited in large numbers and with their own boats, to save victims from the brink of death or desperation, cutting through raging floods of the Periyar and the Pampa.

“All sections of society took part in the rescue and relief effort, but the participation of one section will stand out in our minds. The fisherfolk who battle with the sea for a living. Thousands of them had come ready as volunteers from hamlets all along Kerala’s coast, from Vizhinjam to Munambam. They had come in
groups of four or five, transporting their boats here on vehicles and spending money from their own pockets. They had no fear. The currents in the river or the weather—nothing mattered to them,” T.M. Thomas Isaac, State Finance Minister and MLA from Alappuzha district, said about the amazing rescue effort launched by fisherfolk, especially in Chengannur, one of the worst-affected areas.

After the stunning initial hours, as the scale of the calamity struck Kerala, impromptu volunteers sprung up everywhere, bringing relief to the stretched official machinery.

There were myriad stories of bravery, selflessness, heroism and compassion: of a pregnant woman airlifted from her flooded home giving birth on arrival in a Navy hospital; of a fisherman going down on all fours for people to get into his rescue boat; of an Air Force officer braving extreme odds to land a chopper on the roof of a house to help an old woman to safety; of NDRF men helping stranded women and children cross a rocky path across a fast-flowing river where just an hour earlier a landslide had claimed a bridge; of entire families staying back because an aged parent could not risk being winched up onto a precariously low flying helicopter; of an MLA breaking down, helpless before the plight of hundreds trapped without food or water in his constituency.

As voluntary agencies, neighbourhood clubs, health workers, social media groups, youth organisations, students and media organisations joined hands, Kerala could bridle what would have been a calamity of unimaginable proportions within the shortest possible time.

An amazing voluntary and mostly crowdsourced relief effort was launched simultaneously, and district administrations were overwhelmed by the relief materials that poured into special camps and the enthusiastic participation of Kerala’s youth and students in running it.

Thiruvananthapuram, one of the least affected districts and with a fully functional airport, became a key hub for the relief effort. Its young District Collector, K. Vasuki, told a gathering of passionate volunteers working feverishly inside a huge school auditorium full of neatly packed relief materials, including food, water, medicines, clothing and blankets: “Do you know what you are doing here? You are creating history.”

With the Cochin International Airport flooded and closed indefinitely, the airport in Thiruvananthapuram was in battle readiness throughout the crisis period, with planes and choppers taking off every other minute. About 400 volunteers helped load tonnes of material for the flood victims in other districts every day and the army flew numerous sorties over affected areas.

In Kozhikode, Collector U.V. Jose told the media that the relief camps were run entirely with crowdsourced materials.

Leading the efforts was a hands-on Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who set aside a journey to the U.S. for medical treatment, and, along with his Cabinet colleagues and officials, coordinated the rescue and relief efforts and gave support and confidence to those on the front line. Holidays were cancelled and the government machinery moved as a disciplined force. There were innumerable stories that made total dedication and selfless service commonplace. The death toll was limited only because relief camps could be opened quickly at all crucial locations.

The role of vibrant Malayalam television channels and social media groups in bringing the ground-level realities to light minute by minute, in locating thousands of flood and landslide victims, and in helping reach food, water and essential life-saving materials to them, was exemplary.

Messenger groups, much derided for spreading fake news and “hartal mischief” not long ago in the State, proved to be lifelines for the victims themselves and their rescuers. As floodwaters rushed into buildings, there were a million messages flying back and forth. Videos went viral.

A man pleaded, with several anxious eyes above water all around him: “Somebody please save us. Please. We will all die soon.” Others said: “About 500 students of the Sri Sankara Hostel are still trapped there. Please share this message”; “Here, in this location I have shared, my family members and many others are unable to step out of our house. The water level is rising by the minute. If somebody can provide a boat, please help.”

Saji Cherian, the MLA from Chengannur who had been elected just a few months earlier, wrote anxiously on his Facebook page: “Please give us a helicopter. We will fall at your feet. Please help us. My people here will all die. Help, please. Airlift is the only option here. We are doing our best with fishers here with political influence. We are helpless here. We need the Army here. Or we will die. Help us!”

There were countless messages like this and rescuers were stunned by the sheer number of distress calls.

By August 20, when the floods started receding at many places and there was a let up in the rains, 370 people had died but nearly 12.5 lakh people were rescued—82,442 of them on August 17; 58,000 on August 18; 22,034 on August 19; and 602 persons on August 10—and brought to 3,274 camps.

If Kerala was rattled by the unforeseen devastation wrought by the rains, landslips and the deluge of dam waters, it soon recovered and joined hands for a historic rescue and relief effort.

The story of “this century’s flood” is also a story of a flood of heroes and very few villains.

*R. Krishnakumar in Thiruvananthapuram*
344 mm, Kakki 915 mm, Kuttiyadi 954 mm and Idamalayar 644 mm.

In June and July too, there were two consecutive “active spells” of rain with above-normal rainfall that peaked on June 14 and June 20. Another bout of intense rain was recorded around July 20. The State was already in trouble by the time the fourth active spell began by about August 8, with heavy rainfall events of above 7 centimetres being recorded in many places north of Alappuzha district. Some areas received very high downpours: for instance, Nilambur in Malappuram district got 40 cm of rain in a single day, on August 8.

By the end of July, all the 35 hydroelectric and irrigation dams, which are classified as “major dams”, had reached their full reservoir level (FRL). There was no buffer storage in any of these dams to accommodate the heavy inflows from August 10. Soon, almost all the dams that received heavy rain in their catchment areas (170 per cent above normal in August up to the 16th) were opened one by one, releasing huge quantities of water into the rivers.

Much of Kerala was submerged, with large areas cut off completely from the rest of the world, without power, water, food or communication links, by the time the rain’s fury began to subside after August 17.

For lakhs of unsuspecting people who had never experienced such a phenomenon, the calamity began as a mind-numbing spectacle that was telecast live for hours, as all the five shutters of the Cheruthoni dam was opened after 26 years, letting out the waters of the huge Idukki reservoir into the downstream areas of the Periyar river, which is the longest in Kerala and has the highest discharge potential.

The shutters of the Idamalayar and Bhoothathankettu reservoirs downstream of Idukki had been opened a few days earlier. This had caused the Periyar to overflow all its course from Kothamangalam, Kalady, Perumbavoor, Aluva and Eloor.

Although all the 15 shutters of the Bhoothathankettu irrigation dam, just 15 kilometres from Kothamangalam, the gateway to Ernakulam, were open, water had already started brimming over that dam, as was the case at Peringalkuthu hydroelectric dam (in Thrissur district) upstream. Across the Chalakkudy river, the Idamalayar hydroelectric project dam, with its huge reservoir, was already full.

**DELUGE FROM DAMS**

The release of water on a massive scale from the Cherithoni dam followed the release of water from the upstream dam, Mullaperiyar, by Tamil Nadu into the Idukki reservoir, after a controversial but crucial wait and appeals by Kerala to the Supreme Court-appointed monitoring committee. Tamil Nadu’s action came in the context of the long–drawn-out battle between the two States over the safety of the Mullaperiyar dam and the storage that ought to be permitted.

During this key interval, Kerala later claimed, while there was pouring rain in the catchment areas of both the dams, the heavy inflows into the Mullaperiyar dam were allowed to build up instead of being diverted quickly across the basin into the Vaigai dam in Tamil Nadu. The water level at the Mullaperiyar dam rose to its full permissible level of 142 feet and when it was released, it forced Kerala to open the shutters of the Idukki reservoir at Cheruthoni.
The muddy torrents let loose gobbled up the bridge at Cheruthoni and parts of the town itself and then swiftly began to rush to the plains, swelling the already flooded banks of the Periyar right down to the urban centres of Aluva and Eloor and the towns of Paravur and Kothamangalam.

With such a rush of floodwaters from the Cheruthoni dam to Ernakulam in a matter of a few hours, even the most well-managed and controlled water release from dams could do little to stop the damage of heavily populated areas in Ernakulam and Thrissur districts. Similar events played out in most districts.

The picturesque Kuttanad region, situated at the tail end of four major rivers, looked like a festering swamp after four days of torrential rain. It is a region known for its unique method of paddy cultivation on large tracts reclaimed from the Vembanad backwaters. Many such tracts are situated two to three metres below sea level and are prone to flooding and salt water intrusion.

Kuttanad is a 900 square km delta spread over three major districts of Alappuzha, Pattanamthitta and Kottayam. It is a confluence of landmasses fragmented by rivers, coastal backwater channels, marshes, ponds, reclaimed paddy fields and garden lands. Its villages are all thickly populated. The residents have, for generations, been resilient to floods, braving nature’s mood swings to grow crops on fertile stretches reclaimed from the lake and the river. But the hilly tracts, midland and coastal stretches, through which the rivers flowed, have all been heavily built up in recent times. As a result, the floodwaters did not drain out from the Kuttanad region even after several days.

Of the two lakh people in 13 panchayats in Kuttanad, a rescue operation that caught the attention of everyone for several days brought 1.25 lakh people to relief camps; about 50,000 preferred to shift to the houses of relatives; several others refused to leave their homes or cattle or pets.

The massive three-day operation involved hundreds of fishing boats, about 30 house boats, about 20 travel boats and several vallams (traditional boats). About 25 buses and two dozen trucks were used to transport people from the boats to the camps. Later, the government began an operation to save cattle and other animals in huge barges brought from outside.

The low-lying areas of Alappuzha, including Kainakary, Chambakulam and Pulinkunnu panchayats all went under water and the Alappuzha-Changanassery road was submerged.

Similarly, the flooding of the Pamba and Achankoil rivers in Pattanamthitta district brought several towns under water. The opening of the two major reservoirs (Pamba and Kakki-Anathodu) linked to the Sabarigiri hydroelectric project on the Pamba, the State’s third-longest river, led to heavy flooding and landslips on the banks of the river. Communities downstream were caught unawares. As they woke up, many stepped hysterically into a brisk river flowing through their bedrooms.

**A NEWLY BUILT** house in Kozhikode that was nearly washed away by flash floods on August 9.

**ARMY PERSONNEL** evacuate local residents at Aluva on August 17.

**NAVY SOLDIERS** during a rescue operation on August 17 in Kerala.
WHAT followed the rain and flooding in Kerala was a deluge of “fake news” in the garb of “well-meaning” messages on social media which undermined the suffering of the flood-affected and impacted the outcome of relief operations negatively.

Even as the people in the State struggled to stay afloat, mentally and physically, and quietly appreciated the coordinated efforts by the Left Democratic Front government, the opposition and the Centre, there were attempts to discredit the united efforts, the relief pouring in and to underplay the extent of the devastation. These were political attempts by those owing allegiance to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates as some of those posts revealed. The wrangling over the quantum of aid required from the Central government and other sources, including international aid, and the Centre’s reluctance to declare the floods a “national calamity” added to the already difficult situation.

One message that was circulated widely on social media in the second week of August was a two-minute audio clip put out by Suresh Kochattil, a Hyderabad-based professional whose Facebook account describes him as a “diehard optimist who believes in standing up for a just cause, no matter what the consequences” and as belonging to the “Social Media of the BJP”. The clip was aimed at underestimating the extent of devastation in Kerala and was clearly directed at dissuading people from sending money or other relief material. Almost everyone with a Facebook account or WhatsApp installed on their phones had seen, read and heard the message and were forwarding it as well. With a forwarded message that said “please listen to this before you plan next for Kerala Flood Relief”, the audio clip, in impeccable English, urged people not to waste their efforts in sending money and other relief material as it was the “superbly rich” and the well-placed who had been affected. He also claimed with considerable authority that what Kerala needed was “hundreds of thousands” of carpenters, plumbers and electricians who would help in the rebuilding of houses. Suresh claimed that “most of the people impacted were from well-to-do families, either middle or upper middle classes” and that they did not require “money, candles and matchboxes”. In fact, they do not “need anything”, he said in the audio clip.

He claimed that he had been to several relief camps, including one run by the Gujarati community, which had 200 to 300 trucks loaded with material. He claimed that the indoor stadium in Kochi was full of stuff and no one wanted it. His political inclinations stood exposed in his statement that if anyone wanted to donate money they could do so to “genuine guys” and “recognised agencies” such as volunteers of Seva Bharati. “I have the Seva Bharati guys here,” he said in the audio clip, who “are working on ground”.

Seva Bharati is a non-governmental organisation founded by Balasaheb Deoras, the third sarsanghchalak of the RSS. Suresh further said how Seva Bharati functioned in every district and offered to help coordinate with those sending relief material. He repeatedly cautioned people not to send money and said the Chief Minister’s Distress Relief Fund was “not a great place to donate”. He then proceeded to make comparisons with floods in “Andhra or Telangana”. People in Chenganur, Pala and Ranni were rich people, he said, adding that “they will throw it [the relief material] back at you”.

Meanwhile, AltNews, a website busting fake news, said images of RSS workers seemingly involved in relief operations being propagated were old images of them involved in relief in a fire incident in Kollam in 2016. Photographs of Kerala’s Agriculture Minister, Sunil Kumar, distributing relief were also circulated on social media describing him as an “RSS karyakarta”.

There were also other attempts to misinform the public. S. Gurumurthy, who was recently inducted into the Reserve Bank of India as its Director, shocked all sensibilities when he tweeted linking the Kerala rains to a Supreme Court case regarding the entry of women in
the Sabarimala temple. His tweet said: “Supreme Court judges may like to see if there is a connection between the case and what is happening in Sabarimala. Even if there is one in a million chance of a link, people would not like the case decided against Ayyappan.” Gurumurthy, the editor of Tughlaq, later clarified that his tweet was a “comment on people’s view” and that he was not an Ayyappa devotee.

In another controversial statement, the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha chief Swami Chakrapani said no help should be given to those who ate beef. There were social media posts requesting “North Indians not to donate a single penny to these beef eaters”. There were others who declared that “beef eaters should die”. One BJP supporter posted: “Don’t donate any money as it will not be used for relief work. It will be used against our country by these leftists by giving it to naxals and JNU tukde tukde gang. Find some other way to help Keralites, not by donating to the CMO, Kerala.”

Sankaran Nair of Guruvayoor Networks posted that natural calamities had been “affected [sic] on the Christians and Muslim dominated districts in Kerala. Christians dominate the districts—Kuttanadu in Allapuzha, Kottayam, Pathanamthitta, Idduki, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Wayanad and Muslims dominate districts like Malappuram and Kozhikode.”

A game of one-upmanship was clearly on to discredit the efforts of the State government. BJP sympathisers claiming to be experts in natural disaster management put out long narratives of how it was a man-made disaster for which the government was solely responsible. Significantly, Congress chief Rahul Gandhi and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu appealed to the Central government to declare the floods a national calamity.

K.J. Alphons, Union Minister for Tourism who was critical of the State government’s constant plea for more funds, later appealed to the Centre that the State should be allowed to receive aid from the United Arab Emirates, which it had apparently offered. Alphons had undertaken aerial visits of the flood-affected areas with the Chief Minister and Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh.

Despite attempts to polarise the State on communal and sectarian lines, there were several instances that displayed humanity—of fishermen putting their lives and boats at risk to rescue people and reach relief material to them; of Khalsa Aid reaching out from Punjab; of a Thrissur temple offering a hall for Muslims to pray and of a mosque in Malappuram serving as a haven for all, including Hindus. For most people, it was a question of getting back on their feet; for some others, it was an occasion to polarise and reap a political harvest.

T.K. Rajalakshmi

Places such as Ranni, Vadasserikkara, Athikkayam, Perunadu and Ayiroor were completely flooded by early morning. Entire sections of Ranni town and the holy town of Pandalam, part of the Sabarimala pilgrimage, went under water. Buses lay submerged. There was up to five feet of water in shops that were getting ready for Onam festival sales. Scenes of the swift flow of the river through the streets of Ranni and Pandalam and rescuers using guiding ropes to help people wade through it went viral.

As rain intensified around the Sabarigiri hydroelectric project, Kakki, Anathodu and Pamba dams were opened and the waters converged at Triveni at Pamba, on the foothills of the Sabarimala temple, just as the temple was being opened for the season’s pilgrimage.

After a landslip at the Pamba hilltop on August 16, widespread destruction followed and the Sabarimala temple was totally isolated, with power and telecommunications links cut. The weigh bridge at Triveni was washed away. The Pamba Ganapathy temple, the first of the major shrines at the foothills of Sabarimala, the police station, hotels and number of other buildings familiar to pilgrims were submerged; the government hospital went under water and the bridge across the Pamba at Triveni, a landmark, was partially damaged.

The river itself took a different course at Pamba, as it did at many other places downstream. As the temple
priests were stranded and it became difficult to transport even food and goods for essential temple rituals to them, for the first time in memory the Sabarimala shrine became inaccessible to pilgrims. The pilgrimage itself was suspended.

Meanwhile, in the hilly areas, several people remained stranded for several days after landslides and rain at Munnar in Idukki district and Nelliampathy in Palakkad district, both tourist attractions. Munnar, the famous hill station, lay submerged. Muthirapuzha, the river that runs through the town, witnessed “the biggest flood” in at least 50 years, local people said. The same refrain could be heard from other districts too about local rivers. The opening of the Mattuppetty dam made matters worse. Several bridges, some built during the British days, were washed away. With landslips blocking roads, Munnar, the victim of the great floods of 1924 (see separate story), was isolated. Tourists were asked to stay away. Palakkad, too, was cut off, as traffic was blocked on all roads.

A key road at Kuthiran, a stretch connecting Palakkad with Thrissur, was washed away. The Attappadi tribal area was isolated. At Pattambi, the Bharathapuzha, the second-longest river in Kerala, flowed over the bridge. In Palakkad, which received one of the highest rainfalls this season, all 11 dams were opened and many parts of the district went under water.

RESCUE OPERATIONS

For several days, rescue workers could not reach many flooded areas. Army, Navy and Air Force personnel aided by fishermen from many parts of the State and volunteers struggled for over several days to reach out to them. In many areas, food and water and medicines were delivered mostly by helicopters. There was a limit to the number of people who could be rescued in boats, especially in the initial days of the flood, when rescue teams were still getting a grip on the micro-level flood realities. On the roads and bylanes, the flood flow was rapid; eddies and cross-currents were complicating the rescue of people stranded on upper floors of buildings. Trees in the neighbourhood, power lines and roofing sheets and crosswinds made even the delivery of food and water by air difficult. Rescuers braved many such hurdles to finally rescue most of those stranded by the fourth day.

Maintaining sanitation and preventing disease in relief camps was declared a top priority, State Health Minister K.K. Shailaja said. Authorities were also seeking to restore regular supplies of clean drinking water and electricity. Even burying or cremating the bodies of the dead became an issue, with government hospitals running out of mobile mortuaries and burial and cremation grounds getting flooded. Media outlets and the authorities were overwhelmed by heart-breaking stories of people staying in flooded homes with their dead spouses or parents and of frantic calls and messages from people about missing relatives.

It was a huge challenge for the State government to handle such an emergency situation that involved loss of life and property on an enormous scale and required the evacuation of over 13 lakh people to over 3,527 relief camps spread out in affected areas. Making sense of the disaster in its entirety was an impossible task at the beginning. Stocktaking of the destruction and losses in various sectors will take a long time. The immediate challenge is to help rebuild homes, provide safe drinking water and prevent communicable diseases from spreading. Repairing roads and bringing electricity, water supply and telecommunication facilities back on track are urgently required tasks.

There is no clear idea of the losses suffered by individual families in this great flood, which affected all sections of society. The rich and the poor both had to abandon their homes and valuables and flee as fast as they could. According to preliminary figures provided by the government, over 7,000 houses have been completely

CHIEF MINISTER Pinarayi Vijayan and opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala at a relief camp in Ernakulam district on August 11. (Right) At a relief camp in Nattakom. 
The only silver lining in the grim scenario was the united effort in the State to overcome this humongous tragedy (see separate story). Kerala society rose as one to face it, and even as it fell into despair, there were innumerable uplifting tales of bravery, selflessness, compassion and humanism.

The rescue and relief efforts undertaken by the government under the Chief Minister’s leadership, aided by the Central government and the armed forces, and the unparalleled monetary and material support pouring in from all parts of the country and overseas, have helped the State see through the initial days after the flood. For instance, even the rising tensions over Mullaperiyar did not dampen the spirit of fellow feeling that saw relief materials pouring in from neighbouring Tamil Nadu into the flood-affected parts.

The calamity is likely have a lasting adverse impact on the State’s economy. Tourism, a major revenue earner for Kerala, has been badly hit as several destinations have been devastated. The destruction wrought by the rains has also been most severe in the agricultural districts of Idukki, Wayanad, Palakkad and Alappuzha. Crops on nearly 30,000 hectares have been completely destroyed, according to one estimate, and farmers face a bleak future.

The deluge came with its share of controversies, too. The first was over finding the resources for the huge task of rehabilitation and reconstruction that Kerala has to undertake now. The Central government offered an immediate assistance of Rs.600 crore, after the Prime Minister and the Home Minister visited the State and assessed the situation. But it is only a small fraction of the requirement.

A petition was filed in the Kerala High Court that the floods should be considered a “national disaster” so that compensation could be decided accordingly. But the Centre has maintained that there is no provision in the law to declare a disaster a national calamity (story on page 28) and that it can only be categorised as a Level 3 disaster (meaning the most severe, “a catastrophic situation or very large-scale disaster that overwhelms the State or district authorities”).

In the meanwhile, Pinarayi Vijayan announced that the United Arab Emirates government had offered to provide Rs.700 crore as assistance. This became controversial when the Centre decided not to accept assistance from foreign governments for flood relief.

RELEASE OF WATER FROM MULLAPERIYAR

Another controversy revolved around the cause of such an unprecedented floods: whether indeed it was a case of unprecedented rains or unscientific dam management or if it had been triggered by the sudden discharge of water from the Mullaperiyar dam by Tamil Nadu after it had reached the limit of 142 feet in spite of Kerala’s request for an early and slower release before the level crossed 139 feet.

At the time of writing this report, the issue of release of water from Mullaperiyar as a reason for the floods was being considered by the Supreme Court, with Tamil Nadu claiming that timely intimation was given to Kerala right from the point when the water level reached 136 feet. Kerala, in turn, has claimed that this was not so. It alleged that Tamil Nadu was trying to score a legal point that the dam was safe enough to hold water up to 142 feet, while Kerala was struggling to deal with an unprecedented floods situation downstream and trying to extend the release from Cheruthoni as much as possible in order to evacuate more people to safety.

While there is no doubt that the intense rainfall was the main contributory factor, the debates about the proper management of water release from the dams and about Mullaperiyar are likely to continue for a long time. The debate around dams also brings to centre stage the serious issue of rapid urbanisation that has robbed all 41 rivers flowing to the Arabian Sea of their floodplains; of large-scale reclamation of wetlands and paddy fields; and of the fast degradation of Kerala’s hills.

Disastrous land use practices, together with rapid deforestation and the mushrooming of granite quarries, have resulted in an abundant quantum of rainwater flowing swiftly downstream without being retained by the forests or recharging the water table in the plains. Given the geography of the region and the possibility of freak rainfall events, the current state of affairs only sets the stage for destructive landslides and inundation of low-lying areas.
IT is almost seven years to the date since the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) set up by the Government of India under the eminent ecologist Madhav Gadgil recommended that several areas in Kerala and all of Kodagu district, which come under the Western Ghats, be classified as ecologically sensitive zones. Both areas were recently ravaged by floods and landslides. In September 2011, in its voluminous and well-researched report based on data from the ground and satellite imagery (all of which were made available to the public), the Gadgil panel recommended a slew of measures for the preservation of the natural environment in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats, including strict curbs on mining, timber felling, quarrying and on the use of land for non-forest purposes. Of course, the report was unpalatable to successive governments in the six stakeholder States.

Faced with objections from them and adverse responses from others, the Union Environment Ministry thought it best to appoint another panel, this time one headed by the space scientist K. Kasturirangan, to “examine” the Gadgil committee report in a “holistic and multidisciplinary” manner. The Kasturirangan committee, which submitted its report in 2013, watered down the recommendations of the Gadgil panel. In effect, it suggested that only a third of the Western Ghats need be identified as ecologically sensitive, differentiated between “natural landscapes” and “cultural landscapes” and, in Gadgil’s words, “destroyed the spirit of [his] panel’s report”. Excerpts from an interview the 73-year-old Gadgil gave Frontline.

You have been quoted many a time as opposing the illegal stone-quarrying activity in Kerala. But it is as rampant as ever.

Yes. Way back in 2013 after we had submitted our report, there were many demonstrations against the stone-quarrying activity. And in one of the demonstrations in Kozhikode district against the quarrying, a boy died after he was injured during the stone throwing reportedly organised by the stone-quarrying mafia against the demonstrators. But nobody was brought to book. People realised they were going to be completely unsupported by the authorities. In recent years, stone quarrying has become even more rampant, exceeding all limits. Quarrying and mining are taking place in a very improper fashion.

Timber felling, improper tree cutting has also had an adverse impact. The forest department’s decision to replace natural forests with monoculture or forests of exotic species has also disturbed the hydrological balance.

Your report also highlights the premature silting up of reservoirs, especially those in the steep valleys in the Western Ghats States, because of massive
encroachment and deforestation of catchment areas. How true is that today?

It is as rampant as ever. Besides this, dams have been unnecessarily constructed or planned to be constructed even where technically and economically unjustifiable. This has caused the drying up of streams and even waterfalls. Our report had strongly opposed the construction of the Athirappilly dam on the Chalakudy river in Kerala’s Thrissur district for these very reasons. Another reason for the flooding has been unscientific and improper water management. This poor management is a prescription for disaster. Reservoirs should be gradually filled up as the monsoon progresses not to the fullest the moment the monsoon starts. Water should be released from the dams into the river as an environment flow to protect river life and systems. This year halfway through the monsoon the dams were filled to capacity. And then when there was excess rain the water was suddenly released, causing a flooding downstream. This exacerbated the situation.

In a petition before the Supreme Court, Kerala has accused Tamil Nadu of just this.

States are now wont to play these political games. But they are all equally guilty of this unscientific water management practices.

Would you agree that rampant and, at times, illegal construction has also contributed to the disaster in Kerala?

Certainly. For example, Kerala has the wetland protection Act [the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008]. But it has not been able to prevent construction of houses and other building in paddy fields and even riverbeds. Paddy fields would act as sponges, but now this water is getting into and flooding concrete houses. The water has nowhere to go.

Your report also talks of the fact that reservoir “operations of hydroelectric stations are in tune with the power needs rather than downstream water needs and hence, daily flow fluctuations created by peak and off peak operations of reservoirs in dammed rivers have led to upstream-downstream conflicts in many river basins”. Also, the “diversion of flows into another river basin after power generation is creating problems of daily flood in the recipient basin and drought in the diverted basins”. Have these points have been borne out in this disaster?

Yes.

Do you think that if your report had been implemented, the floods in Kerala could have been prevented?

It is not a question of the recommendations in our report being accepted or not. If the Kerala government had just followed environmental laws, a disaster of this proportion could have been avoided.

But why was your report not accepted?

It would have been in any law-abiding society. Our report was within the framework of our Constitution, environmental laws and meant to protect the ecologically fragile environment. I have asked critics of our report to point out any distortion of facts, illogical conclusions or recommendations that were not within the framework of the Constitution. But all they say is that it is impractical to implement. I would categorise this as the stand of a lawless government that suppresses democracy and does not want local communities to be empowered.

Vested interests that do not want any environmental laws are making sure local people have no say, dictating what governments should do and they [vested interests] are sabotaging and destroying the environment. We wanted our report to be translated into the local language so that it could be examined by gram panchayats in the Western Ghats and give them a level of empowerment right from the ward level and allow them to plan for themselves. Basically, we advocated a bottom-up process.

Of course, that has not happened. And now Kerala is seeking an aid package of Rs.26,000 crore.

T.M. Thomas Isaac, Kerala Finance Minister, 20 years ago co-authored a book titled Local Democracy and Development: The Kerala People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning. And he has very rightly advocated that every gram panchayat be empowered to generate its own “Panchayat development report”. But that has not happened. Why? Kerala would do well to implement Thomas’ recommendations.

You found “flaws” in the Kasturirangan report.

Our report emphasises taking good care of water resources, streams and rivers. The Kasturirangan report ignores this. This will cause havoc on the environment as has been seen in Kerala. The Kasturirangan report has been carried out in an opaque way. It was written for the forest bureaucracy and in a way to increase their [forest bureaucracy’s] powers. Then again, the Kasturirangan report categorises land under the Forest Department as natural landscapes while that under private ownership as cultural landscapes. This is absurd. The ecological system is not confined to or dictated by the ownership of the land.

Do you see this type of disaster happening again in Kerala or in other States?

Yes, this could happen again unless there is a drastic reorientation in the way society operates. Right now the greed for enormous profits has resulted in governments being lax in implementing environmental norms. The Central government has in fact been bending over backwards to make sure that the National Green Tribunal does not function properly.
Time to begin anew

WHAT is sad about this disaster is the fact that this was so predictable. I had, in fact, predicted it. After the 2013 Uttarakhand disaster, I had written: “[An] astounding quantity of water rushes through the rivers at once during floods. It could raise water levels to unprecedented heights, and in the case of rivers that do not usually flood, this could impact places far away from them. But such floods are rare and happen only once in 50 or 100 years. That, exactly, is the problem too. With the passing of generations, people forget how far the river will swell, but nature never forgets. Even after decades or centuries, the river reclaims its natural boundaries. By that time, humans may have built a resort or a hotel there, and all of that will be destroyed. Remember the ‘Great Flood’ of 99 (Malayalam era 1099) in Kerala. There are records that have documented how far the water levels of the rivers rose. It happened in July 1924. Most parts of Thrivutharancode went under water and there were large-scale losses…but most people in Kerala today have forgotten it. After the dams were built in Idukki, people are vying to build ‘beautiful’ houses on the banks of Periyar.

“It is in those parts that were submerged during the 1924 flood that we have built establishments ranging from pesticide factories to airports as part of our ‘development’ during the last 50 years. Statistically, it is a fact that such rains will occur again, and these places, too, will be submerged again. So before we build more flats or supermarkets, it would be wise to check whether such places were submerged in floods earlier.

“There is a general understanding that dams prevent floods, and it is true during most of the years. But during huge floods, dams are double-edged swords. During the floods in Pakistan in 2010, and in Thailand in 2011, the dams actually worsened the situation. When water levels rise beyond limits, and when the shutters of dams are raised only considering the safety of dams, it multiplies the intensity of the tragedy that unfolds below. At the same time, if dams are not opened during floods, it could turn into a tragedy for people who live above the dams. In many places, during the time of floods, there are often arguments and fights between people living below and above the dams.”

I made these predictions entirely based on my experience in dealing with many disasters in other parts of the world. I had also suggested that there are ecosystem-based approaches to disaster risk reduction by which one could continue to develop but still reduce the risks from floods.

I wrote: “What needs to be done is to reserve enough land for the river to expand during flood times. That means, not to build houses near the river but reserve them for agricultural purposes, and declare in advance that farmers will be compensated for any loss due to flood, if at all it occurs. If there are cities near rivers, they have to be protected by building safety walls, but never let the density of population rise beyond a point. That is what is happening in many parts of Europe now. Institutions like the United Nations Environment Organisation are propagating these ideas as a measure to prevent environmental disasters.

“The disasters due to floods are further worsened by landslides and debris flow near the origins of the river. Both are man-made disasters caused by people occupying steep hill slopes, building roads and undertaking construction there. These actions invite disasters. In Kerala, in addition to all these crimes, there is extensive quarrying too.”

Actually, a “flood” is not a natural disaster; it is a natural phenomenon. It is due to floods that many positive things, such as the recharging of groundwater and the increase in micronutrients, and so on, happen in the river valleys. If we adopt land use planning that recognises the natural boundaries of rivers, if we do not destroy forests in the catchment areas, if we do not destroy the hills, any huge rain will find its way through land. On the contrary, if we build houses, hotels, factories and airports along river valleys, we cannot complain about them as natural tragedies when the river reclames its rightful space.

It is a common fact across the world that communities forget about disasters very quickly. However great the disaster is, the society forgets it in a few decades. Japan has developed an innovative approach to deal with this problem. Every time there is a tsunami, they mark it on the ground with a stone tablet—called “tsunami stone”—so that the information is passed on to the next generation. In Kerala, we should mark the boundaries till which the river reached physically in public institutions such as temples and panchayat offices.

However, now is not the time to ponder about how we could have avoided this tragedy. Instead, now is the time to look forward and plan a new Kerala. Naturally, the community wants to build back and that too, as soon as possible. However, if we rebuild in the same location, using the same building materials, then we are naturally recreating disaster risk. In that case, in another hundred years, our great grandchildren, who hopefully will be richer, will suffer even greater losses. We will be failing them as responsible forefathers if we let that happen. What we need to do is to create a risk-sensitive land use planning across the state, introduce new building technologies and train our people to respond to disasters better.

Dr Muralee Thummarukudy, Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Environment Programme, is from Kerala. The opinions expressed are those of the author and may not be that of the U.N.
When the river came home

How a few young men and a crew of fishermen rescued people stranded in their homes in Aluva. BY G. SURESHKUMAR, P. V. JITESH, S. HARI AND ROBIN FRANCIS

ON AUGUST 15, SOON AFTER THE PRIME Minister’s Independence Day speech, we heard the news that the Periyar was in flood and that people were being moved to rescue camps. On behalf of our bank, we gathered relief material, put them in a car and drove to a collection centre run by the volunteer group Abodu Kochi and the Ernakulam district administration.

The scene there was heartening: there were hundreds of youngsters, film actors and officials and NGOs. Packages kept pouring in from people across the State.

Soon we realised that our colleagues and friends too were stranded at many places in and around Aluva. The road to our office was flooded, and the Metro was moving at a snail’s pace. Some colleagues had not left office the previous day. Many roads were already under three to eight feet of water. We needed boats to rescue our colleagues, but the local administration had its hands full and could do little to help.

We were already getting desperate calls from our colleagues. As we waited to launch a rescue effort we created two WhatsApp groups: one for people who were trapped and those who were ready to help; another for a group of decision-makers and bank authorities.

We tried to use a small boat, but the boatman withdrew because the current was too strong. All the while the water was rising steadily in the Periyar and there was no let-up in the rain.

We continued making frantic calls and managed to connect with Hari, an IT professional and a friend, who was already on his way to Aluva from Bengaluru via Thiruvananthapuram after hearing the news of the flood. With the help of a parish priest and others, he found three boats and the crew to run it—14 fishermen led by Robin—and a truck driver, Gopan, who was ready to ferry the boats in his truck from Thiruvananthapuram.

People kept stopping the truck because boats were in demand in other districts too. On the way they dropped one boat at Arattupuzha (Pathanamthitta district), for another team of volunteers.

The bank authorities promised us all help and au-
Thorised our rescue effort. But we still needed to obtain a direction from the Superintendent of Police. More than a hundred of our colleagues were stuck in various parts of the town. We began our search on August 18, at 5.50 a.m. in two boats in dim light. We yelled and whistled and called out “is there anyone here?” We got our first response from an apartment complex near the Aluva Manappuram temple, which was submerged. There were around 30 people stranded in the complex for three days. They were on the first floor, and Hari reached the balcony on that floor by climbing on to a tin-sheeted structure with the help of two crew members. There were many people there, elders in their eighties and nineties and infants, too.

The first task was to convince them that all of them, including a 95-year-old man, could be helped to climb down safely to the boat along the tin roof. One by one each of them was moved to the boat.

As we went back to Thottakkattukara junction, and safety, people were there in large numbers to help those we had rescued and to take them to the Aluva Metro station. The other boat had moved in the direction of Harmony Apartments. It took a long time to reach there because we had to take detours as people, total strangers too, needed help. The boat was big, the roads were narrow.

A colleague waved at us from a building hearing our shouts. Jithesh jumped into the water impulsively. The water was neck deep and muddy. The gate was locked. He had to climb the wall and jump into the compound. Peter and Benedict, crew members, followed him. There were people even on the tenth floor. Many were scared to move out. They only wanted food. We gave them bread, biscuits and water bottles. An aged woman had to be carried to the boat. The floors were slippery. There were steps. Jithesh found that his grip was uncertain as he carried her. He was also struggling to breathe. Everywhere people were reluctant to move out. We tried telling them of the consequences of staying there. At some places, it took nearly 45 minutes to rescue, say, eight people.

As the boat moved forward, an elderly man, Kabeer, gestured to us. He wanted food for two. He preferred to stay back as his mother was 84 and he did not know what to do. We persuaded Kabeer to come down and open the door. The scene inside was startling. The refrigerator, chairs, sofas and household appliances were floating around. The team went in and shifted his mother to the boat in a plastic chair and then went back for Kabeer.

There was another problem. The boat could not be turned around. In such places we drove in reverse gear. Fumes would come out of the engine. But the crew assured the passengers that there was nothing to worry about. We got used to it soon. At the end of every trip, people welcomed the boat and the people in it with shouts of joy, even as they helped them out of the boat.

We had a long list of our bank colleagues in mind when we started a fresh rescue trip. But we found others in equal need. In one such instance, the S.P. asked us to help an elderly man save his relatives who were trapped in an inaccessible area. When we finally located the place, we had to jump into the flood water and walk to the house. The door was locked and snails and centipedes were crawling all over it. The elderly man who opened the door was quite agitated. His wife seemed convinced that they would drown. Both were shaken on seeing the furniture and valuables floating around in the first floor. But we were determined to save them. That helped, perhaps.

**RISING WATERS**

We had to hurry. The water level was rising. A colleague lived nearby. There were 10 or 12 people in her flat. They too did not want to take the boat. But the situation was getting worse. Getting on the boat would be prudent, we told them. If more water was released from Idukki dam, they would be in serious trouble. If the water did not recede quickly, no boat would come their way. Food and drinking water would become a problem then. If the water level came down, they could come back home any time. Finally, they changed their mind.

There were dogs on the third floor. We gave them...
The roads were narrow for the boats to go; in other places the boat could not be turned around and had to move in reverse gear.

Water and food. A lonely dog elsewhere in the building had a forlorn look, his eyes pleading with us to take him with us. But we thought he was safer left in the flat or he would become an orphan once on the street. We gave him bread and left.

Coordinate the logistics

One of us, Suresh, stayed back at the starting point to coordinate the logistics, including arranging fuel and foodstuff whenever the boats went back. He would keep everything ready for our umpteen trips, coordinate with the police and other authorities to arrange ambulances or helicopters or, at times, go with a rented truck to move our colleagues and their families to safe places.

Our list kept on increasing. Strangers and friends would run to us, with their own list of marooned relatives. It was backbreaking work and the crew was hungry and tired. The team had been working since early morning and was hungry. People offered us food.

Three of us, Suresh, Jitesh and Hari, had lost our appetite as we knew that the most difficult part was yet to come and that a lot of people were waiting anxiously for rescue in areas that even boats would find difficult to reach. For instance, rescuers could not go to the Pragathy Gardens area by boat. Navy helicopters had picked up five people from that area earlier. And Federal Village was the remotest of all places on the list. It was the riskiest part of the venture. Suresh and other friends who knew about it were worried for our safety. We could not wait, though.

We asked Suresh to try for a helicopter rescue there; if the pick-up did not happen before three in the evening, we would have to undertake the mission. While we waited, we decided to rescue people from other locations.

There were nearly a hundred people waiting for our boat at Harmony, another apartment complex. Two youngsters came forward to support the team in bringing people from inside while a group of women were in the balcony organising the evacuation. We decided to give preference to the aged and families with kids. There were people with kidney ailment and on life support, old women with broken legs. We had to ask some of them to wait for the next trip. But the water level was receding, and we knew it may become difficult for the big boat to come back again.

We went back and picked up the critically ill person, and a police boat passing by took some of the others already in our boat. We came back with much difficulty as the water level was too low for the boat to move safely. We told all those who remained there that we would send a smaller boat to take them.

Messages kept coming that a group of our colleagues was stranded in Federal Villa and nearby areas of Kadunggalloor, quite an interior location close to the Periyar. All efforts, even choppers, to rescue them had failed. Jitesh and Hari decided we had to go. The current was heavy and there was the serious threat of snake and centipede bites and other dangers in the floodwaters. The crew was reluctant to take us and was very worried about the boats. Damage to the boats meant they would lose their livelihood. We offered to repair the boats if something happened. Finally, the crew agreed to come one more time. We knew it would take at least two trips. But we were afraid to argue with the crew.

When the boat reached Pragathy Gardens, the crew swore it would be the last trip since it was difficult to navigate a fishing boat through the small passages. We asked the crew to turn the boat into the complex. The flow was such that it was impossible to do so. The whole team got out of the boat and turned it around. But it was difficult to steer the boat to the villas inside where some were trapped. The current was really strong and we could not see the road and where people were staying. We rescued several people, sometimes carrying old people ourselves.

When it was time to leave we told the crew we would stay back as the boat was already full. Thus, we made them come back one more time. But the Periyar was quite agitated on that stretch. The crew of smaller boats that passed by were finding it difficult to control the vessels. A while after we started back, our boat began to drift to the right and the entire crew had to get out to push it back to safety. It was impossible to steer the boat using the engines. The only way was to push it all the way to Federal Village. To cut a long day short, when we finally reached Federal Village, the mighty Periyar was flowing majestically out through the villa complex gates. We rescued at least a 100 more people, including all our stranded colleagues, from there and elsewhere that day.

Finally, we had to move to a locality where the roads were only as wide as the boat. The passage was more difficult because of cables and damaged walls. The vessel suffered serious body damage. Still, after about 30 minutes of risky journey, we picked up 13 more people from the roof of an old, two-storeyed building. It was 6.30 p.m. and getting dark. We realised we had left out two of our colleagues. So we went back for them, this time in a smaller boat.

As told to R. Krishnakumar
**History’s new marker**

“THE highest point in the village is the temple. There, the deity stands in neck-deep water. Water! Water everywhere! People have all gone in search of land...”

Thus begins the short story “In the Flood” by Malayalam’s celebrated writer “Thakazhi” Sivasankara Pillai, known by the name of his native village and also as the chronicler of Kuttanad, the unique area in central Kerala prone to floods.

Except for the changes in the social setting, Thakazhi may well have been describing Kuttanad after the floods that ravaged Kerala in August this year. The well-known story written in the mid-1960s is believed to have been inspired by the Great Flood of 1924 in the State, when the writer was a boy of 12.

The similarity between the two floods is not confined to fiction alone. The deluge of 1924 (Malayalam era 1099, in the month of Karkidakam, during the south-west monsoon season) still has space in public memory as “the Great Flood of ‘99”, with reports of “engravings on walls” and “nails on trees” surviving in yellowing newspaper pages as proof of the unbelievable height to which the flood waters rose at many places then. The flood entered the area around the Siva Temple at Vaikom, even as the historic “Vaikom Satyagraha” (1924-25), the pre-Independence movement for entry of all classes of people in the public roads surrounding the temple, was going on. One report says that the satyagraha participants chose to continue their struggle, even though “only their necks could be seen above the water level”.

The “Flood of ’99” occurred at a crucial moment in Travancore’s history, barely four months after the death of its ruler, Sree Mulam Tirunal (1885-1924). As one of the greatest natural disasters struck the kingdom (and the whole of the region that is now Kerala, including those then in the princely States of Cochin and British Malabar), the unimaginable suffering of nearly five million people under her became the first major political and administrative challenge faced by the young Regent, Sethu Lakshmi Bai, who began ruling Travancore on behalf of her nephew Chithira Thirunal, then a boy of 12.

By August 1924, thousands of refugees were in relief centres in Alappuzha, Kottayam, Ambalapuzha, Changanassery and many such places where there are camps functioning for the same purpose today.

In The Ivory Throne, his chronicle of the House of Travancore, Manu S. Pillai writes about the sagacity of the then Dewan in “involving the public” in the relief efforts and his announcement that “through the efforts of private citizens and government officers, nobody was allowed to suffer from starvation” and about the ameliorative measures undertaken by Sethu Lakshmi Bai’s nascent regime.

The most striking similarity between the two catastrophic events is that the same locations were devastated by the floods almost in the very same manner and were caused by the same rivers. Munnar, located 1,500 metres above sea level; Kuttanad, where paddy is cultivated in land below sea level; Peermedu, Aluva, Perumbavoor, Kothamangalam, North Paravoor, Pandanad, Mannar, Pandalam, Ranni, Konni, Aranmula, Omalur, Tiruvalla—all were affected, both then and now.

Official records speak of “an awful night in the town of Aluva, especially its low-lying suburbs”, on July 19, 1924: “Cries of help were heard from all sides. The limited number of boats, public and private, could hardly cope with the rescue of lives, not to speak of property. The current set up by the river overflowing its banks was so powerful that many boats engaged in rescue work are reported to have capsized. The roll of casualty is also said to be considerable but the exact number of casualties and the magnitude of the destruction and challenge caused by this unprecedented flood could not be known until the flood subsided. The flood reached its zenith on the afternoon of the 17th, it having risen nearly six feet above the recorded M.F.L. at the local railway bridge (at Aluva). Nearly a foot of the deep railway girder was also submerged. The flood began to subside from the evening of the 17th.”

Other reports talk about the innumerable “uprooted trees, roofs of thatched houses and carcasses that came

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**FROM ‘THE HINDU’** of July 18, 1924, carrying news on the floods in south India.
“Chennapparayan had been standing in water for one whole night and a day. He does not have a boat. It has been three days since his master reached the safety of land with his own life. Even as water started peeping into the house initially, a makeshift perch was made with some coconut stems and twigs. Two days were spent on the perch, in the hope that water would recede soon. Moreover, three or four bunches of banana and haystack were lying there. If you go away, some smart alecks will flick it all away.

“Now there is knee-deep water above the perch and the roof. Two rows of leaves of the thatch are under water.... He decided that even 12 hours may not be needed for water to flow over the roof and the end was near for him and his family. The torrential rain had stopped three days ago. Chennan broke through the thatch leaves, somehow got out and looked around. There, up north, a catamaran was passing by. He called out to the boatmen. Luckily, they understood. They turned the vessel towards the thatch...”

From “In the flood” by “Thakazhi” Sivasankara Pillai

down the (Periyar) river”; that the “Aluva-Perumbavoor road was submerged”.

Unconfirmed reports say that “Peerumedu (in Idukki district) recorded 120 inches (3,048 mm) of rain in July 1924.”

A feature on July 24, 1994 in the century-old Malayalam newspaper, Deepika, published on the 70th anniversary of the “Flood of 99”, quotes several accounts by local correspondents about “boats that were cruising along the roads of the coastal towns like Noah’s Ark”; “transport and mail services were disrupted”; “all high places on land were brimming with refugees”; “Ernakulam, Ponjikkara, Venduruthi, Njarakkal, took only a few hours to reach ocean-level”; “the rail bridges at Chovvara, Edappally, Aluva, Chalakkudy had water flowing over them that could let a boat pass through”; “many rail bridges were washed away”; “the Broadway grounds in Ernakulam became an ocean” and “very quickly boats conquered the streets of Ernakulam”.

In central Travancore, “there were 8,000 refugees in Tiruvalla, Tirumoolapuram, Tookalsseri in two days”. Among the places “from where people fled with their lives” were Pandanad, Manippuzha, Niranam, Mannar, Karakkal, Perunthuruthi. Bodies were seen “floating by” and on Karkidakam 1 (July 26, 1924), “the streams in Alappuzha looked like oceans” and “water rose up to three feet in the night and the salt and sugar stocked in Travancore’s main trading centre of Alappuzha all dissolved and disappeared in the floods”.

Many refugee camps were flooded, the reports said. On the fourth of Karkidakam (July 30, 1924), the Pamba river, too, experienced a “huge flood”. Buildings in the Ranni market tumbled down; a house was washed away with 12 people on the roof. At Manimala, Mundakkayom, “houses were tied to trees with ropes” and “150 buildings floated by in two hours”, the paper’s Manimala reporter said.

Accounts also talked about “men and elephants flowing by”, of “carcasses of elephants”; “a live tiger”, and a leopard being washed down from the forests.

At Kothamangalam, “the 9,000-acre Periyar rubber estate was under water”; “floods came at night taking away whole buildings”. In the high ranges, landslips occurred in “all the hills from Peermedu to Vandiperiyar”; “40 people died as a hill crashed on a building at 44th mile”; the road from Kottayam to Kumily, in Idukki district, was destroyed by a huge landslide.

South Malabar, too, went under water “after the 17th of Karkidakam”. The report said that “three-fourths of Kozhikode town was under water; about 2,000 houses were destroyed; Ponnani taluk was under water for two days and dead bodies were floating around there; at Kozhikode’s famed timber trade centres, Rs.15 lakh worth of timber was washed away”.

In many accounts, people also have talked about the “blood red colour” of the rivers in flood at that time, of the “torrential rain” that accompanied it, and how those who were fortunate to finally return to their homes, found many of them submerged in mud or not there at all.

Newspaper reports from August 14, when the rains lashed this year, will only startle readers with a sense of awe and wonder that the collective suffering that their ancestors experienced close to a century ago has come back to haunt them.

The difference one would notice, perhaps, is that because of the alarming loss of forest cover in the Western Ghats, live tigers, leopards and carcasses of elephants drifting down to scare floodplain victims have been conspicuous by their absence in this year’s flood.

And, in 1924, the entire region had just one dam, Mullaperiyar. The rest, 81 in all, were built later in the century.

[Note: There are accounts of a cataclysmic event in 1341, a “cyclone and floods in the Periyar”, which entirely altered the geography of the Ernakulam region. But they are, at best, sketchy. This event is believed to have opened up the present harbour at Kochi and the Vembanad backwater system to the sea and formed a new deposit of land, the Vypeen Island near Kochi (see “Muziris, at last?”, Frontline, April 10-23, 2010).]

R. Krishnakumar in Thiruvananthapuram
“FLOODS ARE DUE TO GOD. DISASTERS ARE man-made” is a remark attributed to the late Gilbert White, a floodplain management expert from the University of Colorado, and which one has heard increasingly in recent times in India. By God, of course, here one means the climatic and meteorological factors responsible for the heavy rains, and one has witnessed the truism of this saying in all the country's recent flood-related disasters: Chennai (2015), Kashmir (2014) and Kedarnath (2013). It is just as true in the case of the current disaster in Kerala.

This year, the rainfall in August was the most devastating, with the total rainfall over Kerala until August 24 being 788.3 mm at the time of writing this article. While this is certainly the highest August rainfall in living memory, one may be surprised to learn that the 2018 August rainfall is only the sixth highest.

According to Pulak Guhathakurta of the India Meteorological Department (IMD), who looked at the data of the past 143 years (1875-2017), the August 1931 rainfall of 1,132.9 mm (175 per cent of the normal) was the highest in the recorded rainfall in the country. The other four high rainfall years were 1923 with 876.6 mm, 1907 with 850.8 mm, 1897 with 820.2 mm and 1878 with 800.1 mm. But, in terms of point rainfall, several rain gauge stations recorded higher rainfall extremes than in earlier years. “There are a few days where all rain gauge stations reported more than 10 cm rainfall,” said Guhathakurta in an email.

According to him, in Idukki, the most affected district, during August 1-20, Station Idukki received five days of heavy rainfall (7-11 cm), three days of very heavy rainfall (12-20 cm) and two days of extremely heavy rainfall (more than 20 cm). The rainfall of over 6 cm in these 10 days exceeds past records of maximum frequency of heavy rainfall in a month, he said. Similarly, two other stations of Idukki district, Munnar and Peer madu, received more than 6 cm of rainfall on eight days each, with the respective category-wise break-up being two high, one very high and three extremely high and two high, three very high and three extremely high.

On August 16, stations at Peermadu, Idukki and Munnar also recorded the highest ever rainfall on a single day, exceeding the previous highest with 34.9 cm, 29.5 cm and 29.2 cm respectively. The figures are somewhat reminiscent of figures preceding the Chennai deluge of 2015.

“Such heavy spells will only increase in the coming years,” pointed out M. Rajeevan, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences. Indeed, in their study published in 2008,
Rajeevan and Guhathakurta analysed 104 years of grid-ded rainfall data over the country and observed that the frequency of extreme rainfall events showed not only significant inter-annual and inter-decadal variability but also a statistically significant long-term trend of 6 per cent increase per decade. This seems to be strongly influenced by warm sea surface temperatures (SSTs) over the tropical Indian Ocean that in turn could be in response to global warming and climate change. “A 15 cm rainfall that used to occur over a day now occurs within eight to 10 hours,” Rajeevan added.

Only a year earlier, the duo had studied the long-term trend in rainfall over the country and concluded that rainfall over Kerala showed a decreasing trend. Kerala has, indeed, over the last decade and more been receiving less rainfall, and whenever there have been episodes of heavy rains, these have largely been in the coastal regions. This may be why the authorities did not expect floods of such a devastating magnitude this year and why there was less than adequate preparedness. But the very heavy rainfall of 2018 is, statistically speaking, but one datapoint in the long-term trend, which could still be decreasing, and so the two are not contradictory. The causes for this year’s rainfall bucking the trend are somewhat unusual meteorological factors, which will be discussed presently.

The model-based short-range forecasts (three to five days ahead) by the IMD and the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting had indeed warned of impending widespread very heavy to extremely heavy rainfall, and appropriate alerts were issued to the vulnerable districts. However, inadequate preparedness coupled with injudicious operations of dam reservoirs compounded people’s misery and resulted in a heavy toll of life and on property and infrastructure.

This year’s south-west monsoon rainfall over Kerala throughout the season has generally been above the long-period average (LPA) and widespread as well, and in August it has been exceptionally high, something unprecedented. Until August 19, up to when data compiled by the IMD is available (Table 1), Kerala had received 2,346.6 mm of rain against the LPA of 1,649.5 mm (42 per cent more). With only September remaining in the monsoon season, rainfall has been high in all the three previous months. While in June and July, the percentage departures from the LPA were only 15 and 18, the departure in August was (until August 19) a whopping 164 per cent, which is when much of the flooding and associated devastation occurred.

DISTINCT PEAKS

Figure 1(a) shows the temporal variation of daily rainfall intensity. There are clearly four distinct peaks of rainfall: two in June (around June 14 and 20), one in July (around July 20) and one sustained long one in August (beginning August 8 until August 16), the month when the normal rainfall is usually the least of all the monsoon months and on the decline. Figure 1(b) shows the cumulative rainfall over Kerala for the entire monsoon season up to August 19. Figure 2 shows the district-wise distribution up to August 19. The highest excess over the LPA was recorded at Idukki (88 per cent), followed by Palakkad (70 per cent). It was actually a fresh spell of heavy rainfall that began on August 8 and was sustained without any let-up until August 16 that was responsible for the extensive flooding and associated damage. After which, as Figure 1(a) shows, there was a gradual decrease.

As a result of the heavy rainfall until the end of July, 35 reservoirs were close to the full reservoir level. When the fresh onslaught of rain began, reservoirs had no buffer storage capacity to accommodate the fresh inflows that began after August 8. “Flooding was mainly due to the opening of the dams. Reservoirs were nearly full in July itself, and still they had two months of rain,” Rajeevan said.

Given the heavy rainfall in June and July, with a prolonged spell in mid July, and the forecast-cum-warnings issued by the IMD for June and July (which were by and large either yellow (“stay updated”) or orange (“alert”) for most districts), the appropriate management strategy would have been to begin release of water from the reservoirs in end July itself according to a well-thought-out plan and not wait until faced with an unmanageable overflow situation. When the excessive rainfall spell continued into the catchment areas, the authorities were left with no option but to release the excess water into the rivers downstream. “Unlike the major rivers in basins elsewhere, Kerala’s rivers are minor, and unlike having a few days to take appropriate action elsewhere, here the banks began to be breached within a day of the discharges, and this continuing for a
week caused widespread flooding in many parts of the State,” Rajeevan added. Also, Kerala does not figure in the Central Water Commission’s (CWC) flood-forecasting network of stations (Table 2), as was the case in Jammu and Kashmir during the 2014 floods there. Water being a State subject, the CWC does not establish a station unless a State makes a request to the Centre for the same and creates an appropriate State-supported protocol for flood monitoring of reservoirs. The CWC has only flood-monitoring sites in Kerala.

**STRONGER MONSOON FLOWS**

The chief causative factor for the occurrence of heavy rainfall over Kerala was the strengthening of monsoon flows during July and August. The frequent formation of pressure lows and depressions over the north-west Bay of Bengal, their movement over the mainland and their further intensification caused an increased flow of westerly and south-westerly winds over the Arabian Sea along and off the Kerala coast. The presence of low-pressure systems over the mainland causes an increased flow of cross-equatorial monsoon winds towards the low-pressure region. “These strong winds interacted with the hilly topography of the Western Ghats, leading to orographic uplifting of the moist air,” said Mrutyunjay Mohapatra of the IMD in an email. “This results in the formation of clouds causing heavy rainfall.”

“Orographic effects cause small rain-bearing weather systems to form. It will also give rise to small eddies, which can spiral moisture, giving rise to heavy rains,” Rajeevan pointed out. “These systems are only 10-20 km in size, which form quickly, and we do not notice them as they can be seen only by [Doppler] weather radars,” he added. The Indian Doppler Weather Radar network, which comprises 25 DWRs, unfortunately, does not have any close to the Western Ghats; the only one in Kerala is in Thiruvananthapuram.

“But all our models clearly predicted such intense heavy—more than 20 cm—rainfall days. Normally, you see this kind of rainfall along the western coast. But this year it was not like that,” Rajeevan said. Indeed, because the rainfall was mainly due to the orographic effect of the Western Ghats, the extreme events occurred in Idukki and Palakkad districts, which are far removed from the coast, and the coastal regions themselves were not affected by such heavy rainfall.

According to Mohapatra, all except the June 20 peaking of the rainfall were associated with depressions over the north-west Bay of Bengal. The June peak was due to a trough off the west coast, running from Konkan to Kerala with an embedded cyclonic circulation that extended right up to the mid tropospheric level over the south Konkan neighbourhood, he said.

On the other hand, the exceptionally heavy rainfall in August, Mohapatra said, was due to the consecutive formation (within seven days) of low-pressure systems, first on August 6 and then on August 13. The presence of the monsoon trough, whose eastern end was anchored lower than the normal position (towards the south), also facilitated the pressure lows to evolve into depressions, which then moved north-north-westwards along the trough (Figure 3). (The monsoon trough is the horizontal east-west region along the locations of relatively minimum sea-level pressure in a monsoon region. Most of the active transient disturbances producing rain, such as depressions, develop and move along the monsoon trough.) This angular tilt of the trough is the reason why there were rains in the north and north-western regions around the same time as the heavy rains in Kerala, while the north-east had deficient rainfall.

**AN UNUSUAL FEATURE**

“The total number of low-pressure system days over the Indian region during August 1-18 was 10,” Mohapatra said. “The most unusual feature of this year’s monsoon was the consecutive formation of two depressions over the north-west Bay of Bengal and their nearly westward movement in favourable regions during August 6-17, which led to cumulative rainfall of such intensity,” he added. “August behaviour is very typical of a positive Indian Ocean Dipole [p-IOD] year,” observed Rajeevan. “You get very frequent depressions forming over the Bay of Bengal. By the time one reaches Gujarat or thereabouts, another one will come in two to three days. The year 2006 is a very good example,” he said.

(Figure 3 shows the presence of the monsoon trough, whose eastern end was anchored lower than the normal position (towards the south), also
eastern Indian Ocean (off the northern coast of Australia and throughout Indonesia). A p-IOD phase is when the SST in the former increases and drops in the latter.) But is it a p-IOD year? The long-range forecast and the subsequent short-term forecast releases as well as weekly weather bulletins issued by the IMD to date all mention neutral IOD conditions. The p-IOD phase is believed to be correlated to a good south-west monsoon. In May and June, the IMD had, in fact, talked of its own Monsoon Mission Climate Forecasting System and global models predicting the neutral IOD condition turning to a negative IOD (n-IOD). Now, however, the predictions, the IMD says, are that they will stay neutral during the remaining monsoon period.

Interestingly, however, the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology, which was the originator of the notion of the IOD, claimed in early August itself that p-IOD conditions had emerged at the end of July itself. The African agency the IGAD Climate Prediction and Applications Centre too said that the IOD turned positive in early August. But the Australian Bureau of Meteorology still maintains that neutral IOD conditions continue to prevail. So what is going on?

There has been an indication of positive IOD during late July and then August. Dr R. Krishnan from the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune [who has extensively studied the correlations between IOD phases and occurrences of pressure lows and depressions over the Bay of Bengal], also confirmed using ocean data analysis. It may not further grow. But the August rainfall pattern is very typical of a positive IOD,” Rajeevan reiterated.

But Sulochana Gadgil, formerly of the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru—who evolved a slightly modified index called the Equatorial Indian Ocean Oscillation (EQUINOO), which, she feels, has a better correlation with the Indian monsoon than the IOD—has a different take on the issue. “The EQUINOO phase that was unfavourable in June has been favourable from July onwards, and it continues to be positive,” she said. “The eastern equatorial Indian Ocean has already cooled, and I expect it will be so into September as well. Good monsoon conditions should continue into September as well unless El Nino offsets the positive effect of EQUINOO. There are signs of positive El Nino developing, but atmospheric teleconnections, which are what actually affect the monsoon, are yet to respond to this positive SST anomaly developing over the Pacific. So I am keeping my fingers crossed for monsoon behaviour in September,” she added.

GROUND REALITY
So while the IOD conundrum can remain with the meteorologists and the debate on it can continue, the ground reality in the context of the Kerala rainfall disaster is that there were pressure lows and depressions that caused widespread heavy rainfall over the State, which was unprecedented. The human tragedy of huge magnitude and the infrastructural havoc and the damage caused have been extensive and it will take quite some time for the affected regions and people to return to normalcy.

Balaji Rajagopalan, an expert in environmental engineering from the University of Colorado, put it poignantly: “Catching up on the Kerala floods both from the meteorological and hydrological aspects is quite fascinating and depressing. Depressing because it is almost the same movie we saw with the Chennai floods in 2015! Similar meteorological pattern, similar forecasts made, not taken into account in the operations of reservoirs. Thereby, having to release the reservoirs at the last minute without warning to folks living downstream, leading to disastrous flooding much more than what would have resulted from just the rainfall event. Of course, like in Chennai, human causes—haphazard urban growth, destruction of the ecology of the Western Ghats that added to this by landslides. In all this the question is, how many times should we be hit on the head by nature before we do what is sensible and obvious?”
KERALA, “GOD’S OWN COUNTRY”, MAY HAVE been devastated by the worst floods in a century, but only a dysfunctional legal system would have allowed the political authorities to quibble over how bad the floods have been for Kerala and its people. As the waters recede after leaving a trail of devastation, the people of the State remain confounded by the legalese adopted to classify the latest natural calamity. Amidst the bitter wrangling over how much money Kerala deserves in order to deal with its misfortune, one thing is clear: there are no transparent and clearly defined criteria to determine how severe a particular natural disaster episode is. This deliberate obfuscation gives the Union government tremendous powers of discretion even as the State is left to fend for itself. This asymmetry is at the root of the simmering controversy in the time of a grave tragedy.

From “calamity of a severe nature” to a “national disaster”, public debates in recent days have simmered over several new and vague terminologies. In its response to a petition seeking the declaration of the situation as a “national disaster”, the Centre informed the Kerala High Court that no such term exists in manuals or statutes. Such information asymmetry is not surprising, considering the arbitrariness that characterises the legal and policy frameworks on disaster management in India. Kerala’s plight necessitates the reassessment of our legal
systems that address natural catastrophes in the country. For far too long, these issues have been passed over as tussles between the Centre and the States; the situation is much larger in depth and spread, calling for a detailed and substantive response. It is necessary to graduate from an immediate response of rescue and relief to a comprehensive regime of risk mitigation backed by effective legislation that furthers transparency.

Although the Disaster Management Act came into effect in 2005, following the Asian tsunami of 2004, it took another four years for the national policy on disaster management to be formulated. Seven more years passed before the National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) arrived. The Supreme Court in *Swaraj Abhiyan vs the Union of India and Ors.* (2016) has highlighted this laxity of the state in complying with its statutory duties, noting, “The problem is not the lack of resources or capability but lack of will.”

The concern is not merely about the delay in satisfying the statutory requirements, or the arbitrariness marking the whole legislative process; it is a deeper one involving institutional and normative limitations. The fundamental flaw in the Act is that it views disaster management through the lens of governmental authority instead of the community. This outlook is best highlighted by the fact that it completely ignores the widespread displacement of people because of a natural disaster and the extreme distress it causes.

The clamour to declare the latest crisis a “national disaster” and the political heat surrounding it highlight the need for clarity and transparency on how political and administrative authorities respond to a tragedy such as the one in Kerala. On August 20, the Centre clarified in the Kerala High Court that, according to National Disaster Management (NDM) Guidelines, the floods were of “L3 Level” severity, i.e. a nearly catastrophic or a very large-scale disaster that overwhelms the State and district authorities. On August 16, the Disaster Management Division of the Home Ministry declared it a “calamity of severe nature.” Such multiple nomenclatures are bound to create confusion. In essence, all it means is that the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) funds would now become available to the State government and MPs may use their discretion and utilise funds of up to Rs.1 crore from their Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) Fund for relief activities.

Currently multiple guidelines and manuals prescribe the standards to determine the nature and extent of a disaster situation. There is an urgent need to standardise the methodology of assessing a disaster. The non-binding nature of the guidelines and manuals and the application of different standards by the Centre and the States to define a disaster, combined with either the lack of political will or the egregious use of a disaster for narrow political gain, has resulted in arbitrariness in the matter of States declaring the severity of a particular disaster. This was made glaringly evident in *Swaraj Abhiyan vs Union of India & Ors.*, when the Supreme Court pulled up the governments of Gujarat, Haryana and Bihar for their hesitation to even acknowledge, let alone address, the severe drought situation in their States. Even while admitting the difficulty in laying down specific parameters or mathematical formulae, the apex court made it clear that the elbow room available to States in recognising a disaster situation should be minimised and there needs to be coherence in the parameters employed by the States and the Centre. More importantly, the Supreme Court came down heavily on the Centre for using the argument of “federalism” to absolve itself of its own constitutional responsibilities. Reminding it of the importance of maintaining a fine balance between federalism and constitutional responsibility, the court observed that in the name of respecting the authority of State governments, the Central government cannot wash its hands of its own public duty.

This applies squarely in the present situation too. The collective appeal to declare the tragedy a “national disaster” is, in fact, a cry for solidarity of the Centre with the suffering population of the State. Past experiences,
wherein the quantum of assistance from the Centre has largely been driven by political considerations, are a corroboration that the Centre often fails to live up to the constitutional aspirations of its people.

Organisational Lacunae

Ill-defined and conflicting institutional structures under the disaster management legal framework are among the major obstructions to effective disaster management. Multiple authorities exist with overlapping responsibilities mainly because of the lack of clarity in defining their ambit and demarcating their roles. The passage of the Disaster Management Act was an opportunity to unify the disaster management institutional framework, but the overlapping functions and powers of authorities mentioned thereunder, coupled with their existence alongside some of the old institutional structures, impair the effectiveness of the framework. This is besides the absence of transparency and accountability mechanisms under the Act.

Disaster management requires a multidisciplinary and multi-agency approach. The multiplication of authorities with no clear delineation of responsibilities only creates more confusion at a time of a grave crisis. Neither the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) nor the National Executive Committee (NEC)—the new institutional mechanisms envisaged under the Act—has been able to realise its objectives. The Task Force constituted by the Central Government in 2010 to review the functioning of the Act had called for revisiting the existing institutional structure. A typical example of the inadequacies and confusions pervading the disaster management institutional framework is that of the structure and functioning of the NEC. Both the Task Force and the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC), 2006, recommended the scrapping of the NEC as its functions coincided with that of the already existing National Crisis Management Committee (NCMC) chaired by the Cabinet Secretary. The structure of the NEC, chaired by the Union Home Secretary and comprising 14 Secretaries to the State and Chief of the Integrated Defence Staff as members, hindered it from performing the multifarious tasks assigned to it. The Comptroller and Auditor General’s Performance Audit of Disaster Preparedness in India (2013) reveals how the NEC, since its inception in 2006 and until the CAG Audit, met only thrice in a span of six years, whereas as per the NEC Rules of 2006, they were required to meet at least once every three months. It is not surprising that formulation of the NDMP was delayed by over a decade, as the NEC was tasked with this responsibility. Some of its mandated functions even coincided with that of the NDMA (see Section 6(2) and 10(2) of the DM Act).

The ambiguities are not confined to statutory bodies at the national level, but extend to the State Disaster Management Authorities and State Executive Committees. Further, there is a significant degree of overlap in the powers and functions of the Central government and State governments under the Disaster Management Act.

The national policy on disaster management, the NDMP and the NDM Guidelines, place the primary responsibility for rescue, relief and rehabilitation on State governments, while the Centre is expected to extend financial, logistic and policy support to State governments. The Act, besides not mentioning this important aspect, lacks precision in enunciating the powers of the Centre and the States. These serious lacunae have stymied timely and effective response to a disaster.

It is also significant to note that disaster management is not enumerated in any of the Lists under Schedule VII of the Constitution, and falls under Residuary Powers of the Union under Entry 97 of the Union List. Various committees, including the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, the National Commission to review the working of the Constitution and the Task Force have recommended that disaster management be placed in the Concurrent List as a means to ensure vertical and horizontal linkages in effective disaster management.

Neglected NDMA

While these obvious inadequacies plague the institutional and legal mechanism, there is a growing threat to the very existence of the disaster management framework. The NDMA, the primary body responsible for laying down policies, plans and guidelines, suffers from excessive executive incursion. The Centre’s utter neglect of the institution is evident from the fact that half the positions in the NDMA remain vacant. In the last few years, the NDMA has functioned with four members as against the nine mandated under the Act. Disaster management experts in the field of disaster management warn against the growing tendency of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to control the functioning of the NDMA. This is evident from the developments since 2014. Through an Executive Order, the Cabinet rank of the Vice Chairman of the NDMA and the Minister of State ranks of members were reduced to that of Cabinet Secretary and Secretary to Government of India respectively. The Central government’s response to a recent petition filed in the Delhi High Court supports this questionable action of the MHA. It refuted the petitioner Gaurav Kumar Bansal’s argument that the vacancies had rendered the institution dead. The Centre located its primary argument on the guidance that the NDMA received from the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and the MHA—an open admission of increasing centralisation in disaster management in India. The clarification provided by the MHA to the CAG on the irregular functioning of the NEC is also worth recalling. The MHA informed the CAG that it had been coordinating disaster response even before the NEC came into being. The CAG strongly censured the functional disorderliness and observed that the “MHA functioned as an executive arm of the NDMA.”

Financing Disaster Management

The Second Finance Commission (1955-60), initiated the setting up of a “Margin Fund” to finance State-level machineries to meet expenses necessitated by natural
calamities. Twelve finance commissions later, the present arrangement comprises the NDRF and a set of State Disaster Response Funds (SDRF) which have replaced the Margin Fund.

The NDRF was constituted under Section 46 of the Disaster Management Act in the Public Account of India. Through the years, the budget allocation to the NDRF (which is financed through a “National Calamity Contingent Duty” levied on certain items) has seen ups and downs ranging from as low as Rs.2,500 crore in 2018-19 to Rs.6,450 crore in 2016-17. Each SDRF is financed by the Centre and States in a 75:25 ratio and 90:10 ratio for special category States. The balance in the SDRF is non-lapsable and is to be invested in readily marketable government securities so that it may be available when needed, without the State having to curtail other expenditures or approach the Centre for assistance.

In the event of a disaster, the first round of assistance flows from the SDRF and in cases of “calamity of severe nature”, the Union Government supplements the effort of the State government by providing aid and assistance from the NDRF. Section 46(2) of the Act, in accordance with the operational guidelines of NDRF (4.1), stipulates that funds shall be advanced for emergency response, relief and rehabilitation once the balance in the concerned SDFR runs out. Further, the operational guidelines explicitly state that repair and restoration activities (as opposed to relief and rehabilitation) after a calamity should be funded from the State Plan and not from the response funds (SDRF or NDRF).

The blatant violation of these guidelines in pursuit of political appeasement was brought to light in the CAG’s report in 2013. Nearly Rs.3,000 crore was spent on inadmissible items for repairs and restoration between 2010 and 2012. A quick look at the distribution of NDRF funds in the past five years (a total sum of Rs.29,404 crore) indicate that these funds were used more as a political tool than for disaster relief. It is a matter of grave concern that even though the NDRF was to be placed at the disposal of the NEC to be used for emergency response, it was noted by the Task Force of the Government of India that the NDRF was not made available to NEC but was operated by the MHA in contravention of the Act.

**Misappropriation**

There have been serious misappropriations from the SDRF in the past, including a Rs.237-crore scam in Gujarat during 2007-12. The CAG’s Report No.5 (2013) made a strong objection to this expense, observing that the “Expenditure [was] incurred in State even when there was no disaster in the State.” The total misappropriation from SDRF during this period amounted to Rs.386 crore. It is for these reasons that there are strict restrictions now on spending from the SDRF, with a cap of 10 per cent of available funds in one go.

To further complicate matters, these funds have concurrent jurisdiction. For instance, there is no clear demarcation of Central assistance, State funds and those from international sources in the context of the objectives of these allocations. There is no provision in the Act that specifies conditions or situations to assign jurisdiction or priority to funds. It is this lack of clarity that caused discontent in Kerala where the quantum of funds from various sources became a matter of discussion among the general public.

In effect, India has neither a functional institutional framework nor a working mechanism to undertake rehabilitation and reconstruction after a disaster. The Act mandates the establishment of a National Disaster Mitigation Fund, which has not happened decades after its enactment. Notwithstanding the situation, India has received international aid for disaster mitigation over the years.

Many States affected by disasters have sought loans from international development agencies such as the World Bank for the purpose of rehabilitation and reconstruction. This has been the case in Uttarakhand ($250 million), Jammu and Kashmir ($250 million), Andhra Pradesh ($250 million), Odisha ($218.60 million) and for tsunami relief ($680 million). There is much irony in the proposition that it would be a national shame to seek foreign aid, but that national prestige would somehow be burnished by borrowing on commercial terms.

It is tempting to downplay the debate around the floods to a State vs Centre standoff, but at the heart of the tussle is the grave ambiguity in the laws, the nomenclatures used and the serious asymmetry in the powers of the two sides. There is an urgent need to move towards a regime that exists on a unified, codified and systematic approach to disaster management in which the duties of the Centre and the States are defined clearly. Until then, confusion will continue to reign, even at a time of a grave humanitarian crisis.

This article is the joint work of Neenu Suresh, Noel Benno Joseph, Linitha Mathew, Nissy Solomon and Srilakshmi Nambiar at the National Law School India University, Bengaluru. It is part of the team’s ongoing research on disaster management laws and policies.
IMAGINE THIS: YOU LEAVE YOUR HOME for what you think is a matter of hours, and when you try to return you are unsure how to get there because the roads you always take no longer exist. They have been washed away in the rain, flooded or just covered in tonnes of muddy sludge. Worse, you cannot be sure your house will still be there when you get back. For, your home might just have been reduced to rubble as swathes of a hill or even in many cases the entire hill just slid down and became a valley, destroying everything in its path. That is the nightmare for hundreds of people now left homeless as Kodagu, Karnataka’s most scenic district, tries to cope with the mayhem that hit it in the middle of August. In many areas, the incessant rain caused landslides which in turn forced streams and rivulets to change course, causing immense damage to the hilly landscape, flattening and wiping villages off the face of the land. At the “Stay Coorg” homestay, which is perched precariously on the hillside overlooking the Madikeri-Mangaluru National Highway 275, a boulder rolled down the hill and shot right out through the living room.

The statistics, though they hardly give an idea of what really transpired, are chilling. Preliminary estimates indicate that 34 out of Kodagu’s 104 gram panchayats have been severely affected—that is over 200 villages and a population of around 200,000 (out of Kodagu’s population of 590,000). Sixteen people have lost their lives and 39 are listed as missing. More than 1,200 houses have collapsed; 6,990 people have been moved to 51 relief camps across the district; and 4,450 people have been rescued. Acres of young and mature coffee plants have been washed away; paddy fields have turned into muddy swamps; bridges and roads, including key national highways, have vanished, leaving behind gaping voids. With agricultural activities at a standstill, coffee yields have reduced drastically. Tourists have been banned in the district until August 30.

Officials connected with the rescue and relief efforts estimate that 98 per cent of the Kodagu population has been directly or indirectly affected by the rains. Kodagu district received its highest-ever rainfall for August, breaking an 87-year-old record. Hitherto the highest saturation for August was in 1931 when the district received 1,559 millimetre (mm) of rainfall. During the first three weeks of August this year, Kodagu received 1,675 mm of rainfall. Data gathered from the India Meteorological Department (IMD), Bengaluru, show that 45 per cent (or 768 mm) of the rain in August fell on just three consecutive days—August 15 (206 mm), August 16 (262 mm) and August 17 (300 mm). With the IMD classifying any rainfall in excess of 200 mm as “extremely heavy rainfall”, those three days were enough to cripple and change the face of the district forever. The worst-affected villages are in the Somwarpet and Madikeri taluks—Tantipala, Mukkodlu, Hatti, Meganthala, Muvathoklu, Yemmethala (all situated in the backwaters of the Harangi dam), Aivathoklu, Haleri, Suralabbi, Hebbattageri, Hammiyala, Kaloor, Monnangeri and Jodupala. Homes and roads located in the district capital, Madikeri, have also suffered extensive damage.

If the death toll is relatively low, it is because most people heeded the district administration’s warnings and the urgings of neighbours to move to safer places even as the rain got worse and, in the words of one survivor, the earth “started to move under her feet”. Around 11 on the night of August 16, Vani, 66, awoke to rumblings and blasts that sounded like they were coming from almost beneath her bungalow. Living alone on her 10-acre robusta coffee estate in Kandenakoli village, 14 km from Madikeri, after the demise of her husband a few months ago, she was reluctant to leave her homestead. Still, she left, along with a couple of plantation workers, and they trekked arduously for over seven hours through shrub and forest before landing at a government relief centre. Her entire estate is today covered in brown sludge, and the 40-year-old coffee plants are just a memory. Her home is razed to the ground, and rosewood trees on the estate, some with girths of five to six feet, lie uprooted. Accessibility is nil even a week after the deluge.
For Savita, who is expecting her second child in December, the night she escaped the floods was a nightmare she will never forget. Hailing from Haleri, she worked as a plantation worker. There was no power for over 10 days in the village, and with mobile networks down she was unaware of what was happening. On August 15, a few local boys told her that the Harangi dam and many tanks had filled up and a couple of houses had collapsed, so it would be better to move. They carried her in a chaape (cot), and with the only bridge leading out of the village having already collapsed, they had to wade through waist-deep water. After a long trek they stopped for the night at a school in Kandenakoli on August 16. But the school was unsafe as it was located at the foot of a hill. So they set off again and ascended the hill, waving flags in the hope that choppers would notice them. Savita had no choice but to walk with the others in torrential rain through the night. They reached a road the next morning, but it was blocked and they had to find an alternative route through the forests. Finally, they accessed a road and reached the Suntikoppa relief centre.

**LOST LIVELIHOODS**

Harini, a gram panchayat member from Kathakal, where over 50 houses were flattened by a hill that came sliding down, said: “The facilities at the relief centre are okay. We are being given decent food and other amenities. But what about our livelihoods? Most people at the relief centre work in the plantations, earning Rs.300 a day, and also have some livestock. They have taken loans and built houses. Now with no work, how will we pay our loans? And the houses we bought with loan money have been destroyed.”

Unofficial surveys indicated that around 200 families...
whose major source of income was from coffee cultivation lost a portion of or their entire estates. Pavan Nanjappa, owner of Venkids Valley Estate, was unable to access his bungalow and estate even a week after the disaster. “I’ve lost around eight acres [one acre = 0.4 hectare; an acre has roughly 500 to 600 coffee plants] of my estate. But I’m now worried about the bungalow, which is located 160 feet above the area that was devastated. I need to really think hard whether to replant coffee or go in for jungle trees and pepper. Coffee takes a long time, seven to eight years before you can get an optimum crop. Right now the area that I have lost is just mud, there’s no grass.”

Pramod Kurien lost 30 acres of his 75-acre fully planted robusta coffee estate at Kallur. Along with the coffee plants, three labour lines and a small staff quarters perished. Planters like Kurien are keenly looking at what the government will offer by way of compensation. He said: “The land value is gone. The top soil is gone. Hills have become valleys... will they facilitate the growth of coffee? We do not know if we can cultivate coffee in the land that has been turned into silt. The best thing will be for the government to compensate us financially. Providing planting material may not be the best solution.”

**ESTIMATED LOSSES**

A week after the August 17 deluge, the Karnataka government’s District in-Charge Secretary, V. Anbu Kumar, told *Frontline* that Kodagu had suffered an estimated loss of Rs.1,146 crore. He was quick to add that the figure could go up as 1,019 personnel from the Army, the Navy and the Air Force, and National and State Disaster Response Force and the civil administration waded sludge and debris to reach villages cut off by landslides. “Landslides have caused the most damage. It is too early to say whether this is due to the extremely heavy rainfall or if it is a man-made disaster. We are still assessing the situation. Our initial assessment shows that the affected people are of the following categories: people who have lost their houses completely, those whose houses have been damaged partially, those whose houses are intact but who are afraid to go back for fear of landslides, plantation workers who have lost their livelihood, and planters.”

He said identifying land to be given to people who had lost homes would be a gigantic task and added that people would be rehabilitated in the gram panchayat areas they belonged to. “Shifting them out will cause further distress since they will be far away from their kith and kin. It is not administrative convenience but the displaced person’s wishes that will be taken into account when we allot land. We will accommodate the displaced where they want to be accommodated. Every family that registered at the 51 relief centres has already been paid the prescribed Rs.3,800 relief amount for sustenance.”

The people who have taken refuge at the relief centres are satisfied with the arrangements there, but they are worried about the long-term ramifications of the disaster on their livelihoods. Many estates, including small holdings, have been completely wiped out. Migrant labourers from distant States such as Assam are faced with the added problem of not only looking for work but also being targeted by local people for stealing their jobs.

Haphazard and illegal constructions that flouted environmental norms have caused buildings to literally drop off hillsides. But environmentalists like Captain (retd) Raja Rao pin the reason for the calamity on the excess precipitation. “The rainfall was extremely heavy and beyond expectations, and since it was continuously so for a number of days the exposed surface was not able to absorb the rainfall and be ready for the next downpour. But new settlements have also dug up the natural slopes, preventing the earth from retaining its natural position. Unfortunately, the advice given by environmentalists is not taken cognisance of, rather it is just neglected by governments. Short-term political gains override everything else,” he said.

He agreed that poor water management could have aggravated the situation, but he did not accept the suggestion that the Harangi dam caused flooding. “Harangi is a small reservoir holding hardly seven thousand million cubic feet [tmc ft] of water,” he explained. “But, yes, the first priority of irrigation engineers manning dams of all the States is to start storing water the moment the monsoon rains commence. Karnataka started to store water in June itself, so by July the dams were full. Harangi is no exception. Subsequently, when the heavy rain of August came, the reservoirs were not able to hold any more water and the water had to be released. With saturation also being very high, there was flooding.”

I.K. Anil, a coffee planter who is also the executive editor of the local tabloid *CoffeeLand News*, strongly disagreed. “A number of villages like Tantipala, Mukkodlu, Megathala and Yemmethala, which are situated near the backwaters of the Harangi dam, have suffered extensive damage. The blocking of the natural flow of water and springs has caused flooding. Also, water from Harangi dam was not released at the right time.”

Raja Rao said the IMD should be questioned on the accuracy of its forecasts. “In 2017, the IMD had said it would be a normal rainfall year, but in reality the rainfall was below normal in areas like Wayanad [in Kerala] from where Karnataka’s Kabini reservoir gets most of its water and that, too, only during the south-west monsoon. Kabini is very important since it is from here that Karnataka seeks to meet most [around 18 to 19 tmc ft] of its water-sharing obligations to Tamil Nadu as part of the vexed Cauvery water-sharing accord. If the reservoir is not filled up, Karnataka is forced to release water from its other reservoirs in the Cauvery basin like Harangi, Hemavathy or even Krishnarajasagar. Therefore, the storage at Kabini is crucial. But being relatively small—15 tmc ft—it gets filled up with hardly two to three days of good rainfall. So the IMD has to come up with a more accurate rainfall prediction pattern. Just saying the monsoon in south-west interior Karnataka is normal is not enough. This year, the IMD had predicted a normal monsoon. In actuality, it has been in excess.”
Beyond the mask

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1924-2018), who was often described as brilliantly multifaceted, was never really free of the sectarian agenda of the Sangh Parivar in spite of his being projected as a moderate. By Venkitesh Ramakrishnan

‘BRILLIANTLY multifaceted’ was the adjective repeatedly used to describe former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee during his long political career. There were several reasons for this description—Vajpayee’s extraordinary proficiency in political oratory, effective parliamentary practice, skillful maneuvering of political negotiations with an ability to strike personal equations with leaders beyond party lines, efficient handling of administrative and governance mechanisms, natural interest in international affairs and deftness in deploying diplomatic gambits, and so on. And all this was complemented by the celebration of Vajpayee’s intermittent excursions into Hindi literature and poetry along with the wry humour that he selectively displayed in public fora.

However, as Vajpayee himself reiterated often, the evolution and flowering of all these traits were subservient to his identity as a pracharak of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh-led (RSS) Sangh Parivar. To paraphrase K.N. Govindacharya, one-time close associate of Vajpayee and acclaimed ideologue of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), all other personality traits that this veteran parliamentarian of five and a half decades standing had were a sort of “mukhota” (mask).

Govindacharya’s description fits well with the way the Sangh Parivar claims to have moulded the roles and personalities of the leadership of its
political arm through different generations. The roles of leaders, ranging from Deendayal Upadhyaya to Syama Prasad Mookerji, from Balraj Madhok to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and from Lal Krishna Advani to Narendra Modi, have been crafted and built up keeping in mind the exigencies of the times as well as individual strengths and weaknesses of the leaders themselves.

It is also believed that almost all the leaders have lived up to the roles assigned by the larger Sangh Parivar. Some of these leaders have been projected as champions of various existing or concocted ideologies and political positions from time to time. Thus, Deendayal Upadhyaya was projected as the propounder of integral humanism, Vajpayee as the advocate of Gandhian socialism and Advani as the propagator for Hindutva and Hind Swaraj.

**IMAGE-BUILDING EXERCISE**

The stamp of this planning by the larger Sangh Parivar and Vajpayee’s adherence to it was starkly evident in his political life. One of the roles visualised for Vajpayee becomes clear if one looks at expositions on political alliances advanced by Acharya Giriraj Kishore, a senior leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the self-professed ideological sword-arm of the Sangh Parivar, and prominent player in the Ram Janabhoomi agitation in Ayodhya.

In the early 1990s, he specifically referred to the role designed for Vajpayee in the scheme of things to build united fronts. Giriraj Kishore used to draw parallels between the “united front” strategy adopted by the Communist International in the 1930s as expounded by Georgi Dimitrov and the strategy that the Sangh Parivar was pursuing in India. His contention was that the Sangh Parivar manoeuvres were the Hindutva version of Dimitrov’s ideas.

“Dimitrov’s plan was to join hands with parties protecting so-called bourgeois interests and ultimately bring them under communist, working-class interests. Our plan would be to join with neutral and secular parties and move them finally to the Hindutva fold,” Giriraj Kishore used to tell VHP activists. He also told these gatherings at VHP chintan shivirs (discussion summits) that Vajpayee was to be a key player in forging these alliances. (This correspondent had an opportunity to listen to one of Giriraj Kishore’s presentations in Amritsar in the early 1990s. Sangh Parivar activists later revealed that this theme was repeated in a series of lectures he gave in the 1991-92 period.)

The series was timed to coincide with the unique juxtaposition of the personalities of Vajpayee and Advani respectively as a moderate face of the BJP and an aggressive pursuer of Hindutva. This happened even as Advani was getting ready to become the protagonist of the Ram Janamboomi agitation.

Thus, Vajpayee was presented as a moderate who had made way, after leading the BJP for the first six years (1980-86) after its formation, to a more vociferously Hindutva-oriented Advani.

In his Amritsar presentation, Giriraj Kishore specifically referred to the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) led by Parkash Singh Badal as a potential ally though the party had decided to boycott the Assembly elections scheduled to be held in February 1992. His argument was that opposition to the Congress would ultimately lead the SAD to the BJP fold and that Vajpayee’s “moderate political persona” would help in making this a reality.

**BABRI MASJID**

However, the mask was off on the evening of December 5, 1992, when Vajpayee was directed to return from Lucknow a day prior to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Senior leaders L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, were in Ayodhya to oversee the demolition on December 6 while Vajpayee skipped the event.

On the previous day, Vajpayee asserted his allegiance to the Sangh Parivar’s plan with an extremely volatile speech in front of kar sevaks in Lucknow. The speech, in typical Vajpayee style, had elements of the figurative and the allegorical. He referred to a Supreme Court order of November 1992 prohibiting construction on the 2.77 acres [of the disputed site], but interpreted it in such a way as to give the impression that the Supreme Court had not prohibited kar seva but had only directed “not to start construction till the final verdict of the Lucknow bench of [the Allahabad] High Court is delivered”.

He also gave a new twist to the permission given by the Supreme Court to sing bhajans and kirtans at the disputed site. His rhetoric went thus: bhajans are not done by a single individual but collectively; they could not be done by being on one’s feet. There are sharp-edged boulders at the site of the congregation for kar seva in Ayodhya and that the ground would have to be levelled and made fit for sitting. The mention of “sharp-edged boulders” and the exhortation to “level the ground” were greeted with the kar sevaks’ prolonged applause and cries of “Jai Shri Ram”. This was followed by the statement that “the kar sevaks will also be doing yagya, so there will be some construction also, at least a vedi [an altar for performing rituals] will be constructed”. He went on to say: “I don’t think that the Supreme Court has prohibited any of these. If bhajan, puja, kirtan and yagya take place, then those who are performing these may also think in terms of putting up a shamaiana.”

Vajpayee concluded the speech by stating that he did not know how all these activities would be carried out in Ayodhya but added that he was sure that everything will be decided by the kar sevaks.

On hindsight, the demolition of the Babri Masjid as well as the erection of the temporary structure for the Ram Mandir on December 6, 1992, happened almost exactly as depicted by Vajpayee a day earlier. It was clear that the demolition was a planned act by the Sangh Parivar and that Vajpayee was in the know of it. Vajpayee displayed his allegiance to the Sangh Parivar’s programme at other junctures of his career too.
Addressing the BJP national executive in Goa in April 2002, when he was the Prime Minister, Vajpayee made an extremely sectarian speech: “Wherever Muslims live, they don’t like to live in co-existence with others, they don’t like to mingle with others; and instead of propagating their ideas in a peaceful manner, they want to spread their faith by resorting to terror and threats. The world has become alert to this danger.”

GUJARAT GENOCIDE
This was barely two months after he had seemingly criticised the then Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, for his role in the 2002 February anti-Muslim genocide in the State. Visiting the State as Prime Minister in the wake of the mass murder, he had told a press conference that his advice to the Chief Minister was to follow raj dharma (ruler’s duty) without discriminating between people on the basis birth, religion or caste. This was celebrated by sections of the political class, media and observers as yet another sign of Vajpayee’s commitment to secularism, while sections of the Sangh Parivar questioned his “putting down” Narendra Modi.

The April 2002 speech in Goa was a shocker to those who were trying to discover secular commitment in Vajpayee. It exposed the majoritarian tilt of the then Prime Minister’s world view. Sectarianism was evident in Vajpayee’s speeches even in his early stints in Parliament, but was probably masked by his oratorical skills, which had been noticed, apparently even by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Even after he grew in prominence as the External Affairs Minister in the government of the Morarji Desai-led Janata Party alliance, which came to power in 1977, this sectarian streak appeared now and then. Jana Sangh was the political arm of the Sangh Parivar before 1977. It merged with the Janata Party in the run-up to the 1977 elections citing the need for all democratic forces to unite against the Indira Gandhi-led Congress that imposed the Emergency in 1975.

Soon the Janata Party was rocked by the “dual membership” issue; that is, the association of Jana Sangh members with the RSS even after the formation of the Janata Party. This led to the resignation of Vajpayee, Advani and other Ministers from the Janata government. Vajpayee and Advani made it clear that they would rather remain members of the RSS than ending their association just for the sake of holding on to power. Thus was born the BJP in 1980, with Vajpayee as President.

A look at Vajpayee’s overall political track record underscores the fact that he was never free of the sectarian and divisive agenda of the Sangh Parivar. However, he and some of his associates in the BJP and the Sangh Parivar were able to persist with their image of being inherently secular, which came in handy for the National Democratic Alliance, by winning over regional parties and smaller national outfits as allies.

While his first two stints as Prime Minister in 1996 and 1998 lasted 13 days and 13 months respectively, his return to power in 1999 lasted until 2004.

The third NDA government had 15 active partners and the outside support of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). The formation of this government and the completion of its full term is considered by several political observers as Vajpayee’s greatest contribution to the BJP, especially because the saffron party was anathema to almost all political forces in the country.

STINT HIGHLIGHTS
Vajpayee worked through most of this last stint to buttress his image as a leader committed to the principles of democracy. He maintained good relations with his alliance partners and gave a free hand to large sections of the bureaucracy. At the policy level, an assessment of his three stints as Prime Minister brings out its four distinct aspects.

The first was the greater momentum added to the privatisation and liberalisation of the economy. Even as big business hailed this as revolutionary, farmers, agricultural workers, the industrial working classes and unorganised labour resisted it.

The second was foreign policy overtures to improve relations with Pakistan though his earlier stint saw some moments of confrontation with the neighbour. During his first tenure, India conducted the Pokhran-II nuclear tests in May 1998. Pakistan promptly responded with its own nuclear tests, thus bringing about nuclear parity between the two neighbours. In ef-
fect, this wiped out whatever perceived strategic advantage that the Pokhran tests were to bestow on India.

More significantly, in a “political follow-up letter” sent to the then United States President, Bill Clinton, on May 11, 1998, after the Pokhran tests, Vajpayee referred to China as the primary concern behind India embarking on the nuclear weapon tests path. The letter depicted China as “an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962” and stated that Vajpayee had been “deeply concerned at the deteriorating security environment, especially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past.”

He added: “Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem. To add to the distrust, that country has materially helped another neighbour of ours to become a covert nuclear weapons state. At the hands of this bitter neighbour we have suffered three aggressions in the last 50 years. And for the last 10 years we have been the victims of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by it in several parts of the country, specially Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir.”

This letter generated yet another controversy, but some of his spin doctors sought to play it down by spreading the story that the letter was the handiwork of the Prime Minister’s adviser, Brajesh Mishra, and that Vajpayee had not even read the letter.

Despite all these confusions and controversies, Vajpayee sought to improve diplomatic relations with Pakistan and travelled to Lahore by bus to meet with the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. But that effort did not make much headway and the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan broke out during Vajpayee’s regime. Still, Vajpayee is credited with a positive attitude that sought to look beyond reverses.

Thirdly, engagements with the trouble-torn Jammu and Kashmir were advanced on the basis of the slogan, “Kashmiriyat, Insaniyat, Jamhooriyat” (Kashmir’s inclusive culture, humanitarianism and democracy), which is perceived by many regional players in the State as a viable policy parameter, if followed steadfastly and with sincerity.

The fourth highlight of his tenure was infrastructural initiatives, especially in terms of road infrastructure, although they were marked by conspicuous oversight of core developmental imbalances. This track record was deemed “promising” and “statesmanlike” by a number of political observers.

By all indications, the confidence gained from the positive responses to these moves prompted the Vajpayee regime and its campaign manager, Pramod Mahajan, to embark on the “India Shining” campaign for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections.

**POLICY THRUSTS**

During the preparations for the election, some Sangh Parivar organisations such as the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the Sanskar Bharati, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and the Bajrang Dal, and so on, raised objections to his initiatives such as the establishment of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Bill, the ban on the sale of non-iodised common salt and the decision to allow 100 per cent foreign investment in the cigarette manufacturing industry.

However, they withdrew their objections at crucial junctures and let the government have a free rein.

In the final analysis, it was the cumulative impact of the economic hardships that these policy thrusts imposed on the common people that led to the “surprise” defeat of the Vajpayee-led NDA in the 2004 election. Vajpayee was not able to continue in active politics for long after his ouster from power.

By the next general election he had been replaced by Advani as the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate. There were efforts at that time to adorn Advani too with moderate colours and make him acceptable. But that often did not make much headway among the electorate or with smaller parties, unlike in the case of Vajpayee.

There is little doubt that on this count Vajpayee would be rated as a superior leader—one who managed to win the confidence of smaller, regional parties and their support base despite the divisive agenda of the Sangh Parivar.
Looking back at Atal Bihari Vajpayee, it is hard not to be charmed by his simple, unassuming style, and his capacity to glide effortlessly from high-flown politics to everyday kindness. But there was also a more restless, complex man, who, in the years after he left the political scene, left his mark on Indian life in more ways than one.

In the years leading up to his death, Vajpayee was forced to confront a new reality. He was no longer the powerful leader who could shape the course of Indian politics. Instead, he became a man of the people, a symbol of a bygone era. His death was a loss for India, but also for the world. He was a man who had lived a full life, and his legacy will be remembered for years to come.

A.B. Vajpayee was a lovable leader, but his secular credentials have been called into question many times. **By PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI**

WARM, generous, liberal, lenient, humorous, witty. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, or Atalji, as he was fondly called by one and all, was all this plus much more as a person. His genial personality also had a not-so-pleasant side that manifested itself in flashes of intolerance to criticism and in his ability to be party to the planning and execution of sinister designs, even as his cherubic smile gave nothing away.

There was, however, no doubt that mostly Vajpayee was like the soothing family patriarch who grappled with contentious issues without getting hassled or irritated. He was a much-revered leader even before he became Prime Minister. But despite his national stature, Vajpayee came across as a warm human being who was aware of his frailties as a man, transparent about his personal life but averse to giving any explanations, capable of being extremely angry and not afraid to show it in public, and fond of good food, especially jalebis, rabri and chaat.

This writer’s first encounter with Vajpayee was in Lucknow on February 21, 1998. Those were the days of extreme political drama in Uttar Pradesh. Like seasonal flowers, governments in Lucknow would fall and new ones would bloom out of nowhere. In this particular instance, the then Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, headed by Kalyan Singh had been reduced to a minority after a breakaway faction of the Congress, called the Loktantrik Congress, led by Jagdambika Pal and then Naresh Agrawal (both are in the BJP now), suddenly withdrew sup-

**Prime Minister** Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of Indraprastha College in New Delhi on January 16, 1999.
A couplet for every occasion

WAS Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s poetry read because he was the Prime Minister or did the fact that he could express himself through poems, so unlike most of his political friends and rivals, help him become the Prime Minister? Well, the hard yards of politics are impervious to the mood and metre of poetry. As for the former, the jury is out. There are the old faithful who believe that Vajpayee did not do justice to the poet in him, that politics took a toll on his poetry. They believe that the poet who gave us Meri Ikyawan Kavitayein (My 51 Poems) and Na Dainyam Na Palaynam (Neither Self Pity Nor Escape) was a man who had a wide range of poetry at his command. He could use the pen as a brush to paint with words. He could use it as a scalpel to heal wounds, too. He could use it as a weapon to settle scores as well. He could write with equal felicity about the dangers of war and Hindu mythological elements. They point to his works like Hum Jung Na Home Denge and Hindu Tan-man, Hindu jeevan. Each poem merited a rewind or as they say in mushairas, mukarrar (encore).

So what prevented him from being more prolific? Politics, and its unending power struggle, a world where only the names of the characters changed, the demands remained the same. Vajpayee himself once confessed, “Politics arrested the flow of my poetic propensity. Poetry and politics do not go together.”

SPEECHES LACED WITH PAUSES
Yet together they did go, enabling Vajpayee to rise many notches above the average political speaker. His speeches were laced with pauses, and poetry. For those who covered Parliament, and those who attended his impromptu gatherings in the evening, no mehfil was complete without a Vajpayee couplet or two. Like a skilful practitioner, more often than not, he had a couplet ready for the occasion. The gentle glow of the setting sun and the more amen- able pace of life after the humdrum of political existence during the day brought the poet to the fore.

Vajpayee’s poetry had much of what was lacking in his politics. There was space for Urdu, there was a niche for humanism, the inevitability of death, and the futility of life. There was space for hope, just as there was space for confessions of failure. There was sensitivity, and an ability to observe keenly. The politician’s wily brain went into sleep mode even as the poet’s heart throbbed. Not all of his poetry made it to print, but those who heard him up close and personal can vouch for his literary genius, a genius Vajpayee claimed he inherited from his father, who was a poet in Gwalior.

All this was in contrast to his politics, where he preached raj dharma but refrained from pulling up those who failed to practise it. Yet there were occasions when they met beautifully. For proof, one only has to read his Zindagi ka Dastavez published in Dharmyug, a Hindi magazine, in 1988 even as Vajpayee battled serious illness. It was a rare moment when the poet allowed the politician to express himself on his terms. Otherwise, the poet was a prisoner of politics.

So, how was he as a literary figure? Difficult to judge with accuracy, considering the work available for public perusal. Yet, in the limited oeuvre available, Vajpayee proved himself as an enthusiastic poet, one who often wielded the pen to silence his detractors. The pen had much flow. It was like a river in
slightly away from the others, and when Vajpayee came near walked towards him and joined him in his walk towards the entrance of the building. He looked at me, smiled and started talking. A member of the SPG lunged forward in a bid to stop me, brushing my shoulder in the process. Immediately Vajpayee stretched out his arm, blocking the SPG personnel, and continued talking to me while walking towards the entrance of the lobby. At the door, he asked me to wait, saying he would discuss the matter with party leaders first and then talk to the media at length. I did not even think twice about what had happened, used as journalists are to such rough situations while covering events. To my surprise, after about five minutes, the SPG member who had tried to stop me came over and apologised to me. Later that day I was told by some senior BJP leaders who were with Vajpayee that he had expressed displeasure at the manner in which the SPG member had acted and asked him to apologise. I was impressed by his gentlemanly gesture. Vajpayee visited Lucknow often. Senior BJP leader and the newly appointed Governor of Bihar, Lalji Tandon, who is from Lucknow, hosted chaat parties whenever Atalji was in town. I had a few occasions to attend such chaat parties with Atalji as the chief guest and was always delighted to see him relish his jalebis, rabris and papdi chaat with abandon. He shunned journalistic queries on such occasions and advised us to first savour the delicacies.

Vajpayee's love for Indian delicacies often took him to Chandni Chowk in Delhi, Aminabad and Chowk in Lucknow and Khau Gali in Indore, food lover's paradise, all. Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan, who hails from Indore, once regaled me with stories of how Atalji took him to Chandni Chowk in New Delhi and Khau Gali in Indore, which he recited at a musical evening in New Delhi. The Prime Minister did not forget the good gesture. When Vajpayee went to Pakistan in 1999 as part of a peace-making exercise, he presented an album of Jafri’s anti-war poems to the Pakistan Prime Minister.

Shah Rukh Khan starred in the music video of Kyaa Khojya Kyaa Paya, where the peerless Jagjit Singh gave his voice to Vajpayee's kalaam. The music video notched up many hits online a few years after its release. Did the fans come to listen to the mellifluous voice of Jagjit Singh? Quite likely. Did they want to see Shah Rukh for free? More than likely. Did they come to listen to Vajpayee’s poetry? Debatable. Yes, the jury is still out on Vajpayee’s poetry.

However, the very fact that after the passing away of an ace politician, a former Prime Minister, probably the tallest non-Congress Prime Minister, the nation is discussing his poetry says it all about the efficacy of his written word. Not everybody may cherish it, but Vajpayee’s poetry has outlasted him. It won’t be a surprise if it lends itself to more Indian languages, more translations. After all, Vajpayee was translated in Bulgarian, too.

The fact that he was uninhibited, whether in his eating preferences or his life choices, was obvious to the world. The transparency he displayed in his personal life should be a lesson to the politicians of today. The world knew Atalji as a bachelor des-
pate his open relationship with his companion. He never explained to anyone the nature of this companionship, but he never kept it a secret either.

On one occasion, he was to address a meeting in Lucknow which was attended by the city’s intelligentsia, business leaders, bureaucrats, political leaders and the rest of its who’s who. He had not yet become the Prime Minister. When it was time to invite him on stage, the host announced in chaste Hindi: “Bhaiyon aur behano, ab apke samne aa rahe hai, kavi, wakta, sabke priya neta, chir brahmachari Atal Bihari Vajpayeeji.” (Brothers and sisters, now comes on stage the famous poet, fiery orator, a beloved leader, the forever celibate bachelor Atal Bihari Vajpayee.) Atalji came on stage, took the mike, looked at the assembled crowd with amusement, smiled the best of his cherubic smiles, his eyes twinkling, and after his characteristic long pause said: “Devijon aur sajjan, isse pehle ki main kuch aur kahun main bata dun ki main kunwarar zaroor hun par brahmachari nahi.” (Ladies and gentlemen, before I say anything let me tell you I may be unmarried but am not celibate.) It took a few moments for this to register with the crowd, and then the hall dissolved in laughter. Lucknow will forever cherish this hearty laughter in which Atalji was an enthusiastic participant.

On another occasion, it was disarming to see that this very public man could also become nervous when surrounded by women. This was when he invited women journalists in Delhi for tea with him on International Women’s Day at his official residence after he became Prime Minister. Hundreds of women journalists turned up at 7, Race Course Road. Women were all lining up to get their picture clicked with him. I teasingly told him that he must be enjoying the company of so many enlightened women. Atalji, in his typical style, rolled his eyes, raised his hands and said “Arrey nahi, mujhe to bahut ghabrhat ho rahi hai.” (Oh no, I am getting nervous.) Sushma Swaraj, who was seated next to him, was reeling with laughter.

Benign and humorous in his personality, Atalji also possessed a warmth of heart that was evident after the attack on Parliament House on December 13, 2001. Speaking in Parliament on December 19, Vajpayee thanked his political opponent Sonia Gandhi, who, he said, was the first to inquire about his well being after she came to know of the attack. The attack happened after question hour and before zero hour had begun. Sonia Gandhi had gone out after question hour, but she thought the Prime Minister was still inside the complex when the attack took place. Vajpayee said that he was touched by Sonia Gandhi’s gesture and that he was convinced democracy would always thrive in India where political leaders rose above party lines to worry about the well-being of adversaries.

The same speech also carried a glimpse of the tough leader he was when he indirectly criticised the United States for categorising terrorism as “good terrorism” or “bad terrorism”. “India is capable of handling the challenge alone, we have successfully combated terror before. Now the other countries have to decide where they want to be seen,” he said.

Although Vajpayee has been described as the quintessential secularist, in contrast to his hard-line friend and colleague L.K. Advani, there were layers to his personality. For example, it is widely believed that Vajpayee never approved of Advani’s rath yatra and was never a party to the destructive game plan of December 6, 1992, in Ayodhya. Yet his speeches only a day before the demolition of the Babri Masjid suggest otherwise. Though he apologised for what happened on December 6, 1992, it did not make him part ways with the BJP.

This side of his personality was evident when he faced a no-confidence motion against his government on August 19, 2003. A no-confidence motion is an essential tool in the hands of the opposition in a functioning democracy. Yet, while replying to the charges levelled by the Leader of the Opposition, Sonia Gandhi, he attacked her with unusually harsh words and rebuked her for bringing the no-confidence motion. Quite uncharacteristically, instead of replying to the charges she had levelled, he ridiculed her choice of words and her lack of proficiency in Hindi and said that she sounded as if she had collected difficult words from the dictionary and then used all of them in one paragraph. He reminded her of maryada in public life, though it was not clear how she had violated any maryada by bringing the motion. He chided her for abusing him and asked her to wait patiently for her turn instead of indulging in “political one-upmanship in order to topple his government”. Sonia Gandhi left him speechless with her reply: “When I speak about people’s problems, he speaks about my foreign origin. When I speak about the country he talks about my language skills. As an opposition it is our moral and democratic duty to bring this motion but he has not replied to any of our charges.”

Vajpayee was a warm and sociable human being, a generous man who could be both strong and vulnerable, a good orator and a lovable leader. But was he actually the truly secular, democratic leader he is made out to be? An enigma he will remain.
People’s Speaker

Somnath Chatterjee (1929-2018) was an unrelenting opponent of anti-democratic forces. BY SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY

FEBRUARY 26, 2009: Somnath Chatterjee leaving Parliament House on the conclusion of the 14th Lok Sabha. It was his last day as Speaker of the Lok Sabha.
SOMNATH Chatterjee was one of India’s greatest parliamentarians. In a political career that spanned four decades, culminating in his appointment as Speaker of the Lok Sabha, he not only elevated the status and dignity of Parliament with his exemplary work and deportment, but also introduced many path-breaking initiatives that enhanced the prestige and at the same time helped popularise the goings on in the House among the masses. A 10-time member of the Lok Sabha, a stalwart of the communist movement in the country, an outstanding barrister, a committed crusader for the cause of the downtrodden, and an unrelenting and fierce opponent of anti-democratic totalitarian forces, Somnath Chatterjee was one of the towering political figures of post-independent India. He was the first, and so far the only, communist to be Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

He was one of those rare leaders whose popularity and appeal transcended party lines. He had the respect and regard of even staunch political opponents, as was evident in the way tributes flowed from all quarters when he passed away. “He was a stalwart of Indian politics. He made our parliamentary democracy richer and was a strong voice for the well-being of the poor and vulnerable,” said Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His old adversary from the Congress, former President Pranab Mukherjee, said: “An outstanding parliamentarian and constitutionalist, he remained committed to the cause of people with a firm belief in pragmatic consensus. In his demise I have lost a personal friend, and the nation has lost a great son.”

West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee, who was the only person to have ever defeated Somnath Chatterjee in an election, said: “This is a great loss for us.” The general secretary of the CPI(M), Sitaram Yechuri, said: “In his death we lost a champion of democracy and democratic rights.”

Born on July 25, 1929, in Tejpur, Assam, to the eminent barrister Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee and Binapani, Somnath was a sickly child suffering from nephritis. He recovered under the treatment of the legendary physician Sir Nilratan Sircar and could start attending school. Like his great leader and mentor, Jyoti Basu, the first school that Somnath Chatterjee attended was an all-girls school, Gokhale Memorial Girls’ School, where his sisters studied. (Jyoti Basu at the age of six was admitted to Loreto Kindergarten at Dharmatala in Kolkata.) At 11, Somnath went to the famous Mitha Institution, a Bengali-medium school where he was taught by legendary figures such as the poet Kabishekhar Kalidas Ray, who taught Bengali, the great mathematician Keshab Chandra Nag, and the Sanskrit scholar Janaki Nath Shastry. After finishing school, he went to Presidency College, where he studied science in the intermediate and economics for his bachelor’s degree. While doing his master’s degree in economics at Calcutta University, he also began to study law, wishing to follow in his father’s footsteps. In 1950, he set out for England to become a barrister from Middle Temple, like his father.

N.C. Chatterjee, apart from being a well-known barrister, was also a high-profile political figure. He was the president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, and in the first general election to the Lok Sabha in 1952, he contested as a Hindu Mahasabha candidate and won. A question that Somnath had to face throughout his life was how come he became such a stalwart of the communist movement, given his father’s political leanings. The fact is that later in his political career N.C. Chatterjee developed close ties with the Left movement and in 1963 and 1967 was elected to the Lok Sabha as an independent candidate with the support of the Left. Somnath Chatterjee later recalled that even before the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), was formed, stalwarts of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI), including Jyoti Basu, Benoy Choudhury and Snehangshu Kanta Acharya, would often visit his father in his house.

In 1953, Somnath completed his studies abroad and returned home for good to his family and his wife, Renu, and his young son, Pratap, who was born in 1951. It was while establishing his practice in the Calcutta High Court that Somnath Chatterjee was introduced to Jyoti Basu by Snehangshu Acharya. Basu would remain a lasting influence in his life. Over the next few years, under the influence of Acharya, he became acquainted with Marxist literature and became a member of the Democratic Lawyers’ Association, the lawyers’ wing of the CPI (M). Though he was taking up cases of trade unions and workers of the Left parties in the Calcutta High Court, he had still not thought of joining active politics or becoming a member of the CPI (M).

Interestingly, it was Jyoti Basu and Benoy Choudhury who persuaded Somnath’s father to allow him to contest the 1971 Lok Sabha elections from Bardhaman with the CPI(M)’s support. The then State secretary of the party, Promode Dasgupta, and Hare Krishna Konar also spoke to N.C. Chatterjee on this matter. With his father’s consent, Somnath Chatterjee fought the election as an independent candidate and won. Thus began one of the most glorious parliamentary careers of India. Two years later, in 1973, he became a member of the CPI (M).

PARLIAMENTARY CAREER

Under the wings of the eminent CPI (M) parliamentarian Jyotirmoy Bosu and Polit Bureau member A.K. Gopalan, Somnath Chatterjee quickly learnt the ropes and established a formidable reputation for himself in the Lok Sabha. His role model was Hiren Mukherjee of the CPI, whom he rated “as the greatest parliamentarian” he had ever come across.

“His commitment to the common people, his understanding of their problems and his command over language were unmatched…. To me he was the true embodiment of what an ideal parliamentarian should be—precise and to the point, with in-depth knowledge of the selected subject, appropriate articula-
tion, extremely respectful to the Chair and ever mindful of the rules and conventions of the House," he later wrote of Hiren Mukherjee. The same attributes could be applied to Somnath Chatterjee himself. If there was anyone who was a true inheritor of Hiren Mukherjee’s legacy, it was Somnath Chatterjee.

His was one of the most fearless and articulate voices to speak out against any form of injustice and any attempt to undermine the freedom of the people and the democratic fabric of the country. In 1980, when the Indira Gandhi government enacted the National Security Act, Somnath said: “It is a matter of everlasting shame that this august House which should be the bastion of personal freedom, civil liberty and democratic rights of the people of this country, is involving itself today in the process of denuding the people of their minimal rights.”

Then again, when the Babri Masjid was destroyed in December 1992, Somnath Chatterjee demanded in Parliament that the mosque be rebuilt exactly at the place where it stood and a complex symbolising national integrity be set up in the area. His logically irrefutable and emotionally heart-rending words after the Gujarat riots in 2002 still resonate in the mind: “The victims are the innocent people of this country. Their crime is that they belong to a particular religion. They are totally defenceless.... If we consider every issue in this country on the basis of religion, what remains of this country?”

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In the 1977 general election, he won from the newly created Jadavpur constituency, which he retained in the seventh Lok Sabha election in 1980 after the fall of the Janata Dal government. However, with the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, a sympathy wave for the Congress across the country resulted in Somnath Chatterjee’s first and only defeat in his parliamentary career. A young and upcoming Congress leader by the name of Mamata Banerjee caused this huge upset. But Somnath Chatterjee was back in Parliament a year later after he won the byelection in the Bolpur constituency in Birbhum district. He was elected to the Lok Sabha from this constituency six more times, consecutively, until the end of his parliamentary career in 2009.

In June 2004, Somnath attained the pinnacle of his political life when he was unanimously elected the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. Not only was he the first communist Speaker of the Lok Sabha, but the first pro tem Speaker to be elected as Speaker.
Soon after assuming office, he had to preside over a particularly tumultuous period in Parliament with almost continuous disruption of proceedings. But he did not allow this to deter him from carrying out his responsibilities.

“The biggest satisfaction I can have is when people will point at the Lok Sabha and say that it is a responsible body that is working at taking this country forward and for solving the enormous problems of the people,” he had said in an interview to Frontline during that period of chaos. It is important to note that to uphold the neutral position of the Speaker, Somnath Chatterjee had completely stopped taking part in party meetings.

“It is not that I have given up my party or my political beliefs. My decision not to attend party meetings was a conscious one, so that people do not get the idea that I am following an active political life rather than discharging my functions as the Speaker in a non-partisan manner,” he told Frontline. However, his only regret was that he had lost regular contact with the masses.

As Speaker, Somnath Chatterjee took a number of path-breaking initiatives not only for a smoother and more orderly functioning of the House but also to “take the institution of Parliament closer to the people”. The Lok Sabha Television Channel (LSTV) was launched in May 2006, and a state-of-the-art Parliament Museum was set up the same year.

He raised the issue of the establishment of an autonomous salaries commission for MPs. In 2008 he instituted the prestigious Annual Parliamentary Lecture in memory of Hiren Mukherjee. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen delivered the inaugural lecture. Somnath Chatterjee also introduced an internship programme in Parliament to “serve as a bridge with the youth”.

As much as he was a parliamentarian’s parliamentarian, Somnath Chatterjee was also a “People’s Speaker”. The 14th Lok Sabha, in which he was Speaker, enacted 258 pieces of legislation, including the Right to Information Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Protection for Women from Domestic Violence Act.

**EXPULSION FROM CPI(M)**

Towards the end of his term as Speaker, in 2008, Somnath Chatterjee was expelled from the CPI(M), the party he served for more than 30 years, when he refused to resign as Speaker following the CPI(M)’s withdrawal of support to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) over the signing of the 123 Agreement (India-U.S. Nuclear deal). However, he did not abandon his ideology and right until the end was ever ready and willing to lend his support to any leftist cause. His absence in the party was felt acutely after the 34-year-old CPI (M)-led Left Front government of West Bengal was ousted from power by the Trinamool Congress in 2011.

During the 2016 Assembly elections, various organisations connected with the Left approached Somnath Chatterjee for his support. “I have attended meetings of different organisations that are in the Left movement, but I do not want to create any problems. I never criticise the party, and as I have said before, if by my expulsion the party becomes stronger, then I will be happy,” he had told Frontline then.

The enormous sadness on being thrown out of the party he so loved remained with him until the end, but he bore no grudge and was always optimistic that the Left would be able to bounce back. “Lately and happily the party has become aware of the real situation. I feel the priority should be to remain with the people urgently and through a younger leadership. Let young leaders come to the front. It is essential that the Left parties recover their position in India,” he had told Frontline. His refusal to obey his party’s line stemmed from his belief in the neutrality of the position of the Speaker.

Somnath Chatterjee was among the first top leaders in West Bengal to stress the importance of industrialisation, and in 1994, when Chief Minister Jyoti Basu announced his industrial policy, Somnath Chatterjee assumed the post of the Chairman of the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (WBIDC) and worked indefatigably towards bringing investments into the State. His stress on inviting industries often elicited criticism from a section of the party which was uncomfortable about his perceived proximity to businessmen.

His pragmatic approach to politics was also in evidence when he fully supported the idea of Jyoti Basu accepting the offer of prime ministership in 1996. “Jyoti Basu and I were not averse to the idea,” he wrote in his autobiography *Keeping the Faith—Memoirs of a Parliamentarian*. “The formation of a government under the leadership of Jyoti Basu in 1996 would have given a new life not only to the CPI(M) but to the entire Left and progressive forces in the country,” he wrote.

Twenty years later, ahead of the Assembly elections of 2016, as the debate raged whether the Pradesh Congress and the CPI(M) should bury their ideological differences and come to an understanding to take on the ruling Trinamool Congress, Somnath Chatterjee put the matter in perspective. “It is not a question of two different ideologies forging an alliance, it is a question of pulling the democratic resources in the State to fight against this present government with its anti-democratic approach,” he had told Frontline.

In Parliament and outside, Somnath Chatterjee was a larger-than-life figure. His towering frame, his baritone voice, his reputation and intellect made him appear intimidating at first sight; but when he smiled, warmth and generosity of his spirit flowed out. He was one of the most approachable leaders of Indian politics.

An avid football fan and a diehard supporter of Mohun Bagan Athletic Club, he was its executive member for a long time and also the president of the West Bengal Table Tennis Association. It is a poignant fact that it was not the red flag of the CPI(M) that draped his body in his last journey, but the green and maroon of his beloved football club.
Pakistan: Who needs a crisis?

Pakistan’s balance of payments crisis provides an arena for a proxy stand-off between the country’s former ally, the United States, and China, for which Pakistan is economically and strategically important.

With Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or “Movement for Justice” winning 116 of the 272 seats filled through election to Pakistan’s National Assembly, the former cricketer has been installed as his country’s Prime Minister. So attention has now shifted to how he will address the “crisis” the country faces. It is not a crisis of growth. Pakistan has registered year-on-year growth rates exceeding 5.4 per cent in three consecutive years ending financial year 2017-18, a record matched in this century only in the globally-synchronised, high-growth years 2003-07. Nor could it be identified as a crisis of extreme inequality or deep poverty, since that is a problem that has afflicted Pakistan ever since its creation and characterises most less-developed countries, including neighbouring India.

The problem lies in Pakistan’s balance of payments or external account. Exports have been sluggish for reasons external and domestic, whereas imports have risen, partly because of a rising oil import bill, and partly because growth rode on a wave of import-intensive spending under the previous regime. The three dominant categories of imports were machinery, petroleum and other chemicals, with petroleum accounting for much of the increase between the year ending June 2016 and the year ending June 2018. As a consequence the trade deficits widened; and with remittances stagnant for a few years now, the current account deficit or the excess of foreign exchange spending relative to current receipts of foreign exchange also increased. It did not help that with a rise in external debt-financed spending, interest payments on foreign borrowing were also on the rise. The trade deficit, which stood at $3.9 billion in the first quarter of 2015, rose to $8.8 billion in the first quarter of 2017 and $10.5 billion in the second quarter of 2018. Simultaneously, the current account deficit rose from $2.8 billion in 2015 to $7.1 billion in 2016 and $15.8 billion in 2017. Relative to the GDP, the current account deficit rose from 1.0 per cent in 2015 to 5.2 per cent in 2017.

As is inevitable, this could be sustained only because of capital inflows, which were substantially in the form of borrowing. Outstanding external debt rose from $62.7 billion at the end of March 2015 to $70.4 billion at the end of March 2016, $77.9 billion at the end of March 2017, and $91.8 billion at the end of March 2018. But that alone was inadequate to finance the rising external deficit, and official liquid reserves had to be run down from $18.1 billion at the end of financial year 2015-16 to $9.8 billion at the end of 2017-18. This has triggered a sharp depreciation of the Pakistani rupee from 105.5 to the dollar in November 2017 to 119.4 to the dollar in June 2018 or by 13 per cent in seven months.
Pakistan did see in the BRI a possibility of turning around its economy with support from China for a string of projects that are part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With reason. Under the CPEC, the Gawadar Port was seen as a “game changer”, and projects like the Karot power station, the Orange Line Train in Lahore, the Karachi Circular Railway and the Karakoram Highway were expected to stimulate growth and boost Pakistan’s exports, which in turn would provide the country the wherewithal to service the debt used to finance them. Given its role in designing the whole of the BRI, China was willing to provide that debt, and Pakistan’s borrowing from China did rise in the years after 2013 when work on the CPEC began. It is estimated that all of the projects initiated would require investment to the tune of $60 billion or more. As of end June 2018, Pakistan’s exposure to Chinese debt is placed at only $19 billion, not all of which is due to projects that are part of the BRI. Yet, already, those unhappy with China’s influence are declaring with glee that the project is unravelling.

The effort now is to use Pakistan’s balance of payments difficulties to stall or even abort the activities planned under the BRI. The West would like that, and so would the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which had represented Western interests in Pakistan for much of that country’s history. This has set off an argument that Pakistan cannot afford the luxury of the projects planned under the CPEC. So the process of resolving the current balance of payments difficulties should include a decision to retreat from projects linked to those initiatives. Reportedly, the IMF would like to help with balance of payments financing to the tune of $10-12 billion, but as United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared during a recent visit to Pakistan that IMF dollars should not be used to service Chinese debt. In his words: “Make no mistake: we will be watching what the IMF does. There’s no rationale for IMF tax dollars—and associated with that, American dollars that are part of the IMF funding—for those to go to bail out Chinese bondholders or China itself.”

Besides the fact that it is not Pompeo’s brief to speak for a multilateral institution like the IMF, the argument itself is absurd. This is like Russia saying that it will not allow Greece, if it is given an IMF standby loan to deal with an external payments problem, to use any of those dollars to repay debt owed to any European country Russia does not get along with and which had over- lent to Greek borrowers to promote its own interests. If it did and the IMF had to listen to one of its top 10 member states, the Greek crisis could not have been addressed (even if not resolved) the way it was.

But coming from a senior official of the Trump administration, Pompeo’s words reek as much of desperation as they do of arrogance. The Trump administration has already dumped Pakistan, its long-term ally in the region, on the grounds that it was soft on terrorism and even abetting it. President Trump has attacked Pakistan for giving the U.S. just “lies and deceit” in return for $33 billion of aid over 15 years and for providing “safe haven” to terrorists. His administration also suspended $255 million in military aid to Pakistan on those grounds. For that
administration to displace the Chinese as Pakistan’s friend would be difficult.

The new Pakistani government, too, will prefer not to turn to the IMF, though there is considerable pressure on it to do so. The reasons are simple. Besides not wanting to give up on the opportunities implicit in the CPEC, investments in which partly explain the good growth record under the previous government, accepting an IMF loan would require accepting conditionalities that spell austerity of a kind that would make it impossible to implement any of the campaign promises made by Imran Khan. The question is, whom can he turn to? The obvious answer is China, for which Pakistan is both economically and strategically important. There is reason to believe that China would respond positively, and senior officials and economists linked to the new administration have said they have been assured of Chinese help.

Banks from China, state-owned and backed, have reportedly lent borrowers from Pakistan $4 billion over the financial year ending June 2018, partly as an emergency measure. It is true that in return for such help China lays down conditions. But so would any lender.

Pakistan chose to take the options on offer as part of the CPEC, and it would have to negotiate terms needed to restructure loans it had taken on for the purpose. Given China’s own interests, they are unlikely to be more onerous than the costs associated with aligning with the U.S. in the past.

**HORROR STORIES**

However, faced with this possibility, horror stories of the consequences of turning to China are being constructed. According to one narrative, going with China would result in Pakistan becoming a near-colonial dependency of the former, with control of assets moving from nationals and the Pakistani state to Chinese interests. That can be avoided by turning to the IMF, it is argued. There is some duplicity here, inasmuch as it portrays the IMF as an “independent”, purely technocratic agency, and China as a political power with hegemonic intent. Pompeo’s statement made clear that this is not the way the U.S. administration perceives the IMF. And experience, too, suggests otherwise.

Historically, the IMF, known for its harsh conditionalities associated with its lending, has been “lenient” with the government of Pakistan, reflecting an attitude different from that it adopts with other borrowers. This is clearly because Pakistan is a country that the IMF wants as borrower to influence its strategic and economic behaviour.

Pakistan received its first Extended Financing Facility loan from the IMF in 1988. Since then, it has been under one IMF programme or the other. It has been “rewarded” with exceptional financing under 12 IMF programmes, as compared with one for India, three for Bangladesh and two for Sri Lanka. Pakistan remained a favoured borrower even though during almost all those IMF programmes policymakers failed to deliver on targets set by the Fund, especially with respect to reducing the fiscal deficit. As a result, 11 out of these 12 programmes were stalled midway. Yet each time, after a short gap, when Pakistan needed more funding to stave off balance of payments difficulties, the IMF returned to negotiate a new facility.

**U.S. HAND?**

Analysts have for long seen a U.S. hand behind this unusual behaviour. A December 2012 working paper from the Asia Research Centre of the London School of Economics authored by two erstwhile IMF hands from Pakistan (Ehtisham Ahmad and Azizali Mohammed, “Pakistan, the United States and the IMF: Great Game or a curious case of Dutch Disease without the oil?”) argues: “A history of Pakistan’s relations with the IMF (and the Bretton Woods Institutions in general) cannot be told without reference to the complex and changing role played by the United States, especially since the mid 1980s when the Reagan administration stepped up responses to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.” Whenever expenditures on strategic grounds were needed, they flowed in the form of bilateral commitments by the U.S. government. But when political considerations led to the cessation of bilateral assistance, the IMF stepped in, even if temporarily.

This political (mis)use of a multilateral institution meant that Pakistan benefited from “exceptionally favourable conditionality and flexibility in giving waivers, on not meeting even soft conditionality standards”. The hypocrisy involved in presenting the IMF as a technocratic alternative to a hegemonic China is more than obvious.

It is to be seen how this proxy stand-off between a retreating power treating shabbily its former ally whose policies it has shaped, and a rising power, willing to put its money where its mouth is, would play out. China is bound to offer Pakistan its support but is unlikely not to extract some concessions that strengthen its position. Historically, no nation has used its resources to exceptionally finance a country subject to the hegemony of a competing power.
The number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow in recent years, touching 258 million in 2017, up from 220 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000, according to the United Nations International Migration Report 2017. Nearly two-thirds of all international migrants lived in Asia (80 million) or Europe (78 million), while North America hosted 58 million, followed by Africa (25 million). The largest number of international migrants (50 million) resided in the United States, Saudi Arabia, Germany and Russia hosted around 12 million each, followed by the United Kingdom (nearly 9 million).

In 2017, India was the largest country of origin of international migrants (17 million), followed by Mexico (13 million).

In another report, released in June, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said that the population of forcibly displaced people worldwide increased in 2017 by 2.9 million to touch 68.5 million. They were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict or generalised violence.

### Largest country-to-country migrations Top 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Migrants in millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Migrants’ median age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and Caribbean</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Migrants by income group

- High-income countries: 64%
- Middle-income countries: 32%
- Low-income countries: 4%
### TRENDS AT A GLANCE

**68.5 million**
NEWLY DISPLACED

An estimated 16.2 million people were newly displaced in 2017. This included 11.8 million individuals displaced within the borders of their own countries and 4.4 million newly displaced refugees and new asylum-seekers.

Lebanon continued to host the largest number of refugees relative to its national population, where 1 in 6 people was a refugee under the responsibility of UNHCR. Jordan (1 in 14) and Turkey (1 in 23) ranked second and third, respectively. When Palestine refugees under UNRWA’s mandate are included, the figures rise to 1 in 4 for Lebanon and 1 in 3 for Jordan.

**44,400 new displacements EVERY DAY**

The number of new displacements was equivalent to an average of 44,400 people being forced to flee their homes every day in 2017.

By the end of 2017, about 3.1 million people were awaiting a decision on their application for asylum. About half in developing regions.

### INFographics: T.S. VIJAYANANDAN

#### Migrants by destination (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Female migrants by destination (%)

- World: 48.4
- Europe: 52.0
- North America: 51.5
- Oceania: 51.0
- Latin America & Caribbean: 50.4
- Africa: 47.1
- Asia: 42.4

#### Migrants by region of origin (in millions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Countries home to largest number of migrants (in millions)

- **2000**
  - U.S.: 34.8
  - Russia: 11.9
  - Germany: 9.0
  - India: 6.4
  - France: 6.3
  - Canada: 5.5
  - Saudi Arabia: 5.3
  - U.K.: 4.7
  - Australia: 4.4
  - Pakistan: 4.2
  - Kazakhstan: 2.9

- **2017**
  - U.S.: 49.8
  - Saudi Arabia: 12.2
  - Germany: 12.2
  - Russia: 11.7
  - U.K.: 8.8
  - UAE: 8.3
  - France: 7.9
  - Canada: 7.9
  - Australia: 7.0
  - Spain: 5.9
  - India: 5.2

#### Migrants by country of origin (in millions)

- **2000**
  - Russia: 10.7
  - Mexico: 9.6
  - India: 8.0
  - China: 5.8
  - Ukraine: 5.6
  - Bangladesh: 5.4
  - Afghanistan: 4.5
  - U.K.: 3.9
  - Kazakhstan: 3.6
  - Pakistan: 3.4
  - Germany: 3.4

- **2017**
  - India: 16.6
  - Mexico: 13.0
  - Russia: 10.6
  - China: 10.0
  - Bangladesh: 7.5
  - Syria: 6.9
  - Pakistan: 6.0
  - Ukraine: 5.9
  - The Philippines: 5.7
  - U.K.: 4.9
  - Afghanistan: 4.8

**Source:** UNHCR Report
IT has been a steady climb up the rungs of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) for the low-profile K. Sivan, who took over from A.S. Kiran Kumar as its Chairman on January 12. Sivan was earlier Director, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), Thiruvananthapuram. He first came into the limelight on January 5, 2014, when ISRO’s Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV-D5) flight, with an indigenously developed cryogenic engine, put the communication satellite GSAT-14 into a perfect orbit. He was the Mission Director for that crucial flight.

A graduate in aeronautical engineering from the Madras Institute of Technology in 1980, Sivan took his M.E. in aerospace engineering from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, in 1982. He joined ISRO the same year in the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) project and went on to contribute to its mission planning, design, integration and execution. He obtained his PhD in aerospace engineering from IIT Bombay in 2006.

He was instrumental in establishing parallel computing and building a hypersonic wind tunnel facility at the VSSC. He came up with innovative strategies for sending India’s spacecraft to Mars by an upgraded PSLV. Frontline met Sivan for an interview in his office at the ISRO headquarters in Bengaluru in the context of ISRO’s major technology demonstration of a crew escape system, the first in a series of tests as part of India’s efforts to send astronauts into space (human spaceflight); the upcoming Chandrayaan-2 mission; and ISRO’s efforts to involve industries in building launch vehicles and satellites. Excerpts from the interview:

At what stage is the Chandrayaan-2 mission? Is the composite module, comprising the spacecraft, the lander and the rover, ready? It is going to be a highly complex mission.

As you said, Chandrayaan-2 is going to be a complex mission, and I will...

“We have redesigned Chandrayaan-2. Work on the lander portion is going on…. We are now targeting the launch by the end of this year.”
say that it is the most complex mission that ISRO has ever undertaken. This is the word that experts used when we called for a discussion on it. It is a very, very complex mission. In February or March, we had a review by eminent national experts. A point that came up for discussion was that the failure rates have been very high for spacecraft missions to the moon. Only 50 per cent have succeeded. Many of the missions failed during the landing phase, that is, the descent phase. The landing phase is new for Chandrayaan-2. We have already established the orbiter in Chandrayaan-1. The new thing is the rover. Of course, the rover has to come out of the lander, which is also new for us. We call it a complex mission because it is equivalent to three projects being done together [that is, the orbiter, the lander and the rover].

The second aspect is that when we talk about the launch vehicle, the Chandrayaan-2 mission is much more complex [than previous missions where we merely put a satellite into orbit]. After the orbiter is put into the lunar orbit, the lander has to separate and come down from the orbiter and land at a specified, pre-decided location on the moon. When there is such complexity, the national committee of experts asked for a lot of improvements, including redundancy and robustness in the system. When the lander lands, it should be a stable landing. It should not bump. So they suggested that we carry out a lot of simulation tests.

We worked on their suggestions and found out that the lander configuration of Chandrayaan-2 needed additional modifications. The other aspect is the additional tests we introduced. We have redesigned Chandrayaan-2. Work on the lander portion is going on.

Subsequent to the GSAT-6A mission, our own apex committee with former ISRO Chairman Dr K. Kasturirangan as the chairman suggested improvements in harnessing. [After the GSLV-F08 lifted off from Sriharikota on March 29, 2018, and put GSAT-6A into its initial orbit, communication from the satellite was lost on April 1 during its third orbit-raising operation. Power did not flow into the satellite’s electronic components. So no command could be given to the satellite.]

The apex committee said, “Please check whether there is any failure mode” in Chandrayaan-2. We found that there was no failure mode. They suggested some improvements in the harnessing scheme, that is, the wiring. They suggested changes in the harnessing; that required changes in the orbiter also. So work is going on. We are now targeting the launch of Chandrayaan-2 by the end of this year. Because of these modifications, additional propellant margins are required in the original Chandrayaan-2 that had been planned. With all these changes, the mass of Chandrayaan-2 has increased from whatever we anticipated. When the mass increases, the project can still achieve the mission provided the launch vehicle can put the satellite into a higher orbit. The mass is 3.8 tonnes now.

The mass of the earlier composite module of Chandrayaan-2 was 3.2 tonnes. It has gone up to 3.8 tonnes now.

Earlier, we had thought of a 22,000 kilometre orbit [for 3.2 tonnes]. Now because of the increase in mass, the orbit has also increased. The orbit should be around 37,000 km.

It should now be 170 km x 37,000 km instead of 170 km x 22,000 km. It is 170 km by 37,000 km. Since the mass has increased, the spacecraft has to be put into a higher orbit. Only then it is possible to reach the moon. Because of this, our old plan of launching Chandrayaan-2 by GSLV-MkII is not possible. We have changed Chandrayaan-2 to GSLV-MkIII for this reason.

GSLV-MkII is capable of putting a 2.8-tonne satellite into orbit. The original Chandrayaan-2 composite module weighed 3.2 tonnes and you were talking about building an enhanced GSLV-MkII.

You are right.

Umamaheswaran R., now Associate Scientific Secretary, ISRO, told me in October 2016 that GSLV-MkII can put 3.2 tonnes into an initial orbit of 180 km by 20,000 km.

Yes. We enhanced the GSLV-MkII with high thrust engines and so on. With the enhancement, the number is 2.7 tonnes into GTO [geostationary transfer orbit]. Now, 3.2 tonnes has become 3.8 tonnes. And 22,000 km has become 37,000 km. This combination cannot be launched by GSLV-MkII.

What are the challenges that ISRO faced in developing the lander after Russia, which was to build it, backed out? It has a throttleable engine for soft landing on the moon. The lander should do in-place navigation. Although you have defined the place where the lander should land on the moon, it should be able to change its mind if there are hazards.

Considering the mass of the lander, the thrust level should be very large, around 3.2 kilonewtons or 4 kilonewtons. Making a throttleable engine of 3 kilonewtons or 4 kilonewtons is a totally new development for us. But we wanted to make use of available technologies. We have a LAM [liquid apogee motor] with a 400 newton thruster, and we have been using it on our satellites. We enhanced it to 800 newtons. It was not a major, new design change.

[The propulsion system aboard the lander will comprise a cluster of 4x800 N throttleable engines and eight numbers of 50 N control thrusters. This configuration will lead to considerable saving in the weight of propellants, enabling more scientific instruments to be carried on board.]

Another challenge is that we are landing on the moon for the first time. When we are doing the landing, the sensors should be perfect. Any error in the sensors may lead to the end-phase—we will not know whether we have reached the lunar ground or if we are above it. To get clarity on this, we will be, for the first time, attempting to land the lander into an in-between orbit: orbiter to lander, and then landing. We will
first make the lander to go into an orbit between the orbiter’s orbit and the landing. It will be an orbit with an apolune [farthest point from the moon] equal to 22,000 km and perilune [closest point to the moon] of 100 km.

After checking the lander’s performance and confirming whether the orbit is correct, we will start the landing manoeuvre. So it will be a step-by-step, cautious procedure from the moon orbit to landing. In the process, we have the time to check the performance of the systems. That way we can ensure that everything is done as per plan, and subsequently make sure that we are right and only then continue. That way, we gain confidence.

The third aspect is that we have done simulation tests on bringing the real electronics in the loop.

**Have you done a lot of simulation tests with the lander?**
We have done a lot. We are going to do a lot more wherein the lander will have all the electronics and software. We will be simulating the actual phenomena during landing at Mahendragiri in Tamil Nadu. That way, the tests we are doing will be close to reality. We expect that with these points we will have the confidence to go ahead.

**What are the experiments the lander and the rover will do?**
The lander will insert a probe, a kind of in situ measurement. The rover will do in situ measurements by moving about, but the lander will do it by staying in one place. In the lander a system will come out, a probe will go inside the lunar soil, study the soil profile, and so on. It will do a good amount of tests. It will test the lunar soil characteristics.

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in his Independence Day speech that India would send astronauts, including a woman, to space in 2022 as part of ISRO’s human space flight (HSF) programme. Do you think you can meet this deadline, given the project’s vast complexity?**
This is an excellent gift from the Prime Minister to the nation. This project is going to enhance the level of science and technology in the country. It will inspire our youth. Not only ISRO but a lot of other organisations, including industries, academia and research institutes, will participate in the programme. That way it will be a national project and bring dividends to science and technology. We are happy about the Prime Minister’s announcement. The schedule is very tight, but we will meet it.

**How many flights of GSLV-MkIII should you do before it is declared a man-rated vehicle, capable of taking astronauts to space?**
We will use GSLV-MkIII. We will make it a man-rated vehicle. But its payload-carrying capacity will come down if you make it a man-rated vehicle. This vehicle is capable of carrying 10 tonnes of payload into low-earth orbit. By man-rating it, we will meet the requirements of our human space flight programme. It demands seven tonnes of payload [that is, the crew capsule will weigh seven tonnes]. Mk-III will be able to meet this payload demand. We chose MkIII because it is a simple vehicle. It has fewer number of stages. We will launch the vehicle 10 to 15 times before we use it for the HSF.

**Will you send three astronauts into space in India’s first manned mission?**
Yes.

**Will it include a woman?**
Probably. Nowadays, women are stronger than men.

**What are the technologies that you have to work on for the mission?**
We have developed the crew module. We have to do the Pad Abort Test [PAT] at different times of the day. We have to build the environment-control and life-support systems for the crew. We have to build the ergonomics of the entire system. The interface between man and the instrumentation should be done. Our non-technical activities will include those relating to the Indian Air Force and the Coast Guard. The selection and training of astronauts should be done immediately. The schedule is very tight, but we will do it.

With regard to the HSF programme, the very first step you took was the Space Capsule Recovery Experiment (SRE) where you brought back a satellite to earth in January 2007. It re-entered the earth’s atmosphere and you recovered it from the sea near Chennai. Then you did CARE—Crew Module Atmospheric Re-entry Experiment—where you put a 3.75-tonne unmanned crew module into a sub-orbit and made it splash down in the Bay of Bengal in December 2014. You did a PAT on July 5 to demonstrate the safe recovery of the crew module in case of any exigency on the launch pad. With the help of parachutes, the crew module splashed down in the sea. I have seen space suits that VSSC has developed for astronauts.

We do the technology development well in advance not only for the HSF, but for any technology. We developed the cryogenic stage and demonstrated it in 2014. When I joined ISRO in 1982, close to my room, there was a group working one cryogenic development. In ISRO, we always work on development of technologies. All the technology developments we do in ISRO are linked to a project. Before the activity fructifies into a project, technology development will happen.

One such technology development is the PAT. This particular crew escape system requires a complex motor, with the unique characteristics of giving the highest thrust within the shortest time. So its nozzle geometry will be different. It is like a reverse motor. We have to make use of aerodynamics to tilt the vehicle to 1800°. Only then, when the module is separated, it will be turned on by its own aerodynamics. Then, there will be favourable conditions for the parachutes to open and the module will be brought back to the earth. This is the mission profile. This pro-
file during the mission, that is, the production of the entire system—the crew escape module, then the aero-dynamic module, the realisation of the electronic components—we did in a fantastic way and they performed very well during the PAT.

Along with these functional tests, we did five stage experiments, which we have to do in space. So we did the qualification of the crew escape system and were able to demonstrate five additional, new products on that day. We got a test bed to carry out the tests.

**What were the five new tests?**

New technologies. One experiment is wireless communication. We demonstrated a wireless instrument system during the PAT.

Then we demonstrated a digital telemetry transmitter. Right now, we use the analog system. It is bulky and consumes a lot of power. The digital system will be compact and power consumption will be lower. The third technology was the Ka-band altimeter. This will be used in Chandrayaan-2 when the lander is coming down.

Another technology we demonstrated was the MSS [Mobile Satellite Services] via GSAT-6. Right now, any data we want to get from the cloud is acquired through ground stations. They track a satellite or an aircraft. We need ground stations to track the entire flight trajectory, wherever the vehicle is going. If you have a long trajectory, we need a ground station to acquire the data. But in the MSS link via GSAT-6, the data will go from the flight system to the GSAT-6 satellite. The GSAT-6 can reflect the data and relay it to a ground station. So we don’t have to plan all the ground stations.

The fifth experiment we did was the NAVIC System. NAVICS is now working for slow-moving systems, static systems. We are now releasing it for moving systems, [to see] whether it will work for highly accurate vehicles. These vehicles will have 100 G [100 times the gravitational force experienced in normal conditions]. NAVICS will function in this condition also.

**What will be the weight of the satellite that it can put into orbit?**

It can put a 500-kg satellite into a 500-km orbit.

**Is there a lot of demand for putting small satellites into orbit?**

Basically, this [SSLV] is to cater to the market for small satellites. This vehicle will be cost-effective. It will take the lowest integration time, about 72 hours. The launch operations will be carried out by three or four people only.

**From the Mission Control Centre?**

No Mission Control Centre. Somewhere some PC [personal computer] will be there. The PC can even be in the guest house!

**So a 100-tonne rocket can be launched with the help of a PC in a guest house?**

Not because of the size of the rocket, but because we wanted to introduce an innovation in this type of vehicle. We are adding new technology. The vehicle will be more and more autonomous.

**What are the industries that will be realising this vehicle—L&T, MTAR?**

We had a brief discussion with L&T. They wanted to produce it. Many
people are there for this project. Our Antrix [the marketing company of the Department of Space] is working on that.

What are the rocket motors that L&T will produce in its Coimbatore plant?
They will be producing solid motors. There, too, we are talking of small motors. We are going to industry for the production of PSLVs.

Out of the government’s recent approval of Rs.10,400 crore for 30 PSLVs and 10 GSLV-MkIIIs, nearly 85 per cent, Rs.9,000 crore, will be with industry only. It will be a big bonus to industry. It can plan now. Industry has to come up with new ideas as to how it will meet the large demand for spacecraft as well as launch vehicles.

Industry is already playing an important role in supplying components for building ISRO’s satellites. When will industry be able to build a satellite on its own?
When we are talking about launch vehicles, whether it is a PSLV or satellites—100 per cent building them—industry can do it only when the entire technology is transferred to it with proper documentation. Then industry can produce them.

In the recent satellite launches, industry did make some important contributions.
In all the launches, in the launch vehicles, industry is doing its work. We are not doing the work. Industry is doing the work and we are getting the name. In every launch, in every vehicle of ISRO, 85 per cent of the cost of the vehicle is lying with industry, mainly on materials and the manufacturing cost. These materials form 16 per cent of the total weight of the vehicle. Sixteen per cent of the items of the vehicle account for 85 per cent of the cost of the vehicle. This 85 per cent is lying with industry.

A unique system in the VSSC is that whenever we add extra manpower, we convert it into a work package and that work package is given to a vendor. After he finishes the work, he gets the money and goes away. A similar approach is being adopted.

The satellite is not made in the industry. It is made by the industry. It is made by industrial labour.

TeamIndus could not mobilise enough cash to send a rover to the moon using ISRO’s PSLV. This despite big Indian industrialists being associated with TeamIndus. So are you really confident that Indian industry can do it, that is, build launch vehicles and satellites?
I do not want to talk about TeamIndus. I am not fully involved in that. But I strongly believe that our industry can do it. Also, every component is made now by the industry. As much as 85 per cent of the package is made in the industry. These people are now fabricating rocket components. After fabricating them, they give it to us as vendors. We tell them, “Don’t be a vendor. We want to make you a partner.” It is like somebody is employed in a person’s house. Suddenly, the house owner’s son is marrying the employee’s daughter. The employer becomes the father-in-law.

Can you give me the list of industries that are making important contributions to ISRO’s launch vehicles and satellites? What are the components they manufacture?
We have HAL. It is making all the aluminium light alloy structures, core-based shroud, propellant tanks for the engines, payload fairings, inter-stage structures, and so on. Godrej is fabricating the engines and its components. Then we have L&T, which is doing the solid motor casings. Walchandnagar Industries is also producing motor casings. Another big fish, MTAR, is producing the control components for the engines. MIDHANI is producing metallic materials like maraging steel. Bharat Forge is giving some forgings. Bay Forge, near Chennai, is also doing the forgings.

Along with the big fish, there are medium industries such as Sri Venkateswara Mechanical, Electrical and Engineering Industry in Hyderabad. It is supplying us strap-on motor casings. Then there is KELTRON.
SPECIAL FEATURE

Meenakshi Mission Hospital & Research Centre
Madurai
The smile train is ready to chug. The infants and kids who have clambered onto it are from various parts of Tamil Nadu and will soon be flashing smiles, eating normally and not crying all the time. They are at the Meenakshi Mission Hospital and Research Centre (MMHRC), Madurai, with their parents in an airy, spacious ward for treatment of deformities such as cleft lip and cleft palate. One of them, Hasim, 9, is unable to speak properly, while another, nine-month-old Shiva Pirakanya, has difficulty being fed because the milk comes out through her nose because of the cleft in her palate. “She is always crying,” says her mother, Venkateswari.

The children are waiting to undergo surgery at the hands of Dr N. Panchavarnam, plastic surgeon and the 73-year-old Project Director of Smile Train. Smile Train is an international charity for correcting cleft lip and cleft palate and has its regional centre in the hospital. Dr Panchavarnam said: “All that these children require is a simple surgery which will last 45 minutes. After the surgery, they will stay here for a week. The older children will undergo speech therapy. They will be able to speak and eat well. In the Meenakshi Mission Hospital, we perform this surgery on three to eight children every day.”

One out of about 1,000 children suffered from this deformity, and because of the burgeoning population the sheer number of children with the incidence of cleft upper lip and cleft palate was on the rise, said Dr Panchavarnam, who is the winner of several awards.

“Since 2003 we have done corrective surgery for 11,840 cases of cleft lip and palate deformities free of cost,” said Dr M. Sharmila, the young duty doctor present in the ward. “Treatment and medicines are given free too.”

For the past 30 years, the MMHRC has earned a reputation in the southern region of Tamil Nadu, comprising the nine districts of Madurai, Pudukkottai, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar, Dindigul, Theni, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin and Kanyakumari, for providing world class health care that is affordable. In terms of medical infrastructure, experienced doctors and skilled paramedical staff, it is on a par with the best hospitals in Chennai and Coimbatore. Today, the MMHRC has 1,200 beds, 400 full-time doctors, 45 specialties, 19 operation theatres and 140 intensive care beds. Sixty per cent of its patients are referrals. It has a spic and span hospice for terminally ill patients where their stay and treatment are free.

At the heart of the MMHRC’s raison d’etre is service to the rural poor. There are milling crowds of villagers from southern Tamil Nadu in the hospital’s corridors and waiting rooms outside doctors’ consultation rooms. The hospital has a number of charitable programmes to provide treatment free to poor patients requiring surgery in cardiology, nephrology, urology, cancer treatment, bone marrow transplant, and so on. And its doctors take pride in serving the rural poor. Its philosophy is, “Nobody is too poor to get a first-class treatment.”

Dr Ramesh Ardhanari, Senior Consultant and Head of the Department, Surgical Gastroenterology, said: “No hospital in Tamil Nadu, including those in Chennai, has under one roof all the facilities that our department has
or other departments have. If our patient requires radiation, he need not go outside. There is nothing for which we have to send our patients outside. We are one of the foremost centres in laparoscopic surgery in the whole of India.”

Dr Sathyararayana V., Senior Consultant and Head of the Department of Orthopaedics & Traumatology, echoed the sentiment: “We have a good a backup from other specialties. All facilities are available under one roof.”

The Department of Surgical Gastroenterology has done 15 liver transplants since 2017, with 14 patients doing well. The Department of Nephrology has performed, in the past 20 years, more than 700 kidney transplants, from both living donors and cadavers. The cardiology department is all set to perform its first heart transplant.

The MMHRC has the busiest and the largest Emergency Medicine Department in southern Tamil Nadu. Presiding over it is Dr Narendra Nath Jena. “This [department] is a hospital within a hospital,” he said. Doctors from a variety of departments and paramedical staff have saved thousands of lives. The patients range from accident victims to those who suffered heart attack, cardiac arrest, stroke, pelvic fracture, abdominal trauma and even snakebite.

The MMHRC’s founder is the reputed urologist Dr N. Sethuraman, 75. In 1980, he set up a clinic in Madurai and specialised in urology. He, however, had an ambition to build a hospital to serve the rural population, with charity as its cornerstone. He bought land at Mattuthavani, then a suburb of Madurai, and in 1989 laid the hospital’s foundation stone there. M. Karunanidhi, then Chief Minister, inaugurated the Meenakshi Mission Hospital and Research Centre on July 5, 1990. It is managed by the SR Trust. What began as a 10-bed hospital in 1990 has now metamorphosed into the largest multi-specialty hospital in southern Tamil Nadu with 1,200 beds.

Dr S. Gurushankar, chairman, MMHRC, who is the youngest son of Dr Sethuraman, said: “At the MMHRC, we have always striven to acquire world-class technology and package it in such a way that it is available to the common man. The installation of the second linear accelerator, the PET-CT scan, and the gamma camera stand testimony to this fact. We have developed expertise in transplantation procedures such as bone marrow transplantation (BMT), liver transplant and kidney transplant. All this has equipped us to provide comprehensive health care to our patients and set us on a par with corporate hospitals in metropolitan cities.”

According to J. Adel, general manager-operations, the hallmark of the MMHRC is that “the management gave complete freedom to doctors to run their departments”.

The MMHRC does robot-assisted surgeries. Only a few other hospitals in Chennai and Coimbatore do robot-assisted surgeries. Adel said: “We recently launched the optical coherence tomography (OCT), a machine that scans the blood vessels of the heart and gives details of blocked blood vessels, the density of the block, the number of blocked vessels and so on. We are the first to acquire it in India. The OCT is integrated with the cath lab.” (Cardiac catheterisation is a procedure to examine how well one’s heart works.)

CARDIAC CARE
In the assessment of Dr R. Sivakumar, senior interventional cardiologist, the Department of Cardiology in the MMHRC is one of the largest cardiac care centres in the State. It has a strong, experienced medical team that handles various kinds of cardiac emergencies.

Dr Sivakumar, who has been with the MMHRC since 2001, said: “It was a proud moment for us, the second generation interventional cardiologists in our hospital, when we started doing emergency angioplasty for patients admitted with severe heart attacks. In fact, Chennai took another year to execute emergency angioplasty on a regular basis. We are the pioneers in emergency angioplasty for heart attacks.”

The MMHRC was the first in southern Tamil Nadu to install the intra-aortic balloon pump (IABP) for patients with severe heart attack. “We have saved so many lives with the special balloon pump during emergencies. The hospital took an early lead in introducing advanced and complex angioplasty to deal with left main blocks, chronic and total occlusions, multiple blocks, and severely calcified blocks,” said Dr Sivakumar. The hospital bought a rotablation console to treat calcified blocks. The MMHRC was the first in South-East Asia to equip itself with the OCT integrated cath lab and intra vascular ultra sound (IVUS) with angiogram. With this imaging modality, cardiac sur-
Dr Gurushankar, 38, completed his MBBS from Sri Ramachandra Medical College & Research Institute, Chennai. He did an Executive Education programme from Harvard Business School, U.S., and management training programmes from the Indian Institutes of Management in Bengaluru and Ahmedabad. Excerpts from an interview:

Charity is the cornerstone of the MMHRC. How do you strike the balance with your hospital’s motto of “world-class health care at affordable cost”.

Since the last 30 years, the MMHRC’s mission has been to turn pain into smiles by providing world-class health care at affordable cost. We have a vast charitable programme and incorporated CSR into our culture across all specialties. We have a dedicated ward for pediatric oncology, which has treated more than 2,000 child cancer patients free. We have a tie-up with the charity Smile Train, and have done over 12,000 cleft lip surgeries free till now. A hospice centre exists inside the hospital to provide palliative care to terminally ill patients. It is subsidised by 50 per cent.

In addition, free meals are provided to all patients and attendants thrice a day every day. More than 10,000 plates of food are given away daily. We also organise health camps in remote villages through vans with satellite link. It is a fine art to provide world-class health care, which is expensive, at a cost that the common man can afford. We do this by maximising operational efficiencies, reducing working costs, and leveraging a network of well-wishers and philanthropists.

A large number of patients are from villages in nine southern districts in Tamil Nadu.

With 1,200 beds, we are the largest super-specialty hospital in Tamil Nadu, outside Chennai, with a catchment area extending from Cuddalore and Erode to Kanyakumari. There are only a few hospitals in this area that can provide state-of-the-art facilities. For example, we are the only hospital in the region with the capability of conducting bone marrow transplants, and we have a highly advanced cardiology department. We are always the first in the region to introduce the latest advances in medical science and cutting-edge equipment. Our reputation for medical excellence is one reason why patients flock to the MMHRC from the surrounding districts. The other reason is our impeccable reputation and affordable cost.

How do you explain the failure of private enterprise to build a big, reputed hospital in these districts?

The reasons are manifold. These districts are still largely rural and patients do not have a high paying capacity. Hence, most health care entrepreneurs tend to focus on cities where the per capita income is high and the return on investment is guaranteed. Also, qualified doctors are hesitant to serve in rural areas because their quality of life is impacted.

The government makes matters worse by not offering any incentive or subsidies to open health care facilities in rural or underdeveloped areas. With the launch of the Ayushman Bharat Mission, there will be a great demand for health care facilities in rural areas. The government needs to nudge health care entrepreneurs to move beyond cities by offering incentives and tax breaks.

Why so much importance to building the Institute of Emergency Medicine in your hospital when most hospitals shy away from treating accidents victims?

Emergency care and trauma facilities in rural areas and small towns are largely non-existent. Thousands of lives can be saved every year if emergency medical care is available close at hand. Recognising this, we established a state-of-the-art Institute of Emergency Medicine at our hospital in 2008. It has now become the largest and busiest emergency centre in southern Tamil Nadu, treating more than 2,000 patients a month. It has 70 per cent success rate in reviving patients from cardiac arrest. Our committed emergency rescue team has successfully ensured zero waiting time for emergency patients.

In one instance, a passenger suffered cardiac arrest in a public transport bus when it was entering the Madurai suburbs. The driver drove the vehicle directly to the emergency block of the MMHRC. Our team swung into action and managed to save the patient. It was a proud moment for us that even a bus driver was aware of the emergency care available at our hospital.
What is the bike ambulance that has been introduced in your hospital?

To ensure faster response, we have added motorcycle ambulances to our fleet of emergency vehicles. This has helped us reach the needy patients, especially road accident victims, within the golden hour. Each motorcycle ambulance is manned by paramedical staff and equipped with life-saving equipment that can sustain a patient till proper treatment is available. These bike ambulances provide service within a 25-km radius from the hospital within city limits.

You have observed that “Indian health care has always been plagued” by two important debilitating factors: accessibility and affordability. What is the best strategy to battle this?

The best strategy is to increase spending on health at both the Central and State level. The Central government’s spending on health care, currently at a mere 1.5 per cent of GDP, needs to increase to at least 2.5 per cent. There should be renewed focus on primary health care where most of the diseases can be nipped in the bud. We need more medical and nursing schools to improve doctor-to-patient ratio. We also need thousands of new hospitals in rural areas…. Ambitious government-sponsored insurance schemes like Ayushman Bharat Mission offer a ray of hope. We need affordability in health care but not at the cost of quality. Hence, the cost of medical procedures reimbursable to private hospitals under government health insurance schemes has to be calculated realistically.

What was the strategy you adopted to build the hospital after you took over from your father, Dr N. Sethuraman?

Meenakshi Mission Hospital was established in 1985 by my father with 100 beds. He wanted to build a modern hospital in a small town like Madurai for the sole purpose of making health care affordable. I took charge of the hospital in 2005 when I was just 25. The hospital had grown to 250 beds by then. To shape my vision about how the MMHRC should be run and its future growth path, I took inspiration from many business models around the world. I realigned the company’s management structure and focussed on expansion.

Doctors were encouraged to give up consulting outside and work for the hospital full time. Today, more than 330 doctors are on the rolls of the MMHRC. By 2016, the hospital had grown to 1,000 beds and become the biggest in southern Tamil Nadu.

What are the thrust areas of your hospital?

We have an aggressive growth path for the future. We plan to establish a premium hospital in Madurai that will focus on serving upper-crust patients. We plan to establish a 250-bed hospital each in Salem and Chennai. We recently established a nursing college in Madurai with 50 seats. Internationally, we are focussing on African countries such as Kenya, Burundi and Tanzania to launch health care services in alliance with local players. At the MMHRC, we will continue to lay emphasis on acquiring the latest medical equipment to impact health outcomes.

We recently introduced an advanced Optical Coherence Tomography system for cardiac imaging, which is fully integrated into the Cath Lab. This is the first such system of its kind available in South Asia, offering vastly superior diagnostic capabilities for heart diseases. Our combined revenues [Thanjavur and Madurai] grew by 13 per cent to Rs.350 crore in 2015-16 from Rs.316 crore in 2014-15.

What is the strategy to spread awareness in rural areas about the occurrence of breast cancer?

There are many misconceptions about breast cancer, especially in villages. Sadly, there is little support for rural women suffering from this disease. They hardly have any knowledge about its signs and symptoms, or the need for self-examination. We at the MMHRC continue to take all possible measures to spread awareness about breast cancer. We have a well-equipped oncology department. Our telemedicine practice is a great enabler. Our medical vans reach out to dozens of remote villages every month to conduct health check-ups and to give treatment and advice.

What are your plans for Meenakshi Hospital in Thanjavur?

We had originally planned a single-specialty hospital for cardiac care but public demand made us open a multi-specialty hospital with all critical care and other facilities. We chose Thanjavur because the region did not have a well-established hospital and patients were forced to go to Chennai. From 100 beds in 2013, the hospital has grown to 250 beds with 19 major specialities. It has a 24-hour clinical laboratory and provides emergency services through the Accident & Trauma Care Unit and the Intensive Respiratory Care Unit, both of which are unique in the region. The hospital treats over 1,00,000 patients annually and has conducted over 25,000 surgical procedures till now.

It is a centre of excellence for renal transplantation. It is also the only hospital in the delta region with cardiology and cardiothoracic surgery under one roof. Over 1,000 beating-heart surgeries and 2,000 angioplasties have been conducted till now.
AT the Emergency Medicine Department of the Institute of Emergency Medicine (IEM), Meenakshi Mission Hospital and Research Centre (MMHRC), Madurai, on a bed in the resuscitation bay in Priority 1 sector, lay 26-year-old T. Shajan. He is on an artificial ventilator. Dr Narendra Nath Jena, Director and Head, IEM, said: “We have saved his life. His condition is stable now. He met with an accident when he was riding a motorcycle without wearing a helmet. He was brought here a few hours ago. If he had not reached here on time, he would have suffered hypoxia. His blood pressure is stable now.”

Shajan had suffered head injuries and was fighting for his life when he was brought here. He was unconscious. In no time, doctors and paramedics of the IEM rushed to attend to him and saved his life. When a person is brought to the Emergency Medicine ward, he is admitted to Priority 1, Priority 2 or Priority 3 sectors, depending on his/her condition. Persons with serious injuries are admitted to Priority 1 ward, those with moderate injuries to Priority 2 and those with mild injuries to Priority 3.

“The Institute of Emergency Medicine is a unique department. It is a hospital within a hospital,” said Dr Jena, a renowned specialist in emergency medicine who has been trained in surgical, medical, orthopaedic and paediatric emergencies at the Christian Medical College, Vellore. He called the IEM “the front door to the hospital”. Whether a person has been grievously injured in any accident or has suffered a heart attack, a cardiac failure, trauma, stroke, has consumed poison, fallen from a height, has been bitten by a snake or is the victim of a natural disaster, he or she is first brought to the Emergency Medicine Department. (Government hospitals call it the “casualty” department.) Doctors from various specialties get together to treat the patient. The patient is then sent to the proper department for more treatment.

The first one hour is called the golden hour and the first 10 minutes the platinum period. It is called “life-saving time”. Dr Jena said: “If a person has suffered a heart attack, stroke or trauma or has been bitten by a snake, and he is not given proper treatment within this time frame, he will die. If a person has suffered a cardiac arrest, the first three to four minutes are crucial, for his heart stops, his pulse drops and he becomes unconscious. He has to be given cardio pulmonary resuscitation.”

If a person has suffered head injuries or thoracic injuries, or a pelvis fracture or abdominal trauma, the emergency doctor will resuscitate him. If this was not done, most of the patients would die, he said. He quoted the World Health Organisation as saying that 80 per cent of the people who were caught in these situations in India did not get treatment within the golden hour.

The Emergency Medicine Department has educated manpower who are trained and skilled in providing emergency health care. Its doctors are equipped with life-saving skills. The waiting time is zero. The department has dedicated stroke, cardiac and trauma teams, a state-of-the-art 20-bed emergency room, an advanced resuscitation area, a paediatric emergency bay and ventilator facilities. Every year the IEM treats several thousand most critically and seriously injured patients from nearby districts.

Former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam inaugurated the IEM on February 13, 2015. It is called an institute because it has active academic programmes.

Dr Jena said the MMHRC is “a pioneer in emergency medicine” in southern Tamil Nadu. “We are the biggest Emergency Medicine Department in the whole of southern Tamil Nadu. When it was established, it had four doctors. It now has 40 doctors,” he said. In every shift, 10 doctors work under an experienced emergency medicine physician.

A Special Correspondent
Elephant GEneS were able to execute precisely their angioPlasty procedure and they could provide long-term benefits to patients, he said.

In addition to the OCT and the IVUS, which give an idea of the anatomical narrowing of the artery, the hospital has acquired a special wire called fractional flow reserve (FFR). The FFR gives information on the physiological impact of the narrowing of the artery, enabling an interventional cardiologist to decide whether a stent was required or not. This helped them to avoid unnecessary angioplasty, Dr Sivakumar said. Generally, surgeons did angioplasty through fluoroscopy. “But we could combine fluoroscopy with the OCT or the IVUS. So we were able to optimise our angioplasty.... We do angioplasty only when a patient needs it,” he explained. The MMHRC was off the block quickly to upgrade its cath lab systems of an earlier generation to more advanced systems, and it has three such systems now. Its cath labs worked 24 x 7 to perform primary angioplasty.

In fact, the MMHRC is one of the few hospitals in the country to establish a dedicated department for cardiac electrophysiology (CEP). Electrophysiology primarily studies heartbeats or cardiac rhythm. It is considered a separate specialty coming under cardiology.

Dr P. Jayapandian, consultant Cardiologist and Interventional Electrophysiologist and Pacing, said: “Electrophysiology is the latest development in cardiology. The MMHRC has been specialising in electrophysiology for the past few years. We have a high-end, separate laboratory in electrophysiology. It is a dedicated 3-D laboratory.”

“Dr Sethuraman had the vision to build this hospital and Dr Gurushankar has taken it to the next level,” said Dr Jayapandian, who is one of the six trained electrophysiologists in Tamil Nadu. He added: “An electrophysiologist’s role is important in finding out the cause of the heart failure, in providing the patient proper medical management, making him disease free and increasing the quality of his life.”

Dr S. Kumar, Senior Consultant and Head, the Department of Cardiac Anaesthesiology and Critical Care, readily gives credit to his department members for its success. “We have a good team here. More than 80 per cent of the team has been here for the past 15 years. This is to the credit of the hospital and its management,” he said. He was proud that his department was doing “the entire gamut of cardiac surgeries”, including coronary artery bypass surgery, valve replacement surgery and congenital heart surgery.

“Very soon, we will be doing heart transplants. We have got the approval for it. The patient is ready,” said Dr Kumar. The hospital has so far done more than 8,000 cardiac surgeries with a mortality rate of 1.2 per cent as against the internationally accepted mortality rate of 1.5 per cent. Several “awake cardiac surgeries”, too, have been done. Surgeons in the department have also performed endoscopic vein harvesting, which is useful for obese patients. Importantly, the department has state-of-the-art operation theatres with steel cladding with laminar flow of air (i.e., impure air will not come in), heart-lung machine, anaesthesia machine and intensive care units with their full range of ventilators and monitors, Dr Kumar said.

Dr Ramesh Ardhanari, Medical Director of the MMHRC, is among the most senior doctors in the hospital, having joined it in April 1990 before it was officially inaugurated. He completed his MBBS from Christian Medical College, Vellore, M.S. (Surgery) from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, M.Ch. (Surgical Gastroenterology) from Madras Medical College and FRCS from Edinburgh. Speaking about the Department of Surgical Gastroenterology in the MMHRC, he said that what was unique about the department was that the physician and the surgeon met a patient together. “Then we decide what the better line of treatment is. The physician and the surgeon work together. It is a unique combination. It should be applied in more departments,” he said. He is proud that his department is “one of the foremost centres in laparoscopic surgery in India”.

The Surgery and Surgical Gastroenterology unit is “a high-volume centre” for therapeutic endoscopy, laparoscopy and surgical enterological procedures. It has treated a significant number of patients for gastrointestinal malignancies. It had all the equipment, including robots, needed for laparoscopic surgeries. The MMHRC was the first in southern Tamil Nadu to introduce the 3-D laparoscopic procedure, said Dr Ramesh Ardhanari. “We have all the latest equipment for endoscopy. We are regularly doing all procedures, including a new procedure called Per-Oral Endoscopic Myotomy (POEM). We use high-definition upper endoscopes to perform this.” Since 2017, his centre started doing liver transplants. Out of 15 liver transplants its surgeons have done so far, 14 patients were doing well. “It is a high success rate. The transplants were
A CROWD of patients, mostly from villages in southern Tamil Nadu, waited outside the consultation room of Dr V. Sathyanarayana, Senior Consultant and Head, Department of Orthopaedics and Traumatology, Meenakshi Mission Hospital and Research Centre (MMHRC), Madurai. Using models of knees, spine and elbows, the doctor explained to each patient the problem they had. He answered their questions patiently. “I can proudly say that I set up the department,” he said, recalling how Dr N. Sethuraman, founder, MMHRC, convinced him to relocate from St. John’s Medical College and Hospital, Bengaluru. He said: “We are doing good. We have a good volume of cases. We are on a par with international standards in orthopaedics. Our centre caters to the rural population and most of our patients are from villages.”

The department has treated various kinds of complicated, trauma cases, spine injuries and arthritis disorders, besides performing tumour surgeries, joint replacements and orthoscopic procedures. “We get a lot of spinal injury cases. We get back-up from the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation,” he said. Road and industrial accident cases are on the increase. Workers sustain severe injuries when they fall from buildings under construction and farmhands suffer injuries when they fall from coconut trees. Dr Sathyanarayana said: “We are geared up for all this. We have a blood bank. We have other specialties. Everything is available under one roof.”

GE NE SIS AS A CANCE R HO SP ITAL
Dr K.S. Kirushna Kumar, Senior Consultant and Head, Radiation Oncology, said that the MMHRC began as a cancer hospital in 1989, when there was no centre in southern Tamil Nadu for cancer treatment. “In cancer treatment, there are three specialities: surgical, medical and radiation. All the three specialities were started [here] in 1989. Cancer has to be treated by multiple doctors belonging to these specialities,” Dr Kirushna Kumar, who is also Head, Oncological Services and Clinical Research, said. For instance, the first and second stage of occurrence of a tumour in a cheek can be treated by surgery or radiation. In the tumour’s third and fourth stage, it can be treated by surgery and radiation. If the patient is not fit, he needs both radiation and chemotherapy.

The MMHRC has two linear accelerator machines, image guided radiation therapy (IGRT) and intensive modulated radiation therapy (IMRT). He said: “Other than these, we have a brachytherapy machine. Last year we installed a stereotactic radiation therapy and stereotactic radio surgery for treating brain tumours. For treating tumours other than those in the brain, we have installed a stereotactic body radiotherapy machine. In Tamil Nadu, only hospitals in Chennai, Coimbatore, and we at Madurai have them.”

The centre specialises in treating breast cancer/breast conservation. Normally, the entire breast is surgically removed when breast cancer occurs. “We remove only the tissues. The results are the same,” Dr Kirushna Kumar said. The centre also treats pelvic and vulval cancers. The MMHRC has a clinical research department and much of its research is in oncology.

PAEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY
Dr T. Kasi Viswanathan is the Head of the Department of Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplantation, and Consultant, Division of Paediatric Haematology, MMHRC. He told this correspondent: “I would like you to highlight that cancer in children is highly curable...”
and that they will get the best results if they are treated in a dedicated paediatric oncology department. It is a myth that cancer in children is not curable. We have established in our hospital a state-of-the-art centre for treating cancer in children.

About 40 years ago, the survival rate among children with leukaemia was only 5 per cent. Today, it is between 80 and 90 per cent. This has come about because of the advances in treatment, chemotherapy, radiation, supportive care and also bone marrow transplantation (BMT).

Dr Kasi Viswanathan takes care of two departments: Haematology and Paediatric Oncology. While haematology deals with adults with blood cancer and non-cancerous blood disorders, paediatric oncology deals with children suffering from cancer.

On bone marrow transplant, Dr Kasi Viswanathan said: “When we have a defective bone marrow, it is due to a defect in the HSC [haemopoietic stem cells which give rise to all the cells in the body] and it leads to cancer. The diseased bone marrow is destroyed with intense radiation and a heavy dose of chemotherapy. New stem cells from a normal donor are infused intravenously into the blood [of the child]. The cells go into the bone marrow and repopulate the stem cells. There is no major surgery.” The MMHRC started performing BMTs from 2014. Till date, it has conducted 150 BMTs, with a success rate of more than 80 per cent.
MEENAKSHI MISSION HOSPITAL & RESEARCH CENTRE

from only cadavers. We want to get our cadaver programme up and running well,” he said.

TREATING KIDNEY FAILURE
The Nephrology Department, established in 1992, found during a screening in the southern districts that kidney disease was widely prevalent but knowledge about its occurrence was absent. Said Dr K. Sampath Kumar, Senior Consultant and Head of the Department of Nephrology: “We wanted to do clinical work and sensitise the physician to treat and diagnose kidney diseases in their early stage,” he said. Since kidney diseases fell under two categories, acute kidney failure and chronic kidney failure, the MMHRC set up dialysis facilities for acute kidney failures. The facilities were made available for patients afflicted with kidney failure after they suffered snake bites, high fever, severe diarrhoea, leptospirosis, and so on. “When we published our results [on these], we were recognised as one of the leading academic centres and an intermedial centre in nephrology,” he said.

The department did remarkable research on the use of niacin, a vitamin for reducing the phosphate level in the blood of dialysis patients. “This is one of the pioneering works done by our department, which has been repeatedly cited for the past 10 years. Nephrology centres in the U.S. and Europe have corroborated our findings and they have taken it to the next level,” he said.

When the department conducted screening camps for kidney diseases in villages in the southern districts, its doctors identified a form of kidney disease called chronic kidney disease-urine (CKD-U). Dr Sampath Kumar said: “There is an unknown cause for this. It is probably related to inadequate intake of water. Plus, these people sweat a lot. They suffer from dehydration. This disease occurs in a person over several decades. Elderly people, who are farm hands, suffer from this. We highlighted this in a national-level workshop on nephrology.” The department has done more than 700 kidney transplants in the last 20 years. The kidneys were received from both living donors and cadavers.

CHILD CARE
A primary reason for the popularity of the Department of Paediatrics is its dedicated neonatal and paediatric units. Dr A. Kannan, Senior Consultant Department of Paediatrics and Neonatology, said the department had a neonatal ICU for taking care of extreme pre-term babies and state-of-the-art paediatric ICU (PICU) to cater to critically ill children. He said: “Our Obstetrics Department is receiving a significant number of high-risk pregnancies.... In our Department of Paediatrics and Neonatology, we have around 18 ventilators, including those with high frequency. Our unit for taking care of newborn babies has 25 beds and is well-equipped with different kinds of monitors and capnographic devices.”

The PICU received and managed children suffering from acute respiratory diseases and poisoning. It had paediatric bronchoscopy for managing effectively accidental foreign body ingestion in children. It admitted cases of central nervous system infections with seizures, intracranial bleeding and polytrauma. Dr Kannan said: “Our team is well trained in the management of central catheters, central venous pressure monitoring and intracranial pressure monitoring. Despite our managing severely sick children and extremely preterm newborns, our mortality and morbidity rates have been quite low compared with international standards.”

P. Sundarraj, Senior Manager and Head of the Department of Resource and Development, said: “We have a people-friendly approach. We have community acceptance.” The cancer ward at the MMHRC offers free state-of-the-art treatment to children regardless of their financial status, thanks to the support from the Camila Children’s Cancer Fund. The treatment of a majority of cancer patients who are poor, is backed by various support systems. Besides, “we waive the bed charges and the physician’s fee. Blood investigation is subsidised by 50 per cent. There is a reduction of 20 per cent in the price of drugs. If the patient still cannot afford the cost of treatment, he will be supported by the Camila Children’s Cancer Fund,” said Dr Kasi Viswanathan, who is also Consultant, Division of Paediatric Haemoto-Oncology.

Meenakshi Telecare Centre offers telemedicine services to patients in rural and far-flung areas through its 10 telemedicine centres in Madurai, Virudhunagar, Theni, Dindigul, Sivaganga, Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts. “Telemedicine services will work only where doctors are not available,” Rose Mary, manager, Telemedicine and Nurse Supervisor, said. In these 10 centres, consultations are provided to patients in specialties such as cardiology, dermatology, diabetology, paediatrics, urology and general medicine. The patient reaches the telemedicine centre where a trained village nurse is present. The doctor at the MMHRC in Madurai is reached through videoconferencing. As per the doctor’s advice, the nurse dispenses the medicines to the patient. The patient returns for reviews. If it is a major problem, the doctor asks the patient to come to the MMHRC in Madurai.

Dr R. Ravichandran, Senior Consultant and Head of the Department of Urology and Andrology, said the department had the latest medical equipment for treating urological and andrological disorders. It attracted patients from different parts of India, including West Bengal, Karnataka and Kerala, for problems relating to andrology. “We are the only centre in south India to have an electroejaculator to extract semen from men who will have normal erection but cannot ejaculate,” he said.

The urology centre, established in 1990, treated around 500 patients a month for kidney-related problems. It has so far performed more than 1,300 laparoscopic urological procedures.
The United States is piling the pressure on India to whittle down its oil imports from Iran and retreat from the Chabahar port project. **By John Cherian**
THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN PILING the pressure on India in its ongoing efforts to isolate Iran after the Trump administration unceremoniously reneged on the historic nuclear deal that the Barack Obama administration had signed with the country. All the other signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), including close allies of the U.S. like the United Kingdom, France and Germany, have said that they will honour the deal and will not reimpose sanctions on Iran. President Donald Trump, however, seems to have made the reimposition of sanctions a priority issue for his administration. He had raised the issue with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, during their recent meeting in Helsinki.

The Russian side has been openly critical of the American decision to unilaterally scrap the nuclear deal. China, which imports a lot of Iranian oil and gas, is unfazed by threats from the White House to blacklist companies and countries buying oil from Iran. In fact, Chinese companies placed new orders for Iranian oil after the U.S. government issued the warning. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said in the first week of August that Beijing stood firmly against unilateral American sanctions and emphasised that “China and Iran unwaveringly maintain normal trade and economic ties”. The Iranian economy continues to be dependent on the oil.

In Asia, only the governments of India, Japan and South Korea seem to be buckling under the threats. Tokyo and Seoul are military alliance partners of Washington. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, following arm-twisting by the U.S., has given up plans to undertake a state visit to Iran in July. It would have been the first by a Japanese Prime Minister in more than 40 years. South Korea, the world’s fifth biggest oil importer, buys most of its light crude from Iran. Its government has denied reports that it will stop buying from Iran, but its oil imports from Iran have declined sharply from May. India also seems to following suit after the U.S.’s sharp warning to its “allies” to completely stop importing from Iran by November. The Trump administration has declined “special waivers” to countries like India, which have been traditional importers of Iranian oil.

A U.S. State Department spokesman said sanctions would be imposed on India and China if they did business with Iran. “And yes, we will certainly be requesting that their oil imports go to zero,” the official told the media in June. The Trump administration has been sending senior officials to New Delhi to demand that India act promptly on its recommendations. Among the high-profile American visitors to Delhi in the last two months was Nikki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, who is counted among the Trump administration’s top Iran-baiters. She told the media in Delhi that she had asked the Indian government to cut its oil imports from Iran and downgrade its relationship with the country. Two other top officials have called for regime change in Iran—Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton. Both of them are supporters of the terrorist grouping Mujahedin-e-Khalq.

Going by past experience, the Indian government is likely to substantially reduce oil imports from Iran. The previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government had cooperated to a large extent with the sanctions regime that was in force from 2011 to 2016. However, most of the sanctions against Iran during that period were mandated by the U.N. After the U.N.-mandated sanctions were lifted in 2015, Iran once again became a top supplier of crude to India, just behind Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Iranian heavy crude is cheaper than Saudi and Iraqi oil. The Indian government also committed in 2016 to transfer $6.5 billion it owed to Iran as payment for oil supplies. The payment was held up owing to the sanctions. During the earlier sanctions period, India and Iran had agreed to conduct half of the oil trade between the two countries in Indian rupees. A rupee-rial arrangement was then in place. After the sanctions were lifted three years ago, India started paying Iran in euros for 55 per cent of its oil imports.

The new unilateral sanctions imposed by the U.S. are deemed to be illegal under international law. The Iranian government has been conveying to the Indian side that it understands the constraints India faces as it tries to balance relations between the U.S. and Iran. Interestingly, the Indian government, in the second week of July, gave permission to an Iranian bank to open a branch in Mumbai. The U.S. has not officially reacted to this development. Bank Pasargad will have the distinction of being the first Iranian bank to have an office in India. The presence of the Iranian bank will ensure a smooth flow of funds between the two countries. Then there is the question of the Chabahar port, located adjacent to the Gwadar...
port in Pakistan, which India is committed to developing. New Delhi has committed to invest $500 million in the port and has pledged to make it operational by 2019. There is, however, a question mark on whether India has the will to go ahead with the project in the face of open hostility from the U.S. Off the record, Iranian officials have been complaining about the slow pace of progress in the project. Japanese companies, which were supposed to invest in it, are now unlikely to do so.

The Iranian side has indicated that there are many other countries willing to develop Chabahar. Chabahar can be India’s gateway to the markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the government should ensure that the project is expedited notwithstanding the U.S. threats. The Iranian government wants the Indian government to start work on infrastructure projects that will connect the port to the Iranian rail network and the city of Zabedan located close to the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Minister of State for External Affairs V.K. Singh reassured Parliament in July that India was “engaged in long-term partnership” in the energy sector with Iran and also gave assurances on the operation of the Chabahar port. He stressed that India’s ties with Iran were not dependant on relations with a “third country”. He said that the high-level exchange of state visits highlighted the strong relationship between the two countries.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Tehran in 2016. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was in India in February this year. The declaration of “long-term friendship” between India and Iran came a day after the Trump administration despatched Assistant Secretary of State for Terrorist Financing Marshall Billingslea to New Delhi as part of the U.S.’ ongoing efforts to pressure India into drastically curtailing economic ties with Iran. Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, was also in New Delhi at around the same time to hold talks with Indian officials on the sanctions issue.

The Indian government has on previous occasions insisted that it will comply with the sanctions regime only if it is internationally mandated. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj reiterated this position during the visit of her Iranian counterpart, Mohammed Javad Zarif, to New Delhi in May. She said India would adhere only to U.N.-mandated sanctions and not to those imposed by individual countries. But with the Trump administration fixated on the goal of regime change in Iran, it wants to ensure that most avenues for the export of Iranian oil are blocked, by hook or by crook. Iran has threatened to retaliate if its oil...
exports are blocked by closing down the Straits of Hormuz and disrupting the supply of oil from the Persian Gulf region. “You may begin the war, but it is us who will end it,” warned Major General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, in response to one of Trump’s belligerent tweets threatening to annihilate Iran.

The U.S. has shown its displeasure at the Indian government’s reluctance to immediately comply with its demands by rescheduling, at the eleventh hour, the first ever 2+2 meeting from June to the first week of September. Under the 2+2 format, the Ministers for External Affairs and Defence will hold talks with their U.S. counterparts, the Secretaries of State and Defence.

All of a sudden the Trump administration, which had made an issue out of India’s decision to purchase the potent S-400 missile systems from Russia, has indicated that it will not impose sanctions on India for arms purchases from Russia. But then the Trump administration is not known to speak in one voice on foreign policy issues. The U.S. Congress has passed a “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act” Bill. It went out of its way to provide special “waivers” for India in relation to the purchase of Russian weaponry. Justifying the decision, Secretary of Defence James Mattis said: “The fundamental question we must ask ourselves is, do we wish to strengthen our partners in key regions or leave them with no other option but to turn to Russia, thereby undermining a once in a generation opportunity to more closely align with nations with the U.S. vision of global security and stability?”

In an obvious quid pro quo, the Indian government has agreed to buy even more military equipment from the U.S. There are reports that the Modi government wants to install an American missile shield for the country costing billions of dollars. The Indian government has also also let it be known that it would like President Trump to be the chief guest at next year’s Republic Day celebrations.

Concurrently, the Indian government seems to be on the verge of signing the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) with the U.S. India has been under pressure to do so after the signing of the logistics exchange agreement in 2016. If the Indian government initials the COMCASA, the Indian military will be further drawn into the American military alliance. The logistics exchange agreement allows the U.S. military to use Indian Army bases and ports. COMCASA will give the U.S. access to the Indian military’s communications systems. It will also compromise the sophisticated Russian equipment which is in the service of the Indian armed forces, besides sending a message to China that India is now a key part of the U.S.’ grand strategy of isolating it militarily in the Asia-Pacific region.

Modi in recent months has started talking about the need for strategic autonomy and ambiguity in India’s foreign policy. In a speech in Singapore he said that India’s friendship with the U.S. should not be viewed as an alliance that seeks to contain any other country in the region. Modi had emphasised in his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore that New Delhi gave equal importance to its ties with Washington and Moscow. India is a member of both the BRICS and the SCO. These two groupings have made it clear that they will call the Trump administration’s bluff on Iran. Russia is participating in Iran’s aerospace and nuclear industries. The two countries have played an important role as allies in quelling the jihadist threat in West Asia. China plays an important role in Iran’s economy.

Many of the key Belt and Road projects are located in Iran. Iran is also part of the International North South Transportation Corridor that is essential for enhancing connectivity between Asia countries and the European market.
Reality of racism

The appearance of white-supremacist groups in the public sphere, emboldened by the success of Trump, combined with the casual racism in society has hardened race relationships in the U.S. by Vijay Prashad

A YOUNG WOMAN, ON HER LUNCH BREAK, IS sitting in a common area of Smith College, a small college in Western Massachusetts. She is by herself, unaware of what will befall her in the next few minutes. An employee of the college walks by, notices her and then departs. A few minutes later, a police officer arrives and asks the young woman what she is doing there. The employee of the college, it turns out, had called the police and said that there was a young woman who looked “out of place”.

The young woman is a student, as it happens, and has her identification papers to prove it. The officer apologises, leaves and then does not file a report. The young woman takes to Facebook to vent about the humiliation of the interaction. “I am blown away at the fact that I cannot even sit down and eat lunch peacefully. I did nothing wrong. I wasn’t making any noise or bothering anyone. All I did was be black.”

Diary from Trumpland

DEMONSTRATORS belonging to the right-wing Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer at an alt-right rally in Portland, Oregon, U.S., on August 4.

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What Oumou Kanoute, a young black woman, experienced has become commonplace these days—a sentiment amongst a section of the population in the United States that has begun to assert itself in public spaces, making claims against minorities. The phrase that Oumou Kanoute used, All I did was be black, is used so widely that it is on a T-shirt. What happened to Oumou Kanoute mirrors what happened to Lolade Siyonbola, a black woman graduate student at Yale University. She was taking a nap in a common area in May this year when campus police came to ask her to verify her identity. A fellow student had called the police on her.

In both cases, the colleges apologised for the incidents and set in motion various sensitivity training for staff. This is the typical bureaucratic mechanism to control what would otherwise be a public relations fiasco. Such types of training occur periodically, but they rarely have much of an impact when they are, in fact, fighting against a culture of cruelty that has been largely emboldened by the presidency of Donald Trump.

It is not that this culture of cruelty was absent before Trump took office, but now a broad section of American society feels it can be outrageously bold in the sense that it, namely white America, sets the terms for life in the U.S. When Trump talked of “taking America back”, the question raised was “take it back from whom”? The sotto voce answer is to take it back from the minorities. This is a fantasy. Minorities have never set the terms in the U.S. But it is a great deal easier to blame a young black student for the inequality rate in the country than it is to blame the banks or the very rich.

**Casual Racism**

Not a day goes by without the release of a new video on social media of casual forms of racism. A young child is selling lemonade on the sidewalk and someone calls the police on her because she is black. A young man who is mowing the lawn for someone mistakenly mows part of the lawn of a neighbour, who calls the police on him because he is black. People are sitting in a Starbucks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or barbecuing in the park in Oakland, California, and the police arrive to harass them because they are black. White men and women casually walking up to black parents at playgrounds and at community swimming pools to ask them if they have permission to be there, even when it is clear that they are residents with identification cards that allow them into these gated areas.

Two years ago, Sureshbhai Patel, an aged Indian, was beaten savagely by a police officer after a person said a black man was looking into a garage. The journalist Joy-Ann Reid wrote of these “small acts” in a way that resonates with many who feel impinged upon by everyday racism: “If you’re black or brown in America and you’re lucky, it’s these small acts that stay with you, like a residual cough after a cold.”

What Joy-Ann Reid means when she writes “if you’re lucky” is that there are many black and brown people who do not merely experience the “small acts” but who get killed in their interactions with the police. In June, the Pittsburgh police shot Antwon Rose (aged 17) to death as he fled from them. In July, the Chicago police shot Harith Augustus (aged 37) to death because they suspected he had a gun. In both cases, the men were unarmed. Police data show that since 2012, there is a pattern of disproportionate police killing of blacks (despite being only 13 per cent of the population, 31 per cent of those shot to death by the police are black).

It is important to recognise that the data of disproportionate shooting to death of blacks by the police are only from 2012, namely when Barack Obama was the President. There are deep structures of racism that have not nearly been dismantled, although, through mass pressure, they have been weakened. The Black Lives Matter movement and many other movements like it have certainly raised public consciousness about the fact of racism and its adverse social impact. Psychological studies show, for instance, that the police violence against blacks does immense harm not only to the families of the victims, but also to those who live in communities that suffer from such violence. Young people live in
fear of being shot. That has become their reality. It is because of the protests that surveys recently showed that two-thirds of the U.S. population believes that racism is a major problem in U.S. society. The rest agree that racism exists but do not believe it is a major problem. In other words, everyone agrees that racism exists.

It is this racism that drives the anti-immigration policy of the Trump administration. His statements that Mexicans are rapists or that Mexico is not “sending their best” to the U.S. or that “we’re sending them the hell back”, and his policy to divide families of migrants send a shiver down humanity. Trump’s harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric sends pheromones into society, excites a section to act against anyone who “looks like an immigrant” and deputises them to behave like police officers. It is not uncommon for the police to be called to check if a family that “looks like illegal immigrants” have documents, or not even uncommon for an ordinary person to demand identification of a stranger. The anti-immigrant wave absorbed an unchecked disdain for Islam and Muslims to become a tsunami against anyone who “looks like a Muslim” or “looks like an illegal”.

This is the casualness of the new racial landscape. It reflects the old Nazi slogan *Die Deutschen immer von dem Ausländer und den Juden* (The German always before the foreigner and the Jews), now rewritten as the American always before the blacks, the immigrants, the Muslims and the Jews. Trump’s presidency has emboldened overt racists to enter openly and proudly into the public domain. In the first week of August, a rally in Portland, Oregon, was held by the Proud Boys. Not only are they proud to be white supremacists, many wore T-shirts with the slogan “Pinochet Did Nothing Wrong”, referring to the Chilean dictator who massacred those belonging to the country’s Left.

**AMERICAN NAZISM**

These groups hold rallies against Marxism and for white rights. They consider themselves “ethnic nationalists” or “white nationalists” and hold fast to slogans such as “better dead than red”. Their virulent behaviour towards non-whites and towards the media is given licence by Trump, who calls the media the “Enemy of the People” and who speaks repeatedly of “our country” in racist terms.

At Trump rallies, including as recently as early August in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Trump supporters used Nazi language to refer to the press (Lügenpresse, or lying press) and wore Nazi insignia with pride. There are a range of Nazi groups in the U.S., from the American Nazi Party to Women for Aryan Unity, from Milwaukee’s New Order to San Jacinto’s White Devil Social Club. The entry of these racists in the public sphere, combined with the casual racism in society, has certainly hardened the atmosphere in the U.S.

Fear is only one side of the equation. The battle against everyday racism to Nazism is ongoing. Anti-Nazi groups have resurfaced to prevent the Nazi groups from feeling comfortable in public spaces. No “white nationalist” rally is allowed without contest. In Providence, Rhode Island, in early August, the group Ocean State Against Hate shut down a Resist Marxism rally in a scuffle that turned violent. Meanwhile, in Oakland, California, against the incident at a barbeque (BBQ) when the police intervened as a black family was in the park, hundreds of people came back to the same park and held a “BBQ-ing While Black” event. This was a counteraction organised by ordinary people who want no truck with casual or everyday racism.

**SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING**

Since 9/11 the domestic war on terror has created its own architecture of surveillance, most of it by the government, but a considerable amount by civilians. Citizens are told that if they “see something”, then they must “say something”. Over the years, emboldened citizens have called the police and the FBI—the political police—against people whom they have “mistaken” for terrorists. Vigilance allows old racist ideas to take on new racist forms. Now, in the Trump era, white citizens make all kinds of absurd claims against those whom they see as threat; they approach strangers and accuse them of being criminals or illegal immigrants or being “out of place”. This is government-sanctioned surveillance of some sections of society by others. It has become part of the social fabric.
Mugabe’s man wins

Emmerson Mnangagwa, once Robert Mugabe’s right-hand man and a fixture in Zimbabwean politics since independence, retains the presidency and promises a new beginning for the country. 

The final results of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe held on July 30 were on expected lines. Opinion polls conducted before the elections had predicted a narrow victory for the long-ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party and its presidential candidate, the 75-year-old Emmerson Mnangagwa. The opposition was not as united as it was when Zimbabwe went to the polls the last time around. Morgan Tsvangirai, who had led the main opposition party in the country, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), since the late 1990s, passed away earlier in the year. Opposition disunity was most visible during the contest to select his successor. Thokozani Khupe, a senior MDC figure, split

PRESIDENT EMMERSON MNANGAGWA during the Heroes Day commemorations held at the National Heroes Acre in Harare on August 13.
from the party to form an alliance with Joice Mujuru, once a leading light of the ZANU-PF. Joice Mujuru had been sacked from the post of Vice President of Zimbabwe and later from the party.

When the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission finally announced the results of the presidential election after a delay of almost three days, Mnangagwa’s tally was put at 50.8 per cent of the votes. The figure was important as a candidate needs more than 50 per cent of the vote to avoid a second-round run-off. The MDC’s candidate for President, the 40-year-old Nelson Chamisa, a former student leader and a pastor, got 44.3 per cent of the vote. The rest of the votes were divided among a motley group of 21 candidates, many of whom had broken away from the MDC or the ZANU-PF.

The ruling party won 145 seats in Parliament, while the MDC got 63. This gives the ZANU-PF a two-thirds majority in Parliament, enough to amend the Constitution if the party’s leadership so wishes. Mnangagwa, who took over the presidency in August last year after the military-aided ouster of former President Robert Mugabe, was quick to thank his countrymen after the results were announced and promised a “new beginning” for the country. The President campaigned on a platform of “bringing new jobs and investments” to Zimbabwe.

Mnangagwa has been a fixture in Zimbabwean politics since the time of independence in 1980. Nicknamed the “crocodile” of Zimbabwean politics for his political prowess and timing as he was for a long time viewed as the man who would eventually succeed Mugabe. His sudden falling out with Mugabe last year triggered a chain of events that led to the political demise of his former mentor. Mnangagwa is close to the security establishment and the powerful “national liberation war veterans association”. He has held several important posts in government, including that of Vice President. At a crucial period in Zimbabwe’s post-independence history, he headed the security and intelligence services.

Most of the independent election observers, including those from the African Union, certified that the elections this time were conducted in a largely transparent and peaceful manner. The monitoring group of the Southern African Development Community said that the elections were “peaceful and orderly” and had opened the door to strengthen the country’s democracy. There was a grenade attack at a rally addressed by President Mnangagwa in which two of his associates were killed and a few people were injured.

The Zimbabwean army strongly denied reports that had appeared in the Western media saying that it had helped the ruling party in the election. Mnangagwa’s Vice President is the former army general Constantino Chiwenga, who had played a key role in the sidelining of Mugabe. Many supporters of the ZANU-PF, including those who fought in the liberation war, are unhappy that the security establishment still has a dominant role in the government.

In a surprise last-minute intervention just before the elections, Mugabe told Zimbabweans that he would not be voting for Mnangagwa, his former protege and right-hand man. In fact, he said that he was looking forward to congratulating Chamisa. The 94-year-old former President went on to say that Zimbabwe was no longer a democracy and had “now become a military regime”. Mugabe’s eleventh-hour intervention evidently did not have any impact on the elections as today he is a much diminished figure. His wife, Grace, who led the Generation-40 (G-40) faction of the ZANU-PF, is keeping a low profile. G-40 was the name given to the faction comprising younger leaders of the ZANU-PF who were aiming to step into the political void after Mugabe’s departure. The older generation of leaders supporting Mnangagwa, mainly comprising war veterans, is known as “Team Lacoste”. The “crocodile” is the symbol of the famous French clothing brand Lacoste. Many G-40 leaders are in exile or in the political wilderness while “Team Lacoste” is now ruling the roost.

INTIMIDATION OF VOTERS
A European Union (E.U.) observer mission has claimed that there was an “unlevel playing field” and intimidation of voters but also conceded that the conduct of the elections had “a number of positive features”. It said that there was “an improved political climate, inclusive participation rights and a peaceful vote”. There were very few reported cases of violence against the opposition in the run-up to these elections. The MDC and its candidate for President were allowed to campaign freely all over the country, including in the rural strongholds of the ruling party. Most of the election-related violence took place in the capital, Harare, after the country’s election commission started announcing the results.

Chamisa had a role in fuelling the short-lived but
deadly violence. As soon as the polls closed, he announced that the MDC had won the elections. When the results showed an opposite trend, without providing any proof, he said that the ZANU-PF had stolen the election and called on supporters to protest. Harare, an opposition stronghold, exploded. Six people were killed in a single day of violent protests. Swift intervention by the security forces stopped the situation from deteriorating further, and the city returned to normalcy and opened for business within a couple of days.

After the results were formally announced, Chamisa said that the MDC would not accept the “fake results” and added that the announcement of Mnangagwa as the winner was “regrettable”. He said that he would pursue all “legal and constitutional means possible to protect the people’s vote”. So far, the opposition has not been able to come up with any concrete evidence of vote tampering. Relatedly, Chamisa has accepted the veracity of the parliamentary results but is continuing to insist that he won the popular vote for the presidency. His line of argument is that the ZANU-PF with its stranglehold on the rural vote swept all the seats in the hinterland, but given the support base of the MDC in the urban areas, he should have emerged as the winner.

Mnangagwa had hailed the elections as being “fair, free and credible” and challenged the opposition to come up with evidence to back their allegations. Mnangagwa told the media that any Zimbabwean was free to challenge the election results. “We have introduced comprehensive democracy. Any member of the public or any political party can proceed in terms of the Constitution and the electoral Act to challenge the result in the courts.” At the same time, he said that he was talking to Chamisa and that the opposition leader would have an important role to play in shaping the country’s future. Mnangagwa apologised for the bloodshed that occurred in Harare before the announcement of the results.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was quick to congratulate Mnangagwa on his victory and urged all Zimbabweans “to accept the outcome of the elections or follow the legal route should they wish to challenge it.”. China was among the first countries to congratulate Mnangagwa on his victory. In a congratulatory statement, the Chinese government described the election process as “peaceful and orderly” and said that the choice of the Zimbabwean people “should be respected”.

Mnangagwa has been proclaiming for some time that Zimbabwe under his leadership is once again “open for business”. Britain, the country’s former colonial ruler, and China, its biggest trading partner, seem to be happy with the outcome of the elections. China wants stability in Zimbabwe and the region where it has invested heavily. The British are happy with Mnangagwa’s talk of letting some of the white farmers reclaim the land that was taken over from them. Mnangagwa’s proclamations of making Zimbabwe a “business-friendly” country again has won him many admirers in the West. The International Monetary Fund is planning to step in to help in the efforts to revive the economy. It is estimated that around two million Zimbabweans may be in need of food aid. Only around 6 per cent of the population has formal jobs.

The election results once again reflected the rural-urban divide in Zimbabwean politics. The majority of the people live in the countryside. Another factor was the role played by the war veterans’ association. Those who fought the war against the colonialists still wield a lot of influence in the country’s politics. They were the ones who forced Mugabe to give up his cosy relationship with the white business and farming elite. In February 2000, the war veterans’ association issued a strong statement criticising the Mugabe government for neglecting ordinary ZANU-PF party workers and groups supporting it, including widows and children of those who sacrificed their lives in the liberation war. In the statement, they called for “immediate land reforms”. White settlers, who comprise around 1 per cent of the population, controlled more than 70 per cent of the most fertile land in the country. Groups of “war veterans” then took the law into their own hands and started occupying land owned by white farmers.

The ZANU-PF government under Mugabe, politically beholden to the war veterans, had to acquiesce. It soon approved “a fast-track land reforms policy”. Although Zimbabwe soon after ceased to be the agricultural bread basket of southern Africa, expropriating land from those who sided with the colonisers was a popular move. The E.U. and the United States soon imposed stringent sanctions on Zimbabwe, triggering the country’s downward economic spiral. It will be difficult for Mnangagwa to put the land reforms genie back into the bottle. In fact, in neighbouring South Africa, there are growing demands for radical land reforms of the kind witnessed in Zimbabwe. In South Africa, too, much of the fertile land is still under the control of white farmers.
VANDE MATARAM began as the song of Hindu revivalists in the 19th century, went through a phase of its acceptance as a slogan by Maulanas Mohammed Ali and Shaukat Ali during Gandhi’s opportunistic alliance with them in the destructive Khilafat movement, and has now emerged, shorn of all gloss, as the battle cry of Hindutva.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s (RSS) boss Mohan Bhagwat’s reply to a question soliciting his view on the issue reveals its true significance: “What is the
Sangh’s view? (Thumps the table) Vande Mataram kehna hoga (Everyone in India will have to say Vande Mataram)” (India Today; November 4, 2009). The river of madness was in full flood. Sample this from the same interview: “Pakistan and Afghanistan are a part of us and will return one day”; and this: “India’s unity and integrity is [sic.] non-negotiable. So is the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya and a Uniform Civil Code.” The Supreme Court is toiling in vain. The Sangh Parivar confidently banks on a favourable judgment before the 2019 election. It will never submit to an unfavourable judgment, having declared umpteen times, consistently in the last 30 years, that it is not a matter for the courts to decide.

When told that Muslims consider Vande Mataram to be “against their religion”, he arrogantly replied: “I don’t think any religion is against desh bhakti [patriotism]. To say Bharat Mata ki Jai and Vande Mataram is not like a religious puja or idol worship.” In truth, it is both. Bhagwat is either ignorant or intentionally false.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) was highly influential. His poem “Bande Mataram” was composed as a song in 1875 and inserted in his novel Anandamath, which was first published in 1882, on its completion. It begins in Sanskrit, turns into Bengali and returns to Sanskrit. The “Motherland” was identified with Hindu religious deities, first, with Durga, the demon-slaying goddess, only to be transformed into the image of Kali, an angry and destructive force.

Who is this Mother whom the country was fighting for? The song, read in context, in the novel, provides the answer. It reads thus:

BANDE MATARAM
MOTHER, I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
With the winds of delight,
Dark fields waving, Mother of might,
Mother free.
Glory of moonlight dreams,
Over thy branches and lordly streams,
Clad in thy blossoming trees,
Mother, giver of ease,
Laughing low and sweet,
Mother, I kiss thy feet,
Speaker sweet and low,
Mother, to thee I bow.
Who hath said thou art weak in thy lands,
When the swords flash out in seventy million hands,
And seventy million voices roar
Thy dreadful name from shore to shore?
With many strengths who art mighty and strong.
To thee I call, Mother and Lord!

(Anandamath, Part IV, chapter 8. An English translation by T.W. Clark.)

The context of this extract is that Satyananda, the leader of a band of sanyasis, had just won a victory over Muslim forces and their British officers. To him came a figure who spoke with the voice of God, instructing him to cease fighting.

'Satyananda. Come; I’m ready. But, my lord, clear up this doubt in my mind. Why at the very moment in which I have removed all barriers from before our eternal Faith, do you order me to cease?

He. Your task is accomplished. The Muslim power is destroyed. There is nothing else for you to do. No good can come of needless slaughter.

S. The Muslim power has, indeed, been destroyed, but the dominion of the Hindus has not yet been established. The British still hold Calcutta.

He. Hindu dominion will not be established now. If you remain at your work, men will be killed to no purpose. Therefore come.

S. (greatly pained). My Lord, if Hindu dominion is not going to be established, who will rule? Will the Muslim kings return?

He. No. The English will rule....

He. Your vow is fulfilled. You have brought fortune to your mother. You have set up a British government. Give up your fighting. Let the people take to their ploughs. Let the earth be rich with harvest and the people rich with wealth.

S. (weeping hot tears). I will make my mother rich with harvest in the blood of her foes.

He. Who is the foe? There are no foes now. The English are friends as well as rulers. And no one can defeat them in battle.” (C.H. Philips with the cooperation of H.L. Singh and B.N. Pandey; The Evolution of India and Pakistan, 1858 to 1947: Select Documents, Oxford
The novel was not anti-British. It was anti-Muslim. So, was the song Vande Mataram.

In an erudite essay entitled “Imagining Hindu Rashtra: The Hindu and the Muslim in Bankim Chandra’s Writings”, Tanika Sarkar concluded: “Bankim bequeathed a set of historical judgments on the nature and consequences of Muslim rule in Bengal: ‘How does our Muslim ruler protect us? We have lost our religion, our caste, our honour and family name, and now we are about to lose our very lives. ...How can Hinduism survive unless we drive out these dissolute swine?’ (Anandamath, Bankim 1:727).

These ideological moves do not need proper historical authentication since they are posed in a fictional space; the pseudo-historical comments, however, carry an immense weight of conviction, nonetheless, particularly since Bankim was known for a highly historicist thrust in his discursive prose. They are, therefore, insidiously authenticated, and then they justify political rallying cries of extreme virulence: ‘Kill the low Muslims’ (Bankim 1:784) is the refrain that is repetitively raised in Anandamath. Even though Bankim never made use of the recent theories of the colonial drain of wealth, he used the same motif to describe the flight of money from Bengal to Delhi in the form of a heavy revenue burden in Mughal times (“Bangalar itihass”, Vividha Prabandha, Bankim 2:332).

Perhaps the most significant way in which Bankim served as a bridge between nineteenth century Hindu revivalism and the later, anti-Muslim, violent politics was by providing an immensely powerful visual image of communal violence and by giving it the status of an apocalyptic holy war. He stamped the image indelibly on the imagination of communal politics by fusing the impulse of community violence and revenge with the spectacle of a famine body.

“In his last novel, Sitaram, Gangaram, the brother of the heroine, Shree, is unjustly charged and sentenced to execution by a tyrannical Muslim faqir (holy man) and a qazi (judge). Unable to stop this mockery of justice, Shree goes to the place of execution, where a big crowd, including many Hindus, has gathered to watch the event. In despair, Shree tries to rally them to save a fellow Hindu, to instil a sense of brotherhood and mutual responsibility by evoking the fact that a man of their community is being killed by another community. Shree does not invoke the theme of justice, nor does she try to rally subjects against tyranny and misrule. Quite spontaneously the words that rise to her mouth are words of community solidarity and violence.

“Then Gangaram saw a goddess like figure among the green leaves of the huge tree. Her feet resting on two branches, the right hand clutching a tender branch, the left hand swirling her sari, she was calling out: ‘Kill, kill. ...’ Her long, unbound tresses were dancing in the wind; her proud feet were swinging the branches up and down, up and down, as if Durga herself was dancing on the lion on the battlefield. Shree had no more shame left, no consciousness, no fear, no rest. She kept calling out—‘Kill, kill the enemy.... The enemy of the country, the enemy of Hindus, my enemy ...’ Okill, kill the enemy.”
Anti-Muslim references are spread all over the work since the central theme was anti-Muslim. References of a most intemperate and, indeed, vituperative character abound. Jivananda, with sword in hand, at the gate of the temple, exhorts the children of Kali: “We have often thought to break up this bird’s nest of Muslim rule, to pull down the city of the renegades and throw it into the river—to turn earth free from evil again. Friends, that day has come.”

“Written as a story set in the period of the dissolution of the Moghul Empire, the hero of the novel, Bhavananda, is planning an armed rising against the Muslims of Bengal. While busy recruiting, he meets Mahendra and sings the song ‘Bande Mataram’ or ‘Hail Mother’. The latter asks him the meaning of the words and Bhavananda, making a spirited answer, concludes with: ‘our religion is gone, our caste is gone, our honour is gone. Can the Hindus preserve their Hinduism unless these drunken Nereys (a term of contempt for Muslims) are driven away? ... Mahendra, however, not convinced, expresses reluctance to join the rebellion. He is, therefore, taken to the temple of Ananda Math and shown a huge image of four-armed Vishnu, with two decapitated and bloody heads in front. ‘Do you know who she is?’ asks the priest in charge, pointing to an image on the lap of Vishnu, ‘She is the Mother. We are her children, Say ‘Bande Mataram’. He is taken to the image of Kali and then to that of Durga. On each occasion he is asked to recite ‘Bande Mataram’. In another scene in the novel some shouted ‘kill, kill the Nereys’. Others shouted ‘Bande Mataram’, ‘will the day come when we shall break mosques and build temples on their sites?’

MUSLIMS’ OBJECTION
The context only makes it worse. “The land of Bengal, and by extension all of India, became identified with the female aspect of Hindu deity, and the result was a concept of divine Motherland.” How secular is such a song? It is not the mere gesture of bowing but the bowing to this form of divinity which Muslims have found objectionable. Protest was voiced fairly early in the day and on the unexceptionable ground that it was sectarian and not national.

The protest was expressed with such cogency and restraint that it bears recalling in extenso. In his presidential address to the second Session of the All-India Muslim League held at Amritsar on December 30, 1908, Syed Ali Imam, a great judge, said: “I cannot say what you think, but when I find the most advanced province of India put forward the sectarian cry of ‘Bande Mataram’

R.C. Majumdar: “Bankim Chandra’s nationalism was Hindu rather than Indian. This is made crystal clear from his other writings ... against the subjugation of India by the Muslims.”
as the national cry, and the sectarian Rakhi-bandhan as a national observance, my heart is filled with despair and disappointment; and the suspicion that, under the cloak of nationalism, Hindu nationalism is preached in India becomes a conviction. Has the experiment tried by Akbar and Aurangzeb failed again? Has 50 years of the peaceful spread of English education given the country only a revival of denominationalism?

“Gentlemen, do not misunderstand me. I believe that the establishment of conferences, associations and corporate bodies in different communities on denominational lines are necessary to give expression to denominational views, so that the builders of a truly national life in the country may have before them the crystallised needs and aspirations of all sects. In this connection, every lover of India will welcome such institutions as Kayastha Conference, Mohammedan anjuman and conferences, the association of the domiciled community, and all such denominational institutions. Such activities help to bring into focus the thoughts of all sections of the population of India. Regard for the feelings and sentiments, needs and requirement of all is the key-note to true Indian nationalism. It is more imperative where the susceptibilities of the two great communities, Hindus and Musalmans, are involved.

“Unreconciled, one will be as great a drag on the wheel of national progress as the other. I ask the architects of Indian nationalism, both in Calcutta and Poona, do they expect the Musalmans of India to accept ‘Bande Mataram’ and the Sivaji Celebration? The Mohammedans may be weak in anything you please, but they are not weak in cherishing their traditions of their glorious past. I pray the Congress leaders to put before the country such a programme of political advancement as does not demand the sacrifice of the feelings of the Hindu or the Mohammedan, the Parsee or the Christian.”

In 1937, when Congress Ministries came into being in many provinces, and “Bande Mataram” began to be sung in the legislatures, the Muslim League strongly objected to it. A resolution adopted by the 25th Session of the League at Lucknow, in October 1937, dubbed it as “not merely positively anti-Islamic and idolatrous in its inspiration and ideas, but definitely subversive of the growth of genuine nationalism in India”. The League still believed in Indian nationalism. Before long it was to discard belief in Indian nationalism.

**CONGRESS’ STATEMENTS**

The Congress took note of the League’s objection and tried to meet it halfway. The Congress Working Committee, which met in Calcutta on October 26, 1937, under the presidency of Nehru, adopted a long statement on the subject. It asked that the song should “be considered apart from the book”. Recalling its use in the past 30 years, the resolution said: “The song and the words thus became symbols of national resistance to British Imperialism in Bengal especially, and generally in other parts of India. The words ‘Bande Mataram’ became a slogan of power which inspired our people and a greeting which ever reminds us of our struggle for national freedom.

“Gradually the use of the first two stanzas of the song spread to other provinces and a certain national significance began to attach to them. The rest of the song was very seldom used, and is even now known by few persons. These two stanzas described, in tender language, the beauty of motherland and the abundance of her gifts. There was absolutely nothing in them to which objection could be from the religious or any other point of view. ... The other stanzas of the song are little known and hardly ever sung. They contain certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India.

“The Committee recognise the validity of the objection raised by Muslim friends to certain parts of the song. While the Committee have taken note of such objection insofar as it has intrinsic value, the Committee wish to point out that the modern evolution of the use of the song as part of national life is of infinitely greater importance than its setting in a historical novel before the national movement had taken shape. Taking all things into consideration, therefore, the Committee recommend that, wherever Bande Mataram is sung at national gatherings, only the first two stanzas should be sung, with perfect freedom to the organisers to sing any other song of an unobjectionable character, in addition to, or in the place of, the Bande Mataram song.” A song which requires surgery cannot become a national anthem.

The Government of India acquired this emotion-charged legacy. Its stand was defined in a statement by Prime Minister Nehru to the Constituent Assembly (Le-
The question of having a national anthem tune to be played by orchestras and bands became an urgent one for us immediately after the 15th August 1947. It was as important as that of having a national flag. The ‘Jana Gana Mana’ tune, slightly varied, had been adopted as a national anthem by the Indian National Army in South-East Asia, and had subsequently attained a degree of popularity in India also. The matter came to a head on the occasion of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1947 in New York. Our delegation was asked for our national anthem for the orchestra to play on a particular occasion. The delegation possessed a record of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ and they gave this to the orchestra who practised it. When they played it before a large gathering it was very greatly appreciated, and representatives of many nations asked for a musical score of this new tune which struck them as distinctive and dignified. The orchestral rendering of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ was recorded and sent to India.

“Chatterjee was positively and fiercely anti-Muslim. We were eager readers of these romances and we readily absorbed their spirit.”

Apart from the general appreciation with which this tune was received, there was at the time not much choice for us, as there was no proper musical rendering available to us of any other national song which we could send abroad. At that stage, I wrote to all the provincial Governors and asked their views about our adopting ‘Jana Gana Mana’, or any other song as the national anthem. I asked them to consult their premiers before replying. Every one of these Governors, except one (the Governor of the Central Provinces), signified their approval of ‘Jana Gana Mana’. Thereupon, the Cabinet considered the matter and came to the decision that provisionally ‘Jana Gana Mana’ should be used as the tune for the national anthem, till such time as the Constituent Assembly came to a final decision. Instructions were issued accordingly to the provincial governments. It was very clear that the wording of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ was not wholly appropriate and some change would be necessary. What was important was the tune to be played by bands and orchestras, and not wording. Subsequently, the new Premier of West Bengal informed us that he and his government preferred ‘Vande Mataram’.

“That is the position at present. It is unfortunate that some kind of argument has arisen as between ‘Vande Mataram’ and ‘Jana Gana Mana’. ‘Vande Mataram’ is obviously and indisputably the premier national song of India, with a great historical tradition, and intimately connected with our struggle for freedom. That position it is bound to retain and no other song can displace it. It represents the position and poignancy of that struggle, but perhaps not so much the culmination of it. In regard to the national anthem tune, it was felt that the tune was more important than the words. ... It seemed therefore that while ‘Vande Mataram’ should continue to be the national anthem, it should be that of ‘Jana Gana Mana’, the wording of ‘Jana Gana Mana’ to be suitably altered to fit in with the existing circumstances.

The question has to be considered by the Constituent Assembly, and it is open to that Assembly to decide as it chooses. It may decide on a completely new song or tune, if such is available.”

A more definitive statement was made by the President of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad, on January 24, 1950. He said: “There is one matter which has been pending for discussion, namely, the question of the national anthem. At one time it was thought that the matter might be brought up before the House and a decision taken by the House by way of a resolution. But it has been felt that, instead of taking a formal decision by means of a resolution, it is better if I make a statement with regard to the national anthem. Accordingly, I make this statement. ...The composition consisting of the words and music known as ‘Jana Gana Mana’ is the national anthem of India, subject to such alterations in the words as the government may authorise as occasion arises; and the song ‘Vande Mataram’, which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom, shall be honoured equally with Jana Gana Mana and shall have equal status with it. (Applause.) I hope this will satisfy the Members.”

In the 80 years since the Congress’ surgery and 70 years since the Constituent Assembly’s decision, the Sangh Parivar has discarded any veneer of secular nationalism, fraudulent as it was. We are now left with three stark realities. 1. _Anandamath_ and “Vande Mataram” were deeply religious. 2. Both were viciously, explicitly anti-Muslim. 3. The Muslims of India cannot accept “Vande Mataram” without losing all self-respect.
Politics and the appropriation of history

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s “Vande Mataram” was the subject of controversy even in the 1930s, but contrary to the claims of communal ideologues and politicians, there is no historical evidence to suggest that the Congress leadership “truncated” the poem to appease Muslim sentiments.

The appropriation of iconic figures from national history is a common form of ideological aggrandisement. Perhaps it happens more often in Bengal because there is now a tendency to dwell on the glories of the past. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is the latest victim, for he is easy game for communalist ideologues and politicians. They focus upon parts of his novel Anandamath and some of his historical novels situated in the Mughal period. Some literary critics of his times pointed to his habit of heroising Hindu characters and denigrating Muslims. Above all, politician critics believed that the song, “Vande Mataram”, which he put at the ideational core of Anandamath, iconising the country as a mother figure, alienated Muslim sentiments. From the 1930s it became a political issue in controversies involving Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and indeed the entire All India Congress Committee (AICC).

The fact that the song and Bankim’s works continue to be referred to till date—and controverted and defended—shows that his impact on our historical imagination was great. The latest instance of that is a ‘new interpretation’ of the significance and historical role of the “Vande Mataram” song.

The “new interpretation” comprises two propositions. First, it is said that the original song was “truncated” and recommended by the Congress to the Constituent Assembly as a national song. Emphasis is put on the fact that “Vande Mataram” as we know it today consists of five stanzas or 27 lines, but only the first six lines in the first two stanzas were selected by the Indian National Congress (INC) as worthy of elevation to the status of national song.

Secondly, the “new interpretation” suggests that the plot to truncate the song was driven by a political motive—the motivation of the Congress to appease Muslim sentiments. Hence, the Congress’ decision to discard the last four stanzas of the original poem containing references to Hindu images and deities. An extension of the above argument leads to the conclusion that the Partition of India was the ultimate outcome—those who divided the song eventually divided the country. This “new interpretation” made frontpage headlines in The Hindu, The Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Economic Times, etc., on January 28.

Let us examine these proposi-
tions. First, how far is it correct to assume that there was a truncation of the original text of the poem? Contemporary documents suggest that the original version, written probably around 1872, contained six lines in two stanzas. Later, the poem was expanded to 27 lines in six stanzas by Bankim to place the poem in the context of the novel at the time of its publication in 1881. Thus, there were two separate poems.

Another major problem with the “new interpretation” is that the scenario one would expect if indeed the Congress, in pursuit of appeasement of the Muslim leadership, had conceded on Vande Mataram; if indeed that is how we must understand the attitude of the Congress, then the action and behaviour of the two parties in contestation would have been different from what they actually were.

I looked around searching in the contemporary documents and what did I find? There is no evidence that the resolution of the INC in 1937 with respect to accepting “Vande Mataram” as a national song was in exchange of, or in the expectation of, a quid pro quo from Jinnah and other Muslim leaders. In fact, there is no evidence that the Muslim League was pleased with the decision. On the contrary, Jinnah wrote to Nehru a few months after the Congress resolution drawing attention to the fact that “Muslims all over have refused to accept the Vande Mataram or any expurgated edition of the anti-Muslim song as a binding national anthem” (Paradoxes of Partition: Documents, ed. S.A.I. Tirmizi, Delhi, 1998, hereafter cited as Documents, page 361). Needless to say, Jinnah’s term “expurgated” serves as the equivalent of the term ‘truncated’, currently in circulation in the “new interpretation”.

In April 1938, Jinnah, in his presidential speech at the Muslim League Conference in Calcutta, reiterated his opposition to “the Congress endeavour to impose the Vande Mataram song” (Documents, page 387). On October 8 that year, while speaking at the Sind Provincial Muslim League Conference, he launched another tirade against the Congress saying it had aggressively imposed on the provincial legislatures a song that was “idolatrous” in its origin and in substance “a hymn to hatred for the Musalmans” (Documents, page 482).

In the Qaid-i-Azam Papers, his private papers, there are notes which he jotted down as important points for negotiating with Nehru: the Vande Mataram issue is among the first two points for discussion towards elimination, the other point being the Muslim Mass Contact Programme of the Congress (Documents, page 326; Qaid-i-Azam Papers, F. 40/1-12). In December 1938, at the Muslim League Conference in Patna, Jinnah once again emphasised the League’s opposition to “Vande Mataram” (Jinnah’s speech, December 26, 1938, Documents, page 541). Thus, there is plenty of evidence of Jinnah’s continued opposition to the Congress agenda with respect to “Vande Mataram”.

WHAT WAS “TRUNCATED”? Next, let us look at the so-called act of “truncation”. There is undoubtedly something one cannot easily accept in the idea of cutting up a poem in the manner suggested in the “new interpretation”. However, proponents of this interpretation may consider the fact that what happened actually is a little different from what the unqualified term “truncation” suggests. It is true that in October 1937 the poem was divided into two parts (the first part, comprising six lines in two stanzas, being accepted as a national song), but the crucially important fact is that the piece of writing thus divided was actually a composite piece, the result of merging a poem written by Bankim Chandra around 1872 and another poem written by him in 1881. Thus, there were two poems to begin with, and the “truncation” or division made in 1937 separated two originally separate pieces.

What is the evidence that the poem divided in 1937 originated in the merger of two different poems written at different times? Our evidence comes from the memoirs of Bankim’s younger brother, Purna Chandra Chatterjee. He recalls that when Bankim was the editor and Purna Chandra the manager of the literary journal, Bangadarshan, one of the assistants in their office picked up the manuscript of “Vande Mataram” from Bankim’s desk and said: “This is not too bad and it will do quite well as a filler to fill up an empty page we have in the galley proofs we have for the next number.”

Bankim was not pleased with the proposal to publish “Vande Mataram” in that manner. He locked up that page in his drawer and said: “You cannot guess now if this is good
or bad. Time will tell—I shall be dead by then, it is possible that you may see that day” (Purna Chandra’s memoirs in this regard are reproduced in the latest biography of Bankim Chandra, Bankim Chandra Jeebani by Amitra Sudan Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 1991, pages 331-332). There the matter ended and the poem remained in Bankim’s possession, unpublished, until Bankim returned to the theme of Vande Mataram while writing Anandamath in 1881.

We must add that the exact date of the composition of the original poem is not known. But biographies of Bankim surmise that it was certainly written around 1872, when the first census of Bengal Presidency revealed that in 1872 the population was 70 million, the number the poem mentions as “saptakoti”.

The poem was reincarnated in Anandamath and Bankim added several more stanzas. The original poem written years ago was a lyric in the tradition of “vandanas” in Sanskrit and there is a sharp stylistic contrast between that part and the addition made in 1881. Unlike the original poem, in the addition that came later there are words and verses in Bengali. Moreover, the original poem was a lyric in praise of the beauty and bounties of the motherland; the later addition was militant in spirit, which was consonant with the context of the novel in which it was now placed. Aurobindo Ghose’s translation conveys to some extent the difference between these parts of the poem. Here is his translation, published first in the journal Karma Yojin on November 20, 1909; the sequences of lines below do not exactly tally with the lines in the original Sanskrit version.

“I bow to thee, Mother,
Richly-watered, richly-fruiting,
Cool with the winds of the south,
Dark with the crops of the harvests,
The Mother!”

Her nights rejoicing in the glory of the moonlight,
Her lands clothed beautifully with her trees in
Flowering bloom,
Sweet of laughter, sweet of speech,
The Mother, giver of boons, giver of bliss!”

In contrast, in the second part not included in the national song approved by the Congress in 1937 there is militant imagery and religious symbolism.

This is clear from invocations to “the Mother who has at her command seventy million people’s swords”, the mother “who drives from her the armies of her foes”, Kamala (or the deity of wealth Lakshmi), “Durga holding her ten weapons of war”, etc., which were added in 1881 to the original lyric; Anandamath required a song with a militant spirit.

The formation of elected provincial governments under the Govern-
with phases of the national movement since 1905 and also recalled how he was “the first person to sing it” at a Congress meeting in 1896. Secondly, he thought that the context of *Anandamath* did influence the reception of the poem in the Muslim mind, that the poem “was liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Muslim susceptibilities”. Thirdly, the first two stanzas of the poem were entirely unobjectionable, but he personally could not sympathise with the sentiments in the stanzas that followed.

“To me the spirit of tenderness and devotion expressed in its first portion, the emphasis it gave to beautiful and beneficent aspects of our motherland made a special appeal, so much so that I found no difficulty in dissociating it from the rest of the poem and from those portions of the book of which it is a part, with all the sentiments of which, brought up as I was in the monothestic ideals of my father, I could have no sympathy” (Rabindranath Tagore, *Letter to J.L. Nehru*, President of Indian National Congress, October 26, 1937).

Tagore concluded: As far as the first two stanzas were concerned, that portion of the poem “acquired a separate individuality and an inspiring significance of its own in which I see nothing to offend any sect or community” (Tagore to Nehru, October 26, 1937, in Prabhat K. Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra Jeebanee*, Vol. IV, 1994, page 110).

**THE FINAL OUTCOME**

If one accepts the “new interpretation” of the Congress position from 1937 as “appeasement” by Congress, what was the difference between that position and the opinion of Tagore? The operative part of the Congress Working Committee resolution was as follows: “The Committee recognise the validity of the objection raised by Muslim friends to certain parts of the song. While the Committee have taken note of such objection insofar as it has intrinsic value, the Committee wish to point out that the modern evolution of the use of the song as part of national life is of infinitely greater importance than its setting in a historical novel before the national movement had taken shape.

“Taking all things into consideration therefore the Committee recommended that wherever the Bande Mataram is sung at national gatherings only the first two stanzas should be sung, with perfect freedom to the organisers to sing any other song of an unobjectionable character, in addition to, or in the place of, the Bande Mataram song” (“Bande Mataram song”, undated, AICC Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, file nos. 31-34 of 1937).

In the AICC Papers, preserved in the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Nehru’s handwriting can be seen in the drafts of this resolution. In the beginning of the controversy he had dithered—for instance, he wrote to the eminent Urdu poet Ali Sardar Jafri that on the one hand the song had become “a symbol of nationalism” but on the other hand, “the ideas it contains are out of keeping with modern notions of nationalism and progress” (Nehru to Jafri, September 1, 1937, AICC Papers, Nehru Library, file no I. 65 kw-2/1937). But there can be no doubt that the Working Committee’s decision followed Nehru’s line of thinking some weeks later, guided by Tagore’s advice.

We know that far from being satisfied with the “expurgated” or truncated song, even after the Congress resolution of October 1937, Jinnah resumed his pressure on the Congress to drop the song altogether. Thus, unseemly conflicts, demonstrations, walkouts, etc., marked meetings of legislatures, municipal bodies and others at every ceremonial recital of the song. It was an insult to the song.

Eventually, the issue needed Mahatma Gandhi’s intervention. In January 1939, Gandhi himself drafted a resolution: “As to the singing of the long-established national song, Vande Mataram, the Congress, anticipating objections, has retained as national song only those stanzas to which no possible objection could be taken on religious and other grounds. But except at purely Con-
A major dissident was C. Rajagopalachari, who wrote to Vallabhbhai Patel on January 7, 1939: “These concessions will not save the situation. We may act up to the formula ourselves, but if we set them forth as concessions they will only become points for further agitation and will make no gain for peace. On the other hand, the concessions may give rise to a weakening of Hindu psychology and produce depression all around” (C. Rajagopalachari to Vallabhbhai Patel, January 7, 1939, Documents, op.cit., page 591).

However, he eventually accepted the majority judgement. Nehru wrote by way of concluding the debate in the working committee: “The Working Committee was of opinion that we should avoid making this [Vande Mataram] a matter of controversy as far as possible” (Nehru to Gobinda Ballav Pant, January 16, 1939, Documents, page 607). This suggests that the matter was on the brink of causing a controversy in the party. There continued to prevail old loyalties and style of thinking and expression which party resolutions in 1937 could not alter. Congress members, therefore, attached significance to the fact that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in 1931 and Rajendra Prasad in 1934 concluded their presidential speeches with the cry “Vande Mataram”, while Jawaharlal Nehru did not in his presidential speeches in 1929 and 1936. It seems likely that this divided loyalty within the Congress party persisted until Independence and that is why, on January 24, 1950, the last day of the last session of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad, in order to avoid a debate, gave a presidential decision to the Assembly that while “Jana gana mana” would be the national anthem, “Vande Mataram” “shall have equal status with it” (Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. XII, January 24, 1950, page 7).

We started with some questions about the “new interpretation” of the choice made by the Congress with respect to “Vande Mataram”: the Congress elevated to the status of “national song” only the first six lines in the first two stanzas. The fact that the rest of the poem was not so chosen is now being interpreted as part of the policy of appeasement vis-a-vis Muslim politicians.

We have argued that the proponents of this “new interpretation” should reconsider their position if they want to be faithful to history. We have looked around for evidence in contemporary news reports, private papers of leaders, and proceedings of political party meetings, in particular the AICC.

I have also drawn upon a book I wrote in 2003, called Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song, Penguin, Primus.

We find that the attitude and behaviour of Muslim leaders, who were the supposed beneficiaries of the appeasement policy, remained unaffected by “concessions” that the Congress allegedly made. This fact casts doubt on the validity of the “new interpretation”. Nor is there any evidence in the correspondence of the Congress leaders that an effort was made to reach an understanding with the opposite side in pursuit of appeasement.

Moreover, the proponents of the “new interpretation” have ignored what the Congress leaders had to say about the reasons why they did not include all 27 lines of “Vande Mataram” (1881) in the national song. Finally, we have also provided evidence that the 27 lines were originally two separate poems written around 1872 and 1881; this fact substantially qualifies the charge of “truncation” levelled against the Congress’ decision of 1937.

Their ignorance of this fact as well as a lack of awareness of the fact that even Rabindranath Tagore’s judgement was against the acceptance of all 27 lines of the poem, and other gaps in their knowledge, account for the acceptance of the “new interpretation”. Our search for answers to the questions we began with involved recounting minute historical details. Unfortunately, the news media rarely allow such scrutiny of the evidence in detail. But the devil is in the details.
THE general public as well as international relations scholars will benefit from this eminently readable book by Stanly Johny, who combines academic rigour with the ability and mobility of the journalist to reach out to places and persons. He wrote this book in order to answer questions such as: How did the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerge as the most potent “terror machinery” of our time in a matter of few years? What enabled the ISIS to attract many thousands more fighters than Al Qaeda? “It was from this surprise and confusion that this book was born,” says the author.

The book has two parts. The first deals with the ISIS, its origins, growth and its defeat in Iraq/Syria. The second part deals with its connection with India. In the first part, we are given a historically sound account of the origin of the group. It is a rather complex story with many unfamiliar names, but Stanly presents it coherently.

‘TRUE ISLAMIC EMIRATES’

The narration starts with Al Qaeda, founded by the Saudi Arabian billionaire Osama bin Laden in 1989 following the successful anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Inspired by Sayyid Qutub, the Egyptian thinker who wielded much influence in the Islamic world, bin Laden despised the Muslim countries as “un-Islamic”. He had a programme to establish “true Islamic emirates” where the Sharia would prevail. But, that programme was not implemented. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had installed himself in a mountainous enclave in northern Iraq, controlled by Ansar-al-Islam, a Salafi-jihadist group of Iraqi Kurds fighting Saddam Hussein’s government, was destined to carry forward the idea of establishing a Caliphate. It may be recalled that United States Secretary of State Colin Powell had incorrectly asserted in his infamous February 5, 2003, speech in the United Nations Security Council that Zarqawi was in Iraq working with Saddam’s government. The author points out that Powell was wrong not only about Zarqawi but also about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Zarqawi and bin Laden met in Afghanistan, by then ruled by the Taliban who called it “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. The meeting did not go off too well as the two interlocutors had diametrically opposite world views. Zarqawi wanted to target Shias, whereas bin Laden wanted to target Sunnis. However, bin Laden handed over $5,000 as seed money to Zarqawi to set up a network in Herat, close to Afghanistan’s border with Iran. By the time U.S. President George Bush invaded Afghanistan in 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, Zarqawi had built up a force of 3,000.

After fighting the U.S. forces in Afghanistan for a while, Zarqawi, through Iran, came over to Iraq where he found a favourable climate as the U.S. had destroyed the Ba’athist state there. The Shias, until then suppressed under Saddam, gained power, a development that corroborated Zarqawi’s thesis that Shias needed to be put down at any cost. Zarqawi wanted to establish a foothold in “Greater Syria” with a view to establishing a Sharia-ruled state. He “welcomed” the ongoing sectarian war in Iraq.

Unlike bin Laden, who carried out attacks from his hideout without seeking to control territory, Zarqawi wanted to carve out territorial havens. Although a U.S. air strike killed Zarqawi in June 2006, the organisation that he had built up survived.

CALIPH OF THE ISIS

The next important protagonist is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a “low-level Islamic academic” who rose to be the Caliph of the ISIS. His original name was...
Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri. His was a Salafist family. He was arrested by the U.S. security in Falluja when he went there to meet a friend who was on the wanted list. He was sent to a prison called Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, named after the U.S. firefighter Ronald Bucca, who died in the 9/11 rescue operation. Ibrahim led the prayers for the 24,000 inmates and gave Friday sermons. In short, Camp Bucca was “a pressure cooker for extremism”. The Americans respected Ibrahim and used him to settle quarrels among inmates. It assessed that he was not a dangerous person and released him after 10 months. That was in December 2004.

Ibrahim joined the Al Qaeda of Iraq and did propaganda work for it. In October 2006, Zarqawi’s successor, al-Masri, announced the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), but that announcement was not followed up by much action. Bin Laden was not pleased with the announcement either. But, Ibrahim was all for the ISI.

When al-Masri was killed in a raid by the U.S. in April 2010, Ibrahim emerged as the leader of the ISI with the support of military officers who had worked under Saddam. When bin Laden was killed by the U.S. Navy SEALs in April 2011, Ibrahim’s status as a jehadi leader was reinforced. Later, he transformed the ISI into the ISIS. That announcement was opposed by Joulani, who was heading a jehadi group called Al-Nusra, which held pockets of territory in Syria. Both Joulani and Ibrahim appealed to bin Laden’s successor, al-Zawahiri, whose verdict was that Ibrahim should focus on Iraq and Joulani on Syria. Ibrahim rejected the verdict. The ISIS and Al-Nusra fought against each other and the ISIS conquered Raqqah in March 2013. By January 2014, the ISIS, which declared Raqqah as its capital and was formally expelled from the Al Qaeda family.

The author shows a good sense of history when he draws attention to the two failed attempts to establish a Wahhabi state by the Al Saud family. The still enduring Wahhabi state was finally established in Saudi Arabia in the 1920s. The author feels Saudi Arabia is the third Wahhabi state and the ISIS is the fourth in history. He points out that a crucial difference between the fourth and the third is that while the latter agreed to live in peace with its neighbours and accept the emerging international order, the former has adopted “continuous jihad” as the duty of every true Muslim.

JEHADISM & THE WEST

A remark or two might be in order at this stage. The author correctly refers to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and bin Laden as the starting point of jihadism in our times and delves much deeper into Islamic history. It will be interesting to ask why the jihad in Afghanistan was necessary.

Obviously, because the Soviet military invaded Afghanistan. By now it is accepted by most scholars that the U.S. Special Forces were working in Afghanistan months before the Soviet military entered the scene and that Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser, sent him a message congratulating him for giving the Soviets their “own Vietnam”. In short, if Carter had not maliciously drawn the Soviet military into Afghanistan we might not have had bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, and if Bush had been wise enough not to invade Iraq in 2003 even the ISIS might not have entered history.

Another point to be noted is that the ISIS became a force to reckon with only after it captured Mosul in June 2014. The U.S. under Barack Obama could have prevented the capture of Mosul, but chose not to do so as U.S. intelligence for a while considered the ISIS as a counterweight to be used against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Let us not forget that the Pentagon controlled Iraqi
ABU MOHAMMAD

al-Adnani al-Shami, ISIS spokesman, with an Islamist flag at an undisclosed location in this video grab taken on October 2, 2013. The group announced on August 30, 2016, that Adnani was killed in Aleppo, Syria.

airspace and did know that al-Baghdadi was advancing towards Mosul from Syria.

In short, to understand the origins of jihadism, it is necessary to highlight the contribution of the West in different ways. Any account that leaves out the commissions and omissions of the West is historically unsound.

THE INDIA CONNECTION

The second part dealing with the ISIS’ India connection will no doubt be of greater interest to the public. The organisation got more foreign fighters than others in the same category mainly because it had territory. The ISIS looks at the world through a “core and periphery prism”. It does not believe in a nation state and seeks a “perpetually expanding Caliphate”. The South Asia operations are carried out from the ISIS wilayat (province) of Khorasan in Afghanistan. Dhobiq, the ISIS’ online English magazine, once carried an interview with an ISIS leader who said that they would take over Kashmir in the near future.

Indians from India and West Asia have joined the ISIS in Khorasan. It is to be noted that the ISIS got many more operatives from the economically advanced south Indian States compared with the relatively backward States in the north. A study by Brookings Institution shows that of the 142 recruits from India, Kerala accounted for 37, Telengana 21, Maharashtra 19, Karnataka 16, Uttar Pradesh 15, Madhya Pradesh six, Tamil Nadu five and Gujarat four.

THE SALAFIST

The author tries to explain the reasons for the relatively large number of ISIS recruits from Kerala. The Salafist movement in Kerala goes back to 1922 when the Muslim Eikya Sangham (Organisation for Muslim Unity) was founded. It started exhorting its adherents to live as the Prophet and the ancestors lived. Over time, Salafism moved away from its reformist currents and embraced the “puritanical Wahhabi ideals”. The strong connections with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are also a contributing factor. What is striking is that the young who are attracted to the ISIS are educated and employed.

Stanly has met and talked to parents of the young people from India who joined the ISIS and some of those who were arrested before they could leave. The case of two brothers, Ijaz Rahman, 34, a doctor, and Shihaz Rahman, 28, a management graduate, is particularly interesting and even intriguing. At some point of time in their life they turned “extremely religious” and started giving up “luxuries”. They left to join the ISIS with their wives and Ijaz’s son. Shihaz pretended that he was taking his family to Mumbai while Ijaz claimed that he was going to Lakshadweep. Rashid, supposedly the leader of the group of 21, including six women, who left India, is a 30-year-old software engineer associated with the Islamic scholar M.M. Akbar’s Peace International School. The family members of the 21 have said that they were influenced by online propaganda. Most of them sent messages to their families that they had reached Dawlatul Islam, an expression used by the ISIS to refer to territory it controls.

In the last chapter, the author correctly argues that despite the ISIS losing territory in Iraq and Syria, its “organisational network and fighting force are far from destroyed” as evidenced from terrorist attacks carried out in different parts of the world. Further, there is no guarantee that the ISIS will not come back to the cities it has lost as it might not be possible for the government to undo the huge damage caused by the war against the ISIS and restore harmony and normalcy. The ISIS has indicated clearly that it will be “globalising” its operations.

There is a useful glossary and some documents in the annexure. The detailed footnotes are helpful. The editing could have been better. It is stated (page 73) that at its peak the ISIS was as big as the United Kingdom, “ruling over 2 million people”. The comparison with the area of the U.K. is more or less correct. But, according to Rand Corporation, at its peak the ISIS had 11 million people under it. Mosul was captured in June 2014 and not in July 2014 as stated on page 101. In a book that contains so many unfamiliar names, an index would have been useful.

Ambassador K.P. Fabian is the author of Diplomacy: Indian Style.
DESPERATE times call for desperate measures. Today’s neoliberal world order calls for radical ideas to end the widening disparity between the 1%ers who have benefited from the socio-economic boom and the rest, whose economic situation is still to see any improvements. We are standing on the edge of the abyss, a disaster orchestrated and defined by the market upheavals and disruption caused by neoliberalism. This narrative dominates modern-day politics and remains a vexed issue in George Monbiot’s latest book, Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis, which at its core is an optimistic injunction for activism against outmoded and failing economic models.

Monbiot argues vehemently that it is imperative to have a sense of ownership and active engagement with the political process if we are to overcome the blight of neoliberalism. But the powerful rich, the corporate lobby and leaders of the neoliberal dispensation will be relentless in holding on to wealth and power at the cost of the 99%. Moreover, the disease of neoliberalism has not only affected the economic fortunes of millions of people but has spread its tentacles to ethnic and tribal wars, causing the United States Supreme Court to uphold the Donald Trump administration’s law prohibiting entry to people from Muslim-majority countries. The ban not only goes against international law but also abrogates the core values of multiculturalism on which the U.S. is founded. The underlying motive is blatantly economic.

Stories, Monbiot observes, are “the means by which we navigate the world. They allow us to interpret its complex and contradictory signals.” The archetypal story of all time is a confrontation between the hero and a world of deeply unsettling disorder that in the end results in the restoration of order. In the social democratic story, the enabling state, along with its people, is the hero who prevails over the elite, whereas in the neoliberal grand narrative, the business community and individual entrepreneurs overpower the authoritarian state.

The story of neoliberalism is an awakening to the reality of humans being “competitors, guided above all other impulses by the urge to get ahead of our fellows”. Individualism takes priority over any socialist altruism, a toxic ideology of competition “that disallows any comfort of hope for a life of common purpose”. Monbiot looks at a future when humanity, biologically self-sacrificing species, initiates “a new politics of belonging”, a dynamism in the making that thwarts the predatory world view of the free-market economy. This is the radically improved narrative that will usher in a better world: “When we develop the right story, and learn how to sell it, it will infect the minds of people across the political spectrum. Those who tell the stories run the world.”

If the story is “consistent and comprehensible” and told with conviction and “narrative fidelity”, it will demand attention. If it is comprehensible, with a plot that has a beginning, middle and end signifying the trajectory of progress, it gets a large following. Such stories capture the mind, notwithstanding the diversity of beliefs and values that exist among people.

The two stories of the 20th century that Monbiot elaborates in the book are Keynesianism that flourished for over 30 years followed by a virulent and extreme kind of capitalism termed as neoliberalism developed by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. For Monbiot, the “story” of neoliberalism began in the 1970s with the failure of Keynesianism.

He explained in a recent interview: “The social democratic story is basically the Keynesian story that says an economic elite grabbed all of the resources and the power, and was allowed to do so through the laissez-faire economics of the Victorian age, and it...
was a disaster with the depression, mass unemployment and mass destruction of wealth.”

On the other hand, the end of elitism would come when the working class of the world unite, overthrow the elites and triumph over the oppressors. This is the neoliberal story that holds the collective forces of the state as villains and valorises the individual and his dreams, upholding the rhetoric of progress and the logic of the free market economy that would guarantee wealth and prosperity for all. The two stories, argues Monbiot, did not live up to what they set out to achieve, while a new story still awaits to replace the existing ones. In it lies the future welfare of the people of this world. In the absence of any global economic rules, nations, now under the hypnotic spell of neoliberalism, feel free to employ any economic policy that benefits them disregarding its adverse impact on other nations and on the deprived millions across the world.

Neoliberalism has remained entrenched ever since U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher introduced an era of self-enterprise and individual responsibility for economic well-being at the cost of the disappearance of the basic human drive for the life of a community and its basis of social bond.

Self-indulgence and profit become the standard, leading to frustration and, as a consequence, suicides. The figures tell the full story and so do the financial crisis of 2008 and the current trade wars aggravated by Donald Trump. Deregulation has been a fiasco and there has been no aspiration to develop new models/stories for the future.

Understandably, there are no easy ways out except the solutions already under consideration; requisites for basic salary and budgetary participation or the delinking of economic policies from selfish industrial or corporate agendas that drive the opposition to a sensible policy on climate change. Participatory politics as well as environmental economics become the crucial areas to concentrate on and build our new story on if the human race is to survive.

**SOCIAL NEED**

The central feature of the human condition since the birth of civilisation has been altruism, empathy, and standing up for the common good in times of need. When these basic human instincts are abandoned for personal fulfilment in a competitive culture, history takes a swing towards the inhuman or the posthuman where social pain or grief goes unheeded. The factor that defines us as human beings with an intrinsic social need and commitment to each other has been largely ignored and must underpin the new narrative for the future.

Although Monbiot recalls Hobbes to explain the role of the state in safeguarding the rights of its citizens, this is too optimistic a yearning. We all would like it to be so, but the only solution remaining for the Left is to understand the extraordinary capacity for altruism and empathy that will finally save the human race. Integral to this vision is the need to take back the reins from the elites and move on with a narrative that tells us of the victory of the oppressed.

This may sound esoteric but it is entirely human, especially when the new model suggested by Monbiot is based on the urgent need for a synergy between economics and ecology, the successful inter-relation of which will determine our survival on the planet. It is not possible to go on in the Keynesian mood of an incessant rivalry or corporate agendas serving neoliberalism are extreme positions and, therefore, each is untenable. Running societies on altruism or collectivism could be as much a misconception as neoliberal ideology of individualism and self-interest. For any social order to function sustainably, the political process must be participatory and inclusive and seek the promotion of the common good. For that, a compromise is usually the path with the least disruption that will guarantee long-term viable results. Yet, it is undeniable that despite the delusory nature of utopianism, institutions and societies continue to struggle for the ideal. Human history remains fluid and unpredictable and progress will never follow a single linear world view. We will stumble, fall and rise as we negotiate the thorny business of human progress.
THE book, Of Saffron Flags and Skull Caps, basically consists of the reflections of the author, Ziya us Salam, who is as perturbed by the Hindu majoritarian reaction (of resorting to marginalisation and even liquidation of members of the religious minority, read Muslims) as the liberal-secular-plural voices among Hindus and other sections. These reflections are born out of his lived realities, observations, and studies of academic works.

In the 1980s, writings and television broadcasts in local languages helped majoritarian reaction capture sociopolitical spaces. Academics research and write largely for themselves. Broadsheets such as Dainik Jagran and Amar Ujala were a big factor behind the saffronisation of the Hindi belt. Zoya Hasan’s Quest for Power: Oppositional Movements and Post-Congress Politics (1997) demonstrated how Uttar Pradesh was saffronised in the 1980s through such newspapers. Jenny White’s Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics (2002) explored how Turkey was communalised, paving the way for Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s rise to power. Even colonial India witnessed vernacular intelligentsia communalising the socioeconomic spaces. One such study of the Hindi intelligentsia in Bihar is by Hitendra Patel (2011).

Communalisation of local language spaces should, therefore, be taken up with seriousness. The first two segments of the book under review should have looked at how sociopolitical spaces have been communalised through regional language media. Ziya Us Salam is successful in turning academic output into lucid communication, although he, too, caters to the English-reading public. Through renderings of his works, he should try to reach out to wider segments of readers.

In his earlier work, Till Talaq Do Us Part, and through some of the chapters in the current volume, he has raised a voice against gender injustice. Confining his arguments within the Quranic framework, he brings out issues relating to women’s emancipation and empowerment. That way, Ziya Us Salam is particularly concerned about subjecting Muslims to introspection, rather than making them play the victim. He rightly concludes his book on an optimistic note.

“The winds of change may not yet be developing into a storm, but the gentle breeze promises lasting relief. Indians are beginning to speak for fellow Indians, irrespective of their religion, gender, caste, just as our Constitution visualised. Critically, Indians are speaking up for India, a nation whose soul has been under attack, a nation that could do with the balm of pluralism” (page 291). This is not misplaced optimism, given the consistent history of India’s pluralism.

However, it is to the aspect of persuading Muslims to subject themselves to introspection that the book pays relatively less attention. It does not talk much about the ideas and organisations, however marginal and barely significant, harbouring communal and exclusionary intents and indulging in such practices, except mainly some pertinent critical remarks about a gradual transformation of the Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Hind (founded in 1941), which is increasingly becoming inclusive and undertaking charitable welfarism; and Tablighi Jamaat, which does not train its cadres in critical thinking. To some extent, these aspects are brought out in Mushirul Hasan’s Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence (OUP, Delhi, 1997). Irfan Ahmad has made a more comprehensive exploration on the Jamaat-e-Islami in Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami.

Ziya Us Salam also does not talk about caste-based discrimination prevalent among some
Muslim communities. It should not have missed his attention because voices raising the issue are becoming louder in academic and popular political spaces. The Ajlaf and Arzal (that is, Dalit) Muslims, together called the Pasmanda segment, are asserting themselves against the Ashrafiyya hegemony. The author is quite right in saying that the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind (founded in 1919) did contest the Muslim League's politics of communal-territorial separatism. It has been working since Independence, but this and other such organisations have paid scant attention to the issue of caste. The attention they paid to the issue of gender has been hardly helpful in challenging and resisting patriarchy and misogyny. Small and marginal Muslim organisations/movements that are seeking to establish a retrogressive theocratic state in India have not been critiqued and exposed in this otherwise useful and timely volume. While critiquing Hindutva, its counterparts among Muslims should also have been exposed.

At the level of ideas, the rapidly deteriorating quality of Urdu journalism, particularly in northern and eastern India, is another issue (pertinent to the volume) that has skipped the author's attention. These Urdu broadsheets are increasingly getting confined to trivial theological contestations and sub-sectarian disputes. This has its impact on the interplay and enactment of identities among Muslims. True, Hindutva forces, having become much more aggressive after capturing state power, have been accusing madrasas.

**ROLE OF MADRASAS**

As the state has abdicated its responsibility of educating and feeding the poor, the community-funded madrasas are working towards this end. They deserve appreciation and encouragement for their efforts. But that does not mean that these educational institutions should be allowed to remain mired in retrogression. A wide network of these institutions should be made to work towards caste and gender reforms for the simple reason that retrogression leads to communal prejudice and hatred. Not only Hindutva forces but many well-meaning Hindus remain grossly misled about madrasas. Matters have been made worse by the capitalist-imperialist motivations of the West's Islamophobia. Falling prey to Hindutva propaganda, they too consider madrasas to be factories of sedition and treason, whereas in reality madrasas are busy perpetuating intra-Muslim sub-sectarian (maslaki) rivalries, something Arshad Alam demonstrated in his well-researched essay titled “The Enemy Within: Madrasas and Muslim Identity in North India” (*Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 42, nos. 2–3, Cambridge, 2008) and in his blog post “The Barelwi-Deobandi Truce? More than Meets the Eye” (dated May 30, 2016) in *New Age Islam*.

In this regard, however, even institutions of modern education where Muslims have greater numerical presence, such as Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Hamdard University and Maulana Azad National Urdu University, have not been able to perform adequately. Academic outputs (publications) from these institutions have largely shied away from exploring, critiquing and exposing the prevalence of caste- and gender-based injustices among Muslims.

In this era of Hindutva-bashing, especially virulent state-backed Hindutva forces, it is difficult to persuade vulnerable communities to do some introspection. Even well-meaning people may dismiss such ideas as an indulgence in self-flagellation. But that should not be the case. In terms of implications, minority and majority communalisms do vary. This, however, does not mean that even in fighting them, the approaches in the two cases should vary.

What is good about this volume is that in all three segments—Hindutva, Muslim identity and the idea of India—the wilful (or not so) delinquencies of the state have been exposed without fear or favour. Today, lynch mobs are let off by the state, as in the past when rioters went scot-free. The Hashimpura pogrom (May 1987) under a “secular” regime in Uttar Pradesh is a case in point. The then Superintendent of Police of Hashimpura, Vibhuti Narain Rai, subsequently exposed the hand of the personnel of the Provincial Armed Constabulary in the cold-blooded killing of Muslims rounded up from riot-torn Meerut in Hashimpura, the area under his jurisdiction. In his meticulously chronicled book *Hashimpura 22 May: The Forgotten Story of India’s Biggest Custodial Killing*, which, Ziya Us Salam rightly says, “ensures that the faith of the minorities in the state is merely shaken, not crushed. Amid all the gloom, there is hope though” (page 258).

In sum, the author, deeply disturbed by and anxious about the onslaught of virulent Hindutva, goes on to explore the rise of such forces and the way they could be fought at the level of ideas. He then tries to comprehend its impact on the existence of the minorities.

The author’s curiosities about the identity and existence of the minorities lead him to look at the idea of India and its civilizational characteristics. Does he find hope and reassurance? Understandably, this attempt to make sense of the country’s present, past and future prompted him to write *Of Saffron Flags and Skull Caps*. The book reassures the otherwise beleaguered Muslims that notwithstanding cow vigilantism and lynches, they must have faith in this country. Saner forces, it hopes, will push aside the forces of destruction. In this sense, the book can hope to play a vital role in retrieving the India that its founding fathers envisioned.

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The mother smiled

Even Yama, the god of death, won’t know you are sixty, so he will go past you.” Gayathri stared at her son for a while.

The face on the pillow was without a ripple, like water in a tank. How fair and beautiful she looked! Even the bare forehead, without kumkum, shone with an inherent purity and looked as if the sculptor had felt that any extra detail would detract from the simplicity of the perfection.

Gayathri stretched out her hand to her son, who was sitting close to her.

“But you have become old, my dear one.”

“Amma, I’m only forty-two.”

“But I haven’t got you married, cursed that I am!” She heaved a sigh.

“I am forty-two, Amma,” Mani laughed.

“I don’t know about that, you are still my child. If you were married, with a wife and child, if I had seen you as a garlanded groom, would I not have jumped with joy, completely cured, as though I had drunk nectar?”

Gayathri did not realise that she was lying.

“Was that her greatest tragedy?” This was the question that Mani often asked himself.

“Don’t think like that, Amma. I am extremely happy just being your son.”

The flash in her unwrinkled young eyes was a flash of triumph!

“Are you speaking the truth, dear? Do you never ever regret that you haven’t got married or that you do not have a life of your own?”

“No,” A calm reply.

Wasn’t she satisfied?

“Why did her face not shine fully?”

“When I have a mother like you, how can I miss anyone else? It is enough that I...
have you.”

How many times must he have repeated this to her!

He was rewarded for his words by the intense joy that spread over her face. What else did he need? And, indeed, what else did she have? But, forcing her radiant face to droop at once, she picked up his hand and stroked it.

“Hmm, you are a good child. That’s why you say that. But as long as I fail in my duty as a parent, am I not culpable? Tomorrow, if god asks me why my son did not have a spouse beside him when he performed the last rites for me...what answer will I have?”

Did this anxiety, too, lurk in the corner of her heart? “God won’t ask such questions. Won’t He know?”

“Even now...even now...if you wish it, why don’t you get married?”

Mani’s fingers touched his grey hair, spectacles and his sunken eyes, and he laughed.

“Amma, if you are old, I am three-fourths there. A marriage for me...now? I do not have any such desire.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“You have never had such a desire?”

“I am yours and yours alone. I do not have any desire beyond being your son.”

Again the triumphant gleam on the beautiful face.

“Whatsoever you say. If that is your wish, what can I say?” Gayathri smiled at him again.

This exchange was a daily ritual. Neither did she tire of asking her son these things, nor did he tire of responding to his mother.

Ranganathan, the cook, came in with a glass of milk.

“How have you finished all your work?” Gayathri asked him.

“Over, Amma.”

“I’ll get the milk for you.” Mani got up.

She reluctantly released her grip over his hand.

Mani took the glass from Ranganathan with his left hand. This was not out of disrespect, but his nature. He was left-handed, that was all. He raised his mother’s head with his right hand and with his left, put the glass to her lips. This was something he did for his mother every day. Gayathri sipped it slowly, looking at him all the while.

“They say it is lucky to be left-handed. But you are an exception. That’s why you were born to me.”

“I haven’t lost anything by being your son.”

He placed the empty glass on the table, wiped her lips with the cloth in his left hand and gently laid her back on the bed.

“Shall I take leave then?” It was the cook.

“Mmm.”

Ranganathan came to work at six in the morning and returned at night after finishing his work. This had been his routine for the last fifteen years. His house was close by, just two streets away. But due to age, he could not see properly in the dark anymore, so Mani had been escorting him home for five years now.

“Shall I go with him, Amma?” Mani got up.

“Okay, dear. But come soon. I feel so lost without you.” He was his mother’s focus, life and achievement.

Gayathri was not even eighteen when her husband died. Two months later, she turned eighteen and her son was born.

Some pitied him for being a posthumous baby, some cursed him for “finishing off” his father even before his birth. Amidst all the people who made various comments in those days, Gayathri sat like a stone for hours, staring at him.

“What would that eighteen-year-old girl have thought?” Mani often wondered.

Would she have thought, “Why this additional burden when life has come to an end?” or “This is the sole comfort, being proof of the fact that even in a short life, I lived fully”?

When one is at an age at which one is throbbing with the desire to live, when even the limits of one’s dreams are unclear, and a menacing fate puts an end to life even before it has begun, is it possible to deceive oneself into thinking that this is the symbol or the proof of the fullness of one’s life? His mother was, after all, a person made of flesh and blood.

It would not have been surprising if she had hated his father for cruelly dying so suddenly. The sweetness that she had tasted had now been taken away from her forever, and the deprivation was that much more unbearable. The child was a gentle reminder of that sweetness and the loss, and so it would not be surprising if she had hated the child too.

When that young woman, who was forcibly imprisoned in an unnatural barrenness, sat staring at her child, slowly, unbeknownst to her, a bond of hatred might have been forged in her heart. That, too, would not be surprising. Her love must have been three-fourths hatred.

When she had lost everything, the only thing that justified her existence was her child. If she lost him too, the only testimony to her horrendous fate would have gone. It was only by binding him to herself that she could spit triumphantly into the face of fate, which had been cruel to her.

Mani also understood that she would not be aware of the logic of all that she thought. She was certainly not conscious that her every thought and deed arose involuntarily from her, a prisoner of her tragedy and devastation. She must have thought she was an independent being. She must have thought she had nothing but love for the child whom she had carried and hugged in her arms.

His grandfather—father’s father—had taken care of them. He had made a will with the intention of securing his daughter-in-law’s future after his death. Mani turned
twenty-four. Thaatha found a good bride for his grandson. When he told Gayathri that the alliance was a good one and that the family would be supportive of her, she accepted it respectfully, with her head bent. She appeared to be happy with the arrangement. But her eyes were restless. When Mani looked at her by chance, he saw a crazed confusion in her expression. She was always talking to herself, as though in a delirium, hiding her thoughts in her words.

“Just two weeks more. My daughter-in-law will be here. I will then be free of care. I will derive total bliss from watching the pair.”

“Just ten days more. My daughter-in-law will be here.”

“Just eight days more. My daughter-in-law will be here.”

Whenever he woke up in the night, he saw his mother wide awake in her bed, or staring at the sky in the terrace, or walking ceaselessly in the room.

“Amma, not able to sleep?”

“No. I’m just overflowing with joy. Just five days more. My daughter-in-law will be here. You will be her husband.” Then she would stare at his face and without a warning, a question would be unsheathed like a penknife.

“But you will still be my son, right?”

“Why do you doubt that, Amma?”

Did he comprehend her then? Otherwise, why was he now flooded with a gush of pity and sorrow for her? Otherwise, why did he feel a kind of relief along with the sense of loss when his Thaatha died of a heart attack three days before the wedding, and his mother called off the wedding, citing that as a reason and saying that the girl had brought misfortune?

For the next two years, no one raised the topic of his marriage. Then there were murmurs and comments from the neighbours.

“Why are you postponing what you should do for your son?”

“He is earning well and he is young. If you don’t get him married, he will go astray.”

“Just because you look so young, does it mean you should not get a daughter-in-law?”

Unable to bear this, one day she said, “I have no objection. Please suggest a good girl.”

A suitable girl was found when he was twenty-seven. Gayathri had rejected many girls for one reason or the other. Finally, there came a proposal which even she could not object to and she felt silent.

Again the restlessness and the palpitations and the sleepless nights...and the exaggerated liveliness and also the counting of days in a state of agitation.

“Just twenty-six days more, just twenty-five days more.”

The girl died in an accident twelve days before the wedding, as if nothing else could have stopped the marriage.

“Every time your wedding is fixed, something like this happens. Why?” What was there on her wrinkle-free, young face—surprise, sorrow, a stirring or relief? Was it just a feeling of comfort that she didn’t have to lose her son? Or was it also a release from anxiety for a person who had been condemned to loneliness from youth, who could not bear to see the togetherness of another?

Did she herself understand it?

Mani looked at her deeply, and felt a tenderness which made him want to hug and comfort something that was throbbing with hurt.

“Maybe I am not destined to marry?” he had said.

For a moment, her eyes had shone radianty. But the next moment, she had hastened to say, “Don’t be silly. Shouldn’t you also settle down? Shouldn’t I see that and rejoice?”

Was it her eyes that spoke the truth, or her tongue? Both were true.

She slept peacefully that night.

After that, Gayathri did not seriously look out for an alliance for her son. Once in a while, a proposal would come their way, but nothing would come of it. It was difficult to say who was responsible for letting go of the opportunity—the mother or the son. The mother played her part, moved by a nameless emotion; the son completed it by fully understanding her. That was all.

“I keep looking out for good girls, Mani.”

“I know, Amma.”

“Nothing really clicks.”

“So what is the hurry?”

“That’s true. Nowadays, people marry even in their thirties. Somewhere, your bride would already have been born.”

“Don’t worry, Amma.”

“I don’t know. If the girl who should grace this house comes, I will hand you and all my responsibilities over to her and set out without a care for a tour of the temples.”

He would look with compassion at the faultless face, which was a perverse hotchpotch of the nine emotions; at the pathetic face, on which youth and beauty lingered obstinately.

“Mahakali, goddess of sacrifice! I have only one life to offer at your feet and pacify you!” He felt like crying with love and pain.

The years rolled by.

The mother would mechanically ask if he did not feel alone since he was unmarried and the son would reply that he did not. That was the end of it.

“Dear, are you happy?” she would sometimes ask anxiously, stroking his head.

“Of course I am.”

“There is no regret that you are not married?”

“No. I am not interested.”
A smile would spread over her face. It would vanish in a moment. “I am a sinner. I have failed in my duty. You have gone grey.” “Let it be.” “It is just two of us here at home.” “Yes.” Mani would say softly, patting her with his left hand. “But you said that that is what you like, right?” “Yes, Amma.” “Am I a wicked person, dear?” A deep anxiety bubbled in the inner chambers of her eyes. “No, Amma. You are good. There is no one as good as you in the whole world.” He lent meaning to her life. With his left hand, Mani moved back the few grey strands that had strayed by mistake into her youthful appearance. The darkness was giving way to dawn. He had taken the milk that had been stored within water overnight, and heated it on the stove. Adding the coffee powder, he made coffee for his mother and himself. This was his morning routine. “You’re doing all this for me like a daughter.” “So what?” “Your wife should be doing this for you. Instead, you are doing this for this old woman.” He was silent. “Even now it is not too late. You’re only forty-two, not too old for a man. Marry someone if you want to.” Did it occur to her that at forty-two, she had to lookout for a bride for her son...What was the meaning of that glimmer in her eyes? “No such wish, Amma.” “No regret?” “No.” “Really?” The clock sounded in the hall, and one could hear the sound of slippers at the door. Ranganathan entered. “I am very sorry. It got late. My grandson fell down and there was a huge ruckus.” He was out of breath. He had just one daughter and this was her son. “Did he get hurt or something?” asked Gayathri. “Thank god not much, it was just a scratch. But the child got scared.” Did it occur to her that at forty-two, she had to look out for a bride for her son...What was the meaning of that glimmer in her eyes? “No such wish, Amma.” “No regret?” “No.” “Really?” The clock sounded in the hall, and one could hear the sound of slippers at the door. Ranganathan entered. “I am very sorry. It got late. My grandson fell down and there was a huge ruckus.” He was out of breath. He had just one daughter and this was her son. “Did he get hurt or something?” asked Gayathri. “Thank god not much, it was just a scratch. But the child got scared.” “Poor thing! He is just a small child. How old is he?” “Three.” Just as Ranganathan was answering her, the little one came running in. “Thaatha!” Mani stood up abruptly. “Why did you bring the child to work?” He had instructed Ranganathan not to bring the child home. “Don’t be angry, sir. When he stopped crying, he held on to me adamantly and insisted that he would come with me. I had no option but to bring him. I will start the cooking and drop him back and return.” Ranganathan hurriedly picked up the child. “Have you ever brought the child here before?” Gayathri asked him. “Never, Amma. I wouldn’t take such liberties. This is the first time and that, too, because of what happened...” “It’s not that. The child looks familiar, that is why I asked.” “No, I have not brought him earlier.” “He has lively good looks. Your daughter must also be like this. How is she?” “She is fine, your blessings.” He started to leave the room with the child. “Go leave him at home and then start your cooking,” Mani said. “Why do you chase the child away? Let him be here,” Gayathri chided her son and asked Ranganathan to wait a minute. The cook stayed on. Gayathri took a banana from the two lying on her bedside table. “Come, little one. You like bananas, right?” Ranganathan had no option but to go close. Mani realised that he had to step in now. “I will give it, Amma.” He took the fruit from his mother. Then he gave it to the child, standing between his mother and the child. She could not see the child nor that the child took the fruit with his left hand. Ranganathan hurried out with the child. Mani came back and sat on the chair next to his mother. “You didn’t answer, dear.” She looked at him eagerly. “Answer what, Amma?” “Do you really not have any regret about not marrying, having a life of your own, a family? Really?” “I have no such regret...no such wish.” “Maybe after I die...” “Even after you die, I belong to you alone, Amma. I am satisfied with being your son. Haven’t I told you this many times? You are my everything.” Mani looked at her tenderly. The summit of her triumph burned like burnished gold with his total surrender. With throbbing emotion, she picked up his hand and held it to her cheek, and that tremor ran through her whole frame. “You are such a good child. I can be born a million times to have you as my son.” These artificial words came from the genuine fullness of her heart. The mother smiled. Her eyes lit up. He lived for this. He rejoiced in this.

Story selected by Mini Krishnan.
From Madras to Bangalore

A careful examination of picture postcards of Madras and Bangalore of the early 20th century shows that this medium tells us a complex story of colonial urbanism and the history of photography that sheds a new light on these two cities.

By EMILY STEVENSON and STEPHEN PUTNAM HUGHES

IMAGE 1: “Mylapore Temple Tank”. Published by Raphael Tuck & Sons, London, early 20th century. The caption on the back reads: “Mylapore Tank: Madras is built in a straggling fashion along the seashore. Most roads run between the avenues and are flanked by groves of palms and other trees. The shops often stand back from the streets with gardens in front of them. Mansions are built in compounds that are almost parks and rice fields wind in and out between them.”
POSTCARDS were the first widely available and affordable form of mass-produced photography. In the early decades of the 20th century, when postcards were at the height of their popularity, they were a new media craze that swept the globe. They were something akin to Instagram, an innovative and affordable mobile form of photo sharing and social networking.

It has been estimated that in Britain alone approximately six billion postcards passed through the British postal system between 1902 and 1910.

More picture postcards were produced for British India than any other part of the Empire outside of Britain, yet this vast popular archive has not fared well in histories of global media. They have been commonly viewed as trivial scraps of old-fashioned colonial nostalgia. Compared with the high market value museum collections and the scholarly attention paid to historical photography of India, postcards have to a large extent been neglected as photography’s degraded, ephemeral, poor cousin.

We have tried to tap into this neglected mountain of historical evidence through research that has resulted in a public exhibition that is currently running in London. Titled “From Madras to Bangalore: Picture Postcards as Urban History of Colonial India” (on at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London, from July 12 until September 23), the exhibition covers a selection of picture

**Image 2:** “South Parade, Bangalore”. Published by Raphael Tuck & Sons, London, for the English Emporium, Bangalore, early 20th century.
postcards from the two cities between 1900 and the 1930s.

**WHAT WORK DO POSTCARDS DO?**

By pairing these two prominent south Indian cities together, this exhibition tells a tale of how they were linked through a set of common representational styles, networks of photographic production and the movement of both people and postcards. We map out how picture postcard practices forged a set of relationships between Madras and Bangalore in the early 20th century.

Postcards are a conventional system for visually representing urban life, which has remained surprisingly intact for well over a century and has spread just about everywhere in the world. Each postcard offers an emblematic image of the city that is meant to encapsulate and visually materialise a "sight" that is produced as an object that can be sold, bought, written on, taken or sent to other people. Most often the postcard’s presumed mode of address is to visitors or postal recipients that are not familiar with the city. The postcard offers a pictorial vocabulary that translates the cluttered urban environment into “sights” that can be isolated and recorded, dropped in the mail, collected and organised in scrapbooks. As such, these postcards are not so much “a window on to the past” as a visual framework that helped recipients imagine the social and cultural geographies of cities and their inhabitants. In the early

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**IMAGE 3:** “Street Scene, Bangalore”. Published by Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore, early 20th century.
**IMAGE 4:** “Proud Father”. Published by Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore, early 20th century.
**IMAGE 5:** "Mount Road, Madras". Published by Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore, early 20th century. The message reads: "X is the shop where I got this card."

**IMAGE 6:** "Mowbrays Road, Madras". Published by Spencer’s & Co., Ltd., Madras, early 20th century.
IMAGE 7: “A View of the High Court, Madras”. Published by Wiele & Klein, Madras, early 20th century.
decades of the 20th century, they were the most widely circulated and popular media of urban experience the world over.

It is all too easy for us looking back on historical postcards to fixate on the images as if they hold some inherent meaning in and of themselves. However, what distinguishes postcards from other forms of photographs is that they are also a kind of postal correspondence, which links people in widely dispersed situations through both images and written messages. They were meant to be inscribed with messages that might convey much more than their images. From our current perspective, postcards' combination of image, text, address and postmark can teach us a great deal about the history of Madras and Bangalore. It can also tell us much about the networks postcards mapped out as they were produced and consumed in these two cities.

As the two most significant British Indian cities in the Madras Presidency—separated by only 215 miles (344 kilometres) and intimately linked through administration, trade and migration—postcard production networks of exchange were particularly strong between them. Not only did many photographic materials reach Bangalore from Madras, but photographers themselves moved between the two cities as they changed and expanded their businesses.

**DECOLONISING POSTCARD PRODUCTION**

There can be no doubt that the postcards of Madras and Bangalore spoke in the main to European expectations, perspectives and experience of the cities. Most of the surviving postcards of India from this period were sent abroad by Europeans living and working in India to their families living outside of India. As a result of this, and the fact that paper products have a shorter life in India’s climate, these old postcards are now much more difficult to find in India. Moreover, from a quick look through the picture postcard images, messages and addressees,
one might easily assume that these cards were a one-sided product of British rule. On the basis of our research, however, we have found that this would be an oversimplification. When we look closer into the production history of these postcards, it becomes clear that they tell a more complex story than a one-sided colonial encounter and demonstrate that

**IMAGE 8**: “Street in the City, Bangalore”. Published by Wiele’s Studio, Bangalore. Posted in January 1907, the message on the back reads: “After I finish my mail Ella asks me to say regarding photo enclosed that it is a puzzle photo and the puzzle is to find Ella Brown.”

**IMAGE 9**: “Madras High Court”. Publisher unknown. Note the captions in both Tamil and English.
IMAGE 10: Unidentified Muharram procession, most likely in Bangalore. Published by B. Muniratnam Rajoo, Bangalore, early 20th century.
a hard and fast distinction between “Indian” and “Western” photography in India was not at play on the ground.

Postcard production circuits in India were part of a complex global network. It was not unusual for a photograph to be taken in India, printed in postcard format in Germany or Italy, then published by British or Indian companies to be sold across India and finally sent through the postal system abroad or within India with written messages. Alongside these national and global networks of postcard production that linked Madras and Bangalore, however, there were also extensive local networks of photographers, apprentices and studios in south India that played a crucial role in produ-

**IMAGE 11:** Unidentified street scene in Bangalore. Published by R. Shaikahmed Saib & Co., Madras, early 20th century.
There was a thriving market for postcards in south India at the time, and we were surprised to find so many different photographic studios producing postcards in the relatively small geographic areas of Madras and Bangalore. We have found evidence of at least 34 postcard producers operating in the two cities at this time, and there are certain to be more that we have not yet been able to verify.

The largest global company operating in these two cities was Raphael Tuck & Sons. Tuck’s began as a framing and picture business in 1866 in London, but its colourised postcards eventually became its biggest business and were sold across the globe. It produced huge quantities of picture postcards of all of India’s major cities, and its booklets of carefully curated “collo-photo” and “sepia” postcard sets were specifically produced for sale at the English Emporium on South Parade, Bangalore, and Spencer’s & Co. Ltd on Mount Road, Madras (images 1 and 2). In many ways the company epitomises the global reach of the postcard medium and the prevalence of European consumption in the postcard market. However, to deduce from this that large-scale producers of postcards of India were headquartered only in the metropole would be inaccurate.

Working in both Madras and Bangalore, Higginbotham & Co. and Spencer’s & Co. Ltd were undoubtedly the biggest players in terms of the numbers of postcards produced, with each going over 1,000 in the early decades of the 20th century. Higginbotham & Co. was headquartered in Madras and, after 1897, also Bangalore. Whilst Higginbotham & Co. remains well-known today as India’s longest-running bookstore, what is less known is that in the early 20th century it published more postcards of south India than any other company, with Bangalore and Madras featured most prominently.

Despite depicting two different cities, these postcards share an instantly recognisable style, typeface and layout, and thereby unite the two cities in part of a larger representational schema (image 3). Some of the postcards were captioned in a manner that made it impossible to distinguish whether the image was from Madras or Bangalore (image 4). The company’s stores located on Mount Road and South Parade would have been popular places for European residents and visitors to pick up postcards to send to friends and family. In a postcard of Mount Road, the sender made a mark on to the image itself to show the location of the Higginbotham’s shop where the postcard was purchased (image 5).

Spencer’s & Co., with its headquarters on Mount Road, was a
company established in 1863 by Charles Durrant and J.W. Spencer as an auctioneers and general, upmarket goods store. Like Higginbotham & Co., Spencer’s produced many of its own postcards of cities across India but mainly concentrated on Bangalore and Madras (image 6). It also served for a time as the local agent and retailer for Raphael Tuck & Sons cards as noted above.

It was common for photographic studios to initially set up in the larger city of Madras before subsequently establishing branches in the Bangalore cantonment. Wiele & Klein on Mount Road, for example, was a renowned studio and prolific postcard producer (image 7). The studio was run by two Germans, Ernst Frederick Hermann Wiele and Theodor Klein, whose business interests bridged Madras and Bangalore over the course of their careers in south India. By 1900, Wiele had established his own studio at Number 20, South Parade. Wiele’s Studio, Bangalore, produced a wide array of picture postcards of the city, which were often hand-tinted using watercolour in an especially painterly style (image 8). Similarly, Del Tufo & Co. established studios on both Mount Road and South Parade and produced picture postcards of both cities.

From archival records and the addresses printed on postcards themselves, it is clear that the majority of picture postcard producers in Bangalore were located in the cantonment with multiples around South Parade, whilst in Madras several prominent studios were clustered along Mount Road. This trend for postcard producers to be located in particularly European areas of Madras and Bangalore is indicative of the fact that the market for picture postcards was geared towards Europeans.

**MAN Y SMALLE R PLA YER S**

Beyond the handful of leading postcard producers, however, there were many smaller players in the market that tended to be located in other parts of the cities more closely associated with Indian-run businesses and Indian residential areas. In fact, we were surprised to learn that there had been so many Indian postcard producers in a trade that was oriented towards Europeans. Indian photographers played a significant role in the production of postcards and, going by their occasional use of local language captions, seem to have been trying to push the market beyond European consumers (image 9). This is something that has previously gone largely unacknowledged in histories of the medium.

Although each of these companies’ postcard production was smaller in number than that of the leading companies, there were in fact far more Indian-owned photographic studios operating in south India than European ones. Companies such as Ratna & Co., Venkiah Bros., R. Shaikahmed Saib & Co, in Madras and Maruthy & Co., T. Manchayya, A.P.S. Pani, B. Muniratnam Rajoo, P. Valu and T. Mamundy Pillai & Sons in Bangalore all produced postcards alongside the larger companies.

**IMAGE 12:** Unidentified Hindu tiger dancers and crowd. Published by D.P. Valu, regimental photographer, Baird Barracks, Bangalore.
Amongst the numerous Indian photographers, apprentices and studios involved in producing postcards, S. Mahadeo & Son was, perhaps, the most prolific with several branches in multiple cities, including Bangalore and Belgaum. Its studio in Bangalore was first located on Dickenson Road before it was moved to St. John’s Road around 1913 and continues today in the form of G.G. Welling on M.G. Road. Further research is needed to learn more about these photographers and their work, but it is certain that together they made important contributions to the postcard trade in south India.

When the production history of early 20th century postcards of Madras and Bangalore is examined, it becomes clear that the two cities were linked through global, regional and local photographic networks.
that reveal the crucial role that both Indian photographers and regional itinerant practice played in this medium’s success.

Postcards were by design a mobile form meant to travel along the lines of the postal network. They were a form of popular social media that made connections between people across spatial differences. As such, the messages on the back of postcards from Madras and Bangalore leave us a historical record of the personal connections and social traffic between the two cities.

Amongst the postcards consulted for this project were two sizable personal collections from families in the United Kingdom that date to their time living in south India in the early 20th century. Both collections speak to the back-and-forth between the two cities. The first collection we examined comprises 120 postcards that the teenager May Reynolds compiled into a postcard album in Birmingham. The postcards date between 1912 and 1919 and all but a small number were written by her aunt, Annie Reynolds. Annie moved

**IMAGE 15:** “The Horticultural Gardens, Mount Road”. Published by Higginbotham & Co. The message reads: “Baby goes in these gardens every morning. Only a stone’s throw from our house.”

**IMAGE 16:** “Mount Road, Madras”. The faint message above the image reads: “This is the road our offices are located on.”
to Madras in 1912 to join her husband, Will Reynolds, who worked in the office of a Mount Road automobile business that was being managed by his uncle, Kenneth Reynolds. Over the course of this detailed record of a one-sided postcard correspondence (we do not have a record of the letters and postcards that were being sent to India), the messages tell the story of Annie and Will’s everyday life in Madras. They tell us about such habitual events as their weekly trips to the church at St. George’s Cathedral, their visits to the Horticultural Gardens for walks and the milestones of their son, Billie, who was born in Madras (image 13). In addition to their daily routine in Madras, the messages also narrate frequent journeys and prolonged visits to Bangalore (images 14 and 15). For British residents in Madras, Bangalore was an important destination to meet up with friends, escape the heat of Madras and to recuperate during periods of illness. Travel from Madras to Bangalore was an important part of their social world. In the
prises nearly 200 picture postcards of various Indian cities but with a concentration on Madras and Bangalore. The postcards span a period of eight years, from 1904 to 1912. They were sent with great regularity and sometimes multiple postcards were even posted on the same day. The correspondence regularly gave updates on health and business. They also narrated family stories, for example, about the cathedral they visited every Sunday, photographs sent for the McDonald's album, Ella's role in a local play and a joke played on Mrs Brown for April Fool's Day. The weather was a frequent topic of the postcard messages, with the "stiffing" heat of Madras often lamented (image 18). But like May's album discussed above, this collection shows the close connections between Europeans living in Madras and Bangalore. The Browns visited Bangalore regularly for "holidays", describing it as a "lovely place" with "bracing" weather and a number of friends referred to as "great pals" (images 17, 19 and 20).

Through our research we have therefore found that Madras and Bangalore were linked through global, national and local networks of postcard production and consumption. Not only were there commonalities in the ways in which the two city's streets, monuments and people were represented, but photographers, consumers and postcards themselves moved back and forth between the cities. When studio and publisher information, images and messages of postcards of these two cities are closely examined, it becomes clear that this medium tells us a complex story of colonial urbanism and the history of photography that sheds a new light on Madras and Bangalore.

Emily Stevenson, a final year PhD research student, and Dr Stephen Putnam Hughes are both in the Anthropology and Sociology Department at SOAS, University of London. Follow daily uploads from the exhibition on Instagram: SOASpostcard
Third World Marxist

Samir Amin (1931-2018) saw himself as one among those shaping a movement for emancipation and egalitarian development across the Third World. BY C.P. CHANDRASEKHAR

SAMIR AMIN, a leading social thinker, campaigner and activist of and for the South, is no more. Progressive forces, not just in Africa where he was born, and lived and worked for most of his life, but across the underdeveloped world, will miss the presence of a person who was never tired of speaking truth to the apologists and functionaries of imperialism. Besides his energy, charm and deep commitment, what singled Amin out was his ability to connect with intellectuals, activists and movements across the developing world—not just in Africa but across Asia and Latin America. To him, that network was not just one of solidarity among those faced with similar problems, but a movement that needed to be built to confront and transcend a global structure that was responsible for underdevelopment, deprivation and poverty.

Born in 1931 in Cairo, Amin followed a trajectory characteristic of many radical intellectuals from ex-colonial countries by studying and working both in Africa and its coloniser, France. He was in his early teens when the Second World War ended. Britain had ceded power to the United States as global hegemon, and the process of decolonisation that began before the war had gathered momentum. These were the years when anti-colonial sentiments were strong, independent national governments came to power, “delinking” through import substitution was under way in many less developed countries, a “socialist” Soviet Union was an important global influence, and planning was being experimented with even in predominantly market-driven economies.

Like many other radical thinkers, Amin recognised the promise in these trends. So, although a Marxist by persuasion, he joined the many radical intellectuals in the Third World who chose to work with their newly independent governments in the hope that they would follow a path which, while aiming to accelerate productivity and income growth, would distribute the benefits of that growth in ways that would address the underemployment and deprivation that afflicted the majority. He worked with the planning board in
Egypt during 1957-60 before he was forced into exile, with the Ministry of Planning in Mali during 1960-63 and then as director of the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in Dakar, Senegal, for a decade.

These occupational choices reflected the belief that given an appropriately enlightened government and adequate social sanction, trajectories of development that advanced social good could be engineered even within non-socialist economies. But as happened across the Third World, import substitution and planning failed to deliver in Africa. After flirting with egalitarian alternatives, governments compromised with vested interests of various kinds and settled for a path of state-facilitated capitalist development that delivered some growth but transferred much of its benefits to an elite. In time, growth, too, proved unsustainable.

Samir Amin was not one to uncritically accept such an outcome, and was among the communists and radicals who were forced into exile from Egypt by Abdel Nasser. That took him into a career in which he spent much time elsewhere in Africa, leading an intellectual current seeking out alternatives for freedom of the underprivileged from oppression and deprivation. Although his emancipatory project was focussed on Africa and his locational shifts within Africa made him a pan-Africanist in physical and conceptual terms, Amin saw himself as one among those shaping a movement for emancipation from oppression and for egalitarian development across the Third World.

His personal experience, however, did not lead to the conclusion that the problem in underdeveloped countries was just one of exploitative elites and the governments that represented them. He attributed the failure of those governments to their inability to confront the global structures reproducing the inequality and deprivation that had been shaped through capitalist history and under colonialism. In his view, imperialism and the monopolisation of resources, finance and knowledge by the classes that dominated in the developed nations had condemned the “bourgeois” nationalist project to failure. An alternative was required. The emancipation of the Third World depended on its delinking from imperialism, and finally on the overthrow of the latter.

These were not just emotional words and baseless beliefs. Over his career Samir Amin creatively applied the Marxist method to understand what Marx had inadequately investigated in his incomplete life’s work—the mechanisms that ensured that development in the metropolitan centres of capitalism had as its counterpart the underdevelopment of the periphery, making generalised catch-up or convergence under capitalism an impossibility. To unravel those mechanisms, he chose to extract the theory of value from a model of an abstract capitalist economy and apply it to the concrete conditions of accumulation on a world scale. That led to the development-underdevelopment dichotomy.

The Law of Worldwide Value, as one of Amin’s books was titled, was one which took account of the phenomenon of unequal exchange, deriving in the final analysis from the fact that a unit of (otherwise similar) labour power was valued less in the periphery than in the core advanced countries. That is, the surplus extracted from Third World workers emerged not only because they contributed more to the value of the product that they produced than the value of labour power itself, but because similar labour was valued less in the periphery than in the core. When that was taken into account, an explanation of why capitalist accumulation leads to development at the core and underdevelopment in the periphery emerges.

Even those of Leftist persuasion who felt this formulation was not nuanced enough had to accept that this was an idea that was potent, given historical experience and persisting international inequality. The burden of Amin’s argument was that historically evolved exploitative structures continue to reproduce this anomaly. Unless poor countries detached themselves from those structures, or the global system in which those structures were embedded was transcended, the development project within an integrated world economy was doomed to failure.

THE ‘BANDUNG’ SPIRIT

This conceptual understanding of Amin’s translated in practice into an appreciation of the radical strand in nationalist struggles and the non-aligned movement, which he wanted to retrieve. Hence the celebration of the “Bandung spirit”, or the spirit that the Bandung Conference of African and Asian nations held in 1955 in Indonesia was imbued with. In a concept note for the conference to celebrate 60 years of Bandung in 2015, Amin wrote: “The Conference of Bandung declared the will of the Asian and African nations to reconquer their sovereignty and complete their independence through a process of authentic independent consistent development to the benefit of all labouring classes.” He saw Bandung as “the first international meeting of ‘non-European’ (so called ‘coloured’) nations whose rights had been denied by historical colonialism/imperialism of Europe, the U.S. and Japan.” He also saw in the Bandung spirit a willingness of people across the Third World to come together in the struggle against imperialist domination. His political life was geared to strengthening that sentiment and institutionalising it in various ways.

Amin saw the continuation of the radical nationalist project as a process that would lead to emancipation through a 21st-century version of the socialist transformation. This perception marked his Marxist approach as uniquely Third Worldist, and different from the one adopted by many Western Marxists. Amin was an anti-imperialist nationalist and a socialist. Even conceptually, his understanding as an African and a citizen of the Third World dominated that, stemming from his exposure to France and the rest of the developed world.
IT was not easy to like Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. He provoked ceaselessly and was provoked easily. His words hurt. His pen, indeed, even his spoken words, would often open an old wound and then let one bleed in public. However, but for his eye for unsettling the past—mercifully, he never imagined life to be just a battle to settle the past—An Area of Darkness would not have illumined the world of Indians around 50 years ago. And “a wounded civilisation” may never have had a chance to look into the mirror at all the old wrinkles, the unending creases, the visage gone ugly with time. India: A Wounded

A literary lion

With the passing away of Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (1932-2018), the world of literature will be a duller place and inestimably poorer. BY ZIYA US SALAM
Civilisation came at a time when India was going through social and political tumult. Naipaul made no concessions to Indira Gandhi's streak of narcissism or her cultivated streak of arrogance. He deserves credit even if his honesty, his stubborn refusal to toe the line, was facilitated partly by distance from New Delhi. He stayed honest to his view of a nation that had experienced all that could go wrong with human civilisation. Back then, not many people agreed with him. He appeared both intolerant and intolerable. He cared little. He had his prejudices. He revelled in them. Before long though, people born after India kept its tryst with destiny in 1947 were discussing An Area of Darkness and India: A Wounded Civilisation. To grow up in 1970s urban India and not have read either of the books was to be dubbed an ignomus.

A BRAVE NEW VOICE

Like him or loathe him, one could not ignore him. That he was being discussed in the drawing rooms of India, a country where only a handful knew English then, was a rich tribute to a brave new voice in English literature. Indeed, those who had put in the hard yards of liking him were beginning to love him. Sel-dom did his words not rankle. He must have felt relieved. He fought through. He found a way. He did not take the “white man’s burden” theory route to find approbation. That would have been easy enough.

Most felt compelled to read his books. And in that compulsion of the cynics, the critics and the naysayers lay Naipaul’s greatest success. He could say what he wanted to in his own way and force one to accept him. Having started with a trip down memory lane, Naipaul discovered a genius within when he penned A House for Mr Biswas, the tale of an Indo-Trinidadian family. That came in 1961, a few years after he had set foot in the dark, bleak climes of Britain. If Naipaul had quit the literary world after this masterpiece, nobody would have grudged him a place among the best writers of the century. Such was the poetic beauty of his prose and his finesse as an author. A House for Mr Biswas though came too early in Naipaul’s career for his own good. He was still searching, still yearning, still discovering. He himself did not know where this endless foray into the known and the unknown would take him. Well, it took him to India, the land of his forefathers. Unlike the land where to equivocate is to be polite, he took on the dangers head-on. He suffered too; not many people were able to fathom the profundity of An Area of Darkness when it first struck the literary world. The common man found it too grave; the discerning claimed it was a shade pretentious.

Naipaul rubbed the political elite, the babudom, the wrong way, and a young nation still taking the baby steps of freedom was clearly not ready for introspection. The book did Naipaul a favour though: having nursed many a dream from distance about his land of origin, he was stripped of his illusions. In many
ways, it prepared the ground for his even more acerbic, more trenchant book, *India: A Wounded Civilisation*. Again, the book hurt many; some said he was selling India’s ugly underbelly to the West. Yet, nobody, absolutely nobody, could argue with him when he claimed: “Hindus have never got over their subjugation of over a thousand years by alien religions.” In one stroke, he forced the majority community to look within and made the non-majority an alien. Quietly, unannounced, the self-consuming ways of “we” and “they” were swept into the literary world.

It was to take Naipaul much longer to finally find in India a warm embrace. The grudging approval of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s was replaced by a warm embrace, courtesy *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Here, Naipaul noted with obvious astonishment that India had not just survived as a nation with its seeming contradictions but had also managed to turn the tide in its fight against poverty, squarol and denial. In fact, for a country as young as India, it had done remarkably well to even strive to take everybody along. With this third India book, Naipaul completed the trilogy that started in the mid 1960s with *An Area of Darkness*. India, finally, was beginning to be an island of gentle glow and sunshine. And Naipaul loved the warm hug of the nation.

The three non-fiction works around India would have sufficed to define Naipaul as a non-fiction writer, just as *A House for Mr Biswas* would have sufficed to put him in the ranks of fiction writers. Incidentally, *A House for Mr Biswas* found a place in *Time* magazine’s list of the 100 greatest English language novels. He might not have said much about it publicly, but the inclusion of the work in the list would no doubt have pleased Naipaul and, maybe, made his trip to Britain worthwhile.

However, for all the electric worth of his India foray, it would be a misrepresentation to talk of Naipaul without mentioning his foray into the world of believers, that is, his trip to Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and beyond. Almost 40 years after being first published, *Among the Believers* remains a book that evokes extreme reactions. It is here he is at his trenchant best; it is here that he sneers with elan. It is here that he wears his prejudices like a badge of honour. If Naipaul had not written about Islam and about India, he would have been appreciated only for his literary genius, the gentle cadence of his sentences, the brevity of his words, the unfathomable simplicity of his expression. Yet, because of his works on Islam and India, he got his identity as a non-fiction writer, which one could love to hate but never dismiss without paying attention to his arguments.

Contrary to what Naipaul believed when he first set out to examine the Muslim world, Islam is a lived reality. Islam stands for equality rather than uniformity and is far from being a monolith. Because he took a reductionist view, Naipaul was shown to be a man bereft of a wide canvas. He could mine childhood memories for his fiction essays. He could walk down the lanes and bylanes of his forefathers for his non-fiction sagas, yet could never quite fathom the intractable unity of purpose of the world of the faithful: how an Indonesian commoner and an Iranian ruler could pray in the same direction or how a community so divided by language, culture, food and apparel could so warmly join hands over faith. Rather than marvelling over this unity, he considered it proof of imperialism. He even went on to label Arabs as the best of imperialists.

Naipaul was not able to comprehend the equality that having a common faith engendered. He called it slavery. He could not be further from truth. Such was the lopsidedness of his reasoning that even Edward Said was compelled to accuse him of having done only a superficial reading of history. At the same time, it endeared him to the Hindutva lobby. The right wing believed he hated Islam, so he was its friend. Muslims believed he hated Islam, so he was their enemy.

The truth is that Naipaul knew, as Said said, only “superficial” Islam, but that did not prevent him from waxing eloquent about the beauty of Mughal architecture in India, much to the dismay of the Hindutva lobby. Islam and Muslims are not synonymous. Not one to take a step back, Naipaul was probably happy that he was being read once again. Indeed, therein lay his greatest success. When Naipaul wrote, the world read. No wonder he got the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. Incidentally, for all his acerbic writing about the world of Islam, Naipaul ended up marrying the Pakistani journalist Nadira Alvi soon after the death of his first wife, Patricia Ann Hale.

With the passing away of Naipaul, the world of literature will be a duller place and inestimably poorer. One could hate Naipaul, and many did for a long time. One could love him, which not an insignificant number did. But there was only one V.S. Naipaul. He offered no concessions to one’s sensitivity. He said it as he perceived it. Truth, with Naipaul, could be debatable. He leaves as an old wounded lion who silenced most of the hyenas in his lifetime. He needs no brownie points from history.
Fearless voice

A titan among journalists, Kuldip Nayar was also a celebrated author and diplomat who remained a resolute voice for friendly relations with Pakistan.  

BY ZIYA US SALAM

ADMIRERS flocked to Kuldip Nayar like moths to a candle flame. They did not meet the same fate, though. Rather, they came back illumined by stories of peace and progress, of why India and Pakistan needed to talk to each other rather than talk at each other, of how they (Pakistanis) were people like us, Karachi was like Bombay and Lahore very much like Delhi. You crossed the border and a bit of Hindi was sandpapered away, a layer of Urdu added. Punjabis, on either side, retained their language, their culture. Religion divided, but food and dress united. India, too, needed to take a leaf out of Punjab’s book. As the years turned into decades, Nayar became a resolute voice for peace with Pakistan.

Nayar left his ancestral home in Sialkot for Delhi at the time of Partition. Although circumstances had driven Nayar out of Sialkot, they could not drive Sialkot, or the newly born nation of Pakistan, out of him. Along with the likes of Inder Kumar Gujral and Inder Malhotra, later joined by luminaries such as Gulzar and Mahesh Bhatt, Nayar was a durable votary of peace, proving through his people-to-people dialogue that there were takers for offerings of peace on the other side too. “Aman Ki Asha” was a hope that transcended political boundaries. Just as Nayar would have liked.

For the past two decades, every year on Independence Day, he would go to the India-Pakistan border at Attari-Wagah and light a candle for peace. He was confident that peace would ultimately defeat violence. Meanwhile, he worked tirelessly for the release of prisoners who had completed their sentence on both sides of the border but for some inexplicable reason stayed behind bars. His training in law—he had done his LLB from Lahore—and his long years in journalism came in handy. However, it is difficult to gauge his success rate. Nayar’s success lay in transcending the limitations of a given vocation to reach out to those beyond. For instance, after moving to Delhi he opted to pursue a career in journalism instead of law. (He had done a journalism course from the Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, United States.) He continued to be predictably unpredictable. Instead of the more rewarding English journalism, he opted for Urdu journalism and

KULDIP NAYAR at the launch of his autobiography, “Beyond The Lines”, in Bengaluru on September 15, 2012.
worked with an Urdu daily. So popular was he in his brief stint that oldtimers still remember him as an Urdu columnist. Those were the days immediately after Partition, and Urdu did not have a religion. Even the advertisements of Hindu mythological films carried the names of the films in Urdu. Nayar was never in danger of being labelled an anti-nationalist or a Pakistani for writing in Urdu. He could write as he pleased, in the language he was most comfortable in.

His fearless criticism of the government of the day and his ability to use simple words endeared him to many who had migrated from Pakistan, as also Muslims who had opted to stay in India. His range of admirers included those who suffered at the time of Partition and came to India with tragic tales of deprivation and displacement and those who scoffed at the idea of a theocratic state and opted for the pluralistic fabric of India. In those early years, Nayar brought them together on a common page. It was no mean feat.

Urdu was where his heart was. Yet, Nayar was destined to earn his living and much of his fame from English journalism. By the 1970s, he had gone on to lead The Statesman, and when the Emergency was clamped, he was among the first journalists to be arrested—his fearlessness made him an easy target for an authoritarian state. But incarceration failed to imprison his mind.

Soon after release, he continued to use his pen as a weapon against state terrorism, against the suppression of the innocent and against the discrimination against minorities. His writing appealed to the discerning as well as the common man.

If, in 1971 he had criticised the Pakistan government for the atrocities in Bangladesh, in 1975 he did not hold back his criticism of the Congress government and the violation of human rights that the Emergency brought in its wake.

Not surprisingly, in subsequent years, his column “Between the Lines” came to be both anticipated and dreaded, depending on which side of the political divide one was. Soon, the column reached more houses than those who subscribed to The Statesman or the media houses that had subscribed to United News of India. It was syndicated from Assam to Gujarat and from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu. In those pre-Internet days, smaller magazines and periodicals were happy to carry a column even a month after it was initially published by newspapers in New Delhi and Bombay. Some even got it translated. Yet again, Nayar had transcended the limitations of the medium. Here was a man who had started his career as an Urdu journalist, then risen to be the editor of an English daily, and now found his English columns being translated into Urdu and other languages.

By the mid 1980s and the early 1990s, Nayar had become the favourite of some Left-wing publications and Islamic periodicals at the same time. Those opposed to peace as a state practice accused him of hobnobbing with Pakistan. Later, his criticism of the death of Hemant Karkare, chief of the Mumbai Anti-Terrorist Squad, where he alleged the hand of right-wing forces, drew outrage from a section that believed free speech and thought had its indecipherable lines too.

Amid his roles as editor and activist, he wrote Beyond the Lines (1968), followed by much-talked about ventures such as India After Nehru, The Judgment: Inside Story of the Emergency in India, India House, Wall at Wagah, and Tales of Two Cities. As a journalist, he commanded attention with the immediacy of his work and the insight of each piece. As an author, he appealed for attention with work that was always likely to outlive the author. Today, when criticism of the government is tantamount to treason in some quarters, Nayar’s words continue to be a beacon.

In 1990, he was made India’s High Commissioner to Britain. Some seven years later, he became a member of the Rajya Sabha. Thus, a refugee from Pakistan had the rare distinction of having tasted success as a journalist, editor, author, diplomat, politician and human rights activist. But Nayar was not done yet. He continued to wield his pen as an instrument of change. His autobiography in 2012 landed him in fresh trouble, as did his repeated pleas for peace with Pakistan even after the National Democratic Alliance formed the government.

A few hours after the former cricketer and Congress leader Navjot Sidhu was criticised for attending Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan’s swearing-in ceremony, where he sat next to Pakistan’s Army chief, Nayar breathed his last. The level of political discourse had declined and the prospects of peace between two nations constantly squabbling with each other seemed as distant as ever.

He may not have always succeeded, but Nayar had done his bit as a peacenik. He had lit a lamp to dispel the darkness of war and misgivings between the two nations. The subcontinent could not have asked for more.
An attempt to create fear

Interview with Umar Khalid, JNU student. BY DIVYA TRIVEDI

TWO days before India’s 71st Independence Day, outside the Constitution Club barely a stone’s throw from Parliament, a gunman tried to pull the trigger on Jawaharlal Nehru University student Umar Khalid. He was there to attend a programme entitled “Towards Freedom Without Fear”, organised by the citizens’ forum United Against Hate. Assisted by CCTV camera grabs, the Delhi Police registered a case under Section 307 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Sections of the Arms Act. Subsequently, two men from Haryana, Naveen Dalal and Darwesh Shahpur, uploaded a selfie-video on social media, taking responsibility for the attack. They had not been arrested until the time the story went to press.

Twenty-four hours after Umar Khalid survived the attempt on his life, he spoke to Frontline. Excerpts from the interview:

It has been 24 hours since you escaped an attempt on your life. Has it ever crossed your mind, what if? What do you think would have been achieved?

The first and foremost thing they would have achieved is to create an environment of fear among large sections of the people. I am not grading any assassination, but fewer people knew Gauri Lankesh before her assassination compared with people who came to know her after it. But many more people know me. So the message would have gone to all of them that this can be for you. It isironical that I was in a programme titled “Towards Freedom Without Fear” and there was this attempt to create fear and terror. I have been at the forefront of the students’ movement. Attacking me is a message to the student community that if you keep up the agitation against this government, this is the extent to which we can go. It would no longer be limited to rustication, and jail would seem like a better option. Going much beyond that, it is terrorising the young people of this country, especially students and youths who have not been able to get jobs and are taking part in agitations.

What happened that day?

There was a programme at 2.30 in the Constitution Club against mob lynching and hate crimes. I reached early, at 2.10. Some of us came out to drink tea at the stall right outside the gate. After 10 minutes, as I was about to enter Constitution Club, a man came from behind, grabbed me and threw me to the ground. He pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. I somehow kept pushing his hand away. Three of my friends pushed him, and in the jostle he started to run. He fired a bullet after crossing the road as I ran back inside.

I don’t know who he was but we must ponder one thing. The programme was being attended by people whose family members had fallen victim to mob lynching and hate crimes orchestrated through rumours and lies. The fact that two days before Independence Day, in one of the most high security zones of the national capital, an armed assailant could dare to attack me in broad
fear and terror’

daylight only goes to show the brazen impunity that some people feel they enjoy under the present regime. I do not know who he was or what the forces behind him are. That is for the police to investigate. But I want to state here that if something untoward had happened yesterday, or if it were to happen tomorrow, do not just hold that unidentified gunman responsible. The real culprits are those who from their seats of power have been breeding an atmosphere of hatred, of bloodlust and fear. The real culprits are those who have provided an atmosphere of complete impunity for assassins and mob lyncher. The real culprits are those who have used the media to virtually incite lynching. The real culprits are those who have created an atmosphere of hatred, of bloodlust and fear. The real culprits are those who are not interested in academics, that we have been involved in so many other things, I am not allowed by the administration to submit it. The administration is made up of faculty members, and I was thinking which faculty member in the world has a problem with a student submitting his PhD thesis?

The Vice Chancellor may be a supporter of the BJP, I may be an opponent of the BJP, but that is not the primary relationship in the university for a student and a teacher. Here was the first teacher I saw who has a problem with a student pursuing academics. It was also ironical that in the last two and a half years, twice the Vice Chancellor tried to throw me out of the university, but when I actually went to submit my PhD, he wouldn’t let me submit it and leave. It was extremely frustrating to run around courts to submit a piece of academic work. It was an attempt at harassment, but it was also a more sinister conspiracy.

The police have not been able to proceed with a criminal case against us under IPC Section 124 A (sedition). But the propaganda continues. They are desperate for some legal vindication. They know if the matter goes to court, the accusations will not stand. I am confident about my innocence. So instead, they want to punish us through the Vice Chancellor’s court, which is the High Level Enquiry Committee. Just before our PhD submission, they put us in a catch-22 situation. They said, ‘If you
want to submit your PhD, then pay the fine.’ Now if you don’t pay the fine, your PhD is at stake. If you pay the fine, you are accepting guilt and the political narrative will go around that Umar Khalid has accepted punishment. He is guilty. This is how they were exploiting the vulnerabilities and harassing until the end. Coercing me, in complete violation of court orders. This is how vindictive this entire apparatus has become, which extends to lynch mobs on the streets, on television and to the university administration. But I was clear in my head that even if it is at the cost of my PhD, on which I have worked for five years, I won’t submit the fine. My entire life I would regret the fact that I accepted guilt for something I didn’t do. Eventually, we stand vindicated by the court.

‘VISION OF NATIONALISM’

Over the past two and a half years, there has been an attempt to paint you as an anti-national. How do you counter that?

A long time ago, a person whose legacy we uphold so dearly, Shahid Bhagat Singh, said before the British hanged him that a mere transfer of power from the white sahib to the brown sahib will not do, we need a change in the social order. Unless and until that change in social order comes about, this freedom will not be real freedom. Seventy-one years after Independence we see that people who had no role to play in the freedom struggle, who actually collaborated with the British, are now claiming to be nationalists. Our democracy over the years has been hollowed out. This government favours only certain corporations and is not doing anything for the masses. This is what Bhagat Singh pointed out, this is not real freedom. When we speak about nationalism, we speak about Bhagat Singh’s vision of a society where labourers are masters of their produce.

Babasaheb Ambedkar, after the Constitution came into being, said that we are entering into a life of contradictions. At the political level we have equality, one man has one vote. But in our social and economic life, there is going to be inequality. That inequality has intensified over the last few years. For me the vision of nationalism is where there is no discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender or sexuality. For me the vision of nationalism is the vision of Babasaheb Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh.

THE MUSLIM IDENTITY

Over the last two and a half years many like Kanhaiya Kumar have been vilified, but there seems to be a special kind of hatred reserved for you because you are Muslim. Hannah Arendt has said, “If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever.”

I have been asked about my belief for a long time. I have decided not to answer the question specifically on the fact whether I am a practising Muslim or not because that’s my personal choice. It’s not about the belief, it’s about the identity [of the community] you are born into. For them, I am only a Muslim. Yes, I am a Muslim, I was born a Muslim. But I am other things also. I am also a student and a young person in this country. But they only want to reduce me to a Muslim. What Rohith Vemula said, that you will be reduced to your immediate identity. They have a lens..., that Muslims don’t belong to India; Muslims have never been patriotic to India; Muslims are invaders who came from outside; Muslims are involved in terrorism and have their loyalties with Pakistan.

I was linked with Pakistan and allegations were made that I have been to Pakistan twice. I am still waiting for my passport. And I am still waiting for an apology to come from the news anchor who said this. It’s very easy to say this about someone like Umar Khalid or Najeeb...
Ahmad. It is easy to say this about people and run away without any accountability. Is journalism a hit job?

And this disgusting mentality of looking at Muslims as terrorists who have links with terror groups. We have been here for 71 years. This place is our place as well. We were born here, we'll die here, we'll be buried here. And our Constitution promises us equality irrespective of religion. Our country claims to be a secular country. But right now, I think we really need to fight for secularism. This Hindu-Muslim divide is being carried out to polarise the masses so they don’t talk about the economic loot that is happening in the country.

But you want to talk of that as a student and not as a Muslim...

Yes, I am a Muslim. I am also a student and a young person. I have multiple identities. I mean, don’t reduce me to only a Muslim. I will not deny that aspect of my life. I have come to this position in the last two and a half years by being made to feel like one. Being Muslim is not a crime. Even being a practising Muslim is not a crime. The Constitution completely guarantees freedom of religion. You see this Hindu-Muslim polarisation on television every night. They will get some maverick, good for nothing, idiotic Maulana on television, who doesn’t represent Muslims. Many of these people have campaigned for Narendra Modi in 2014. These are hired Maulavis. You caricature Muslims based on what they are saying.

What if someone like you were to represent the community? Isn’t that better than the religious leaders?

What has happened with the Muslims in India historically over the last 70 years is that they haven’t really had a mass leader. By that I mean someone who represents the aspirations of the masses and talks about the basic problems that the Sachar Committee highlighted. The fact that Muslims are very under-represented in jobs, in education, in the bureaucracy, in the Army, all sorts of things, except for jails where they are proportionately higher. Even previous regimes have ensured that no Muslim leadership emerges. There are only two kinds of Muslim leaderships—the Imams who are networking with power, and, the cultural and social elites, the likes of Salman Khurshid, who have no roots in the community. They become Muslim leaders by being among the coterie of elites.

I am not saying it is my responsibility, it is a collective responsibility. A crop of very articulate Muslims has emerged in the last few years. We saw [the] Babri Masjid [demolition] while growing up and then 9/11 happened, post which geopolitics was redefined and Muslims were put under suspicion. There was a witchhunt and it had ramifications in India as well. We’ve seen how the community members have been branded as terrorists. We’ve seen people being picked up on fabricated charges, being released after many years. We’ve seen how the media have operated. Every time there has been an arrest, headlines scream ‘terrorist caught’, but when the same person is released and acquitted of all charges years later, no one bothers to carry that story. In the meantime, you have arrested new people.

Now we are seeing these lynchings and this extreme polarisation, demonisation and caricaturing of Muslims. There is a need for this young, articulate and educated section, for all of us, to put our heads together. The point is that Muslims alone cannot fight this battle. All oppressed groups need to come together and fight this battle, but there has to be a recognition of the fact that Muslims are also an oppressed group in the country today. When I say this, I am directing it at the present opposition to Narendra Modi, because while they claim to speak for every other oppressed group, they are conspicuously silent on the minorities, and [specifically] the Muslims for fear of polarisation and loss of votes. That is not how you can defeat Hindutva forces because even if you defeat them electorally, you let them win ideologically.

Are you going to enter mainstream politics or contest elections or join academia?

It is very difficult for me to plan my life because I plan something and then something happens and my life becomes a complete roller-coaster ride and then I have to make new plans. I am in politics. Politics is not only about contesting elections, and I think I am very mainstream. If it requires contesting elections and if that is what people want, one can think about it, but that is not my priority. Neither have I decided anything on those lines.

More important is to mobilise and organise people: educate, agitate, organise. That is the slogan that needs to be raised. I also think Dalits do not signify a caste. Dalit means oppressed people, broken people, and I think when Babasaheb Ambedkar coined that term, the visionary that he was, he had all oppressed people in mind. All oppressed groups need to come together, and these slogans from the Ambedkarite movement should be raised in the movement for our socio-economic rights as well.
Clean Ganga remains a dream

Four years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s announcement of the Namami Gange project, the river remains as dirty as ever.

BY PURNIMA S. TRIPATHI IN VARANASI
WHILE in Varanasi to file his nomination papers for the 2014 Lok Sabha election, Narendra Modi, then the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) prime ministerial nominee, had declared with his characteristic bravado, “I have not come here on my own. I have been invited by mother Ganga.” He said it was his destiny to serve the Ganga ma and he would do so by cleaning the river in the next five years.

Arguably, this was one promise that must have lit up a billion hearts because the Ganga is revered by Hindus across the globe. The river, which criss-crosses almost half of the breadth of India in its 2,525-kilometre journey, also nurtures almost 40 per cent of the country’s population. Apart from its religious associations, it has huge social, economic and ecological significance for the country. Earlier attempts to cleanse the river had not been successful, though hundreds of crores of public money were squandered away.

Shortly after he took oath as Prime Minister, Modi announced the ambitious Namami Gange project, which involved cleaning the ghats, ridding the river of biological contaminants, improving rural sanitation, and promoting afforestation in the river basin. The works were to be undertaken in the States which straddle the length of the river—Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. Together, these States were discharging 12,000 million litres a day (mld) of sewage into the river basin, while the treatment capacity was only for 4,000 mld. Treatment for only 1,000 mld was actually operational. Around 80 per cent of the pollution in the Ganga is because of untreated sewerage, and 20 per cent because of industrial pollution from tanneries in Kanpur and sugar and paper mills in Uttar Pradesh.

Four years have passed since Modi’s announcement, and the river remains as dirty as ever. The Comptroller and Auditor General’s (CAG) 2017 report titled “Performance Audit of the Rejuvenation of River Ganga” revealed deficiencies in financial management, planning, implementation and monitoring, huge delays in approval of projects, huge unspent balances, and failure to achieve 100 per cent target of “Open Defecation Free” villages in the river basin area. These were the prerequisites for cleaning the river.

The report, which was tabled in Parliament, noted that the award of work for sewage treatment plants of 1,397-mld capacity was to be completed by September 2016, but as of August 2017, it was still being worked out. Only 35 of the proposed 86 sewerage treatment plants (STPs), it said, had been completed. The report noted that this meant unusually high levels of faecal coliform in the water. The CAG, which measured the faecal coliform level in Varanasi, said upstream of the river in Varanasi near Assi Ghat, faecal coliform level was 3,000 MPN (most probable number)/100 ml while downstream it increased to 46,167 MPN/100 ml. For water to be considered safe for bathing, the faecal coliform measure should not exceed 500 MPN/100 ml.

According to the CAG report, the faecal coliform level across the river was found to be six to 334 times higher than the prescribed level. Incidentally, it was this alarming level of the pollution in the river Ganga that prompted the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to comment in its last hearing in July that the government should consider putting a health warning on “Gangajal” (Ganga water) now.

A financial audit of the Namami Gange project in March this year exposed the perfunctory manner of its execution. An amount of Rs.20,601 crore had been sanctioned under the programme for 193 projects. Only 20 per cent of this amount, Rs. 4,254 crore, was actually spent. Only 24 of the 64 entry level schemes had been implemented. In the last three years, the audit found, 1,114.75 km of sewer line had been laid out against the target of 4,031.41 km. What this actually means is that a huge volume of untreated sewage, chemical effluents, dead bodies, and excreta continue to flow into the river. In May 2014, there were 31 STPs with 485 mld capacity. In May 2018, 94 projects with 1,928 mld capacity are still under way, another indication that the Namami Gange project has been a non-starter.

If the holy city of Varanasi was expected to receive any extra attention, a reality check by Frontline brought up disappointing results. Varanasi, at the most, can boast of cosmetic changes to the ghats, which have been spruced up and cleaned. No substantial work has been done to handle the sewage problem. The city generates about 350 mld of sewage and still has only three STPs, which were built in 1986 during the initial stage of the Ganga Action Plan that Rajiv Gandhi initiated as Prime Minister. The three plants together have a capacity to treat only 102 mld of sewage, which means more than 50 per cent of the city’s sewage flows directly into the river near Assi Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat.

Interestingly, these two ghats have seen the most “beautification” in recent days, with new lights and shining dustbins. “But just below these spruced up ghats you have the nullahs discharging tonnes and tonnes of sewage into the river,” said Professor B.D. Tripathi, chairman of the Ganga River Water Monitoring Centre, which is run under the aegis of Benares Hindu University. According to him, 33,000 bodies are cremated every year on the banks of the river in Varanasi, using 16,000 tonnes of wood. This generates 800-900 tonnes of ash, which is im-

A huge volume of untreated sewage, chemical effluents, dead bodies, and excreta continue to flow into the river.
mersed in the river. Besides, a large number of semi-burnt bodies are dumped in the river at Harishchandra and Manikarnika Ghat every day.

Tripathi, who has been doing research on the Ganga since 1972, was also an expert member on the panel of National Ganga River Basin Authority, which was constituted by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2009. “The government talks of creating better infrastructure to handle this problem. But there has been only one electric crematorium in the city for ages, and even this functions sporadically,” he said. According to him, quality changes in the river have been nil, despite all the hype about cleaning the river.

He said this was partly because the volume of water flowing down the river had reduced, decreasing its dilution capacity and hence pushing up pollution levels. “The river flow has decreased because dams have been built on its tributaries like Alaknanda, Mandakini and Bhagirathi, in the upper reaches,” he said. Another reason for this is that water is diverted towards Delhi at Haridwar and exploitation of groundwater in the river basin for irrigation by building lift canals continues unabated.

“While the water flow has reduced considerably, the volume of pollutants has increased multifold, but the treatment facility remains the same as in 1986,” he said. He added that the river could be cleaned only if its flow was increased.

Prof. V.N. Mishra, Professor of Electronics at Benaras Hindu University and head of the Sankat Mochan Foundation, which has been monitoring Ganga water quality for 30 years, is also of the opinion that Namami Gange has basically been reduced to a slogan and has not resulted in any improvement in water quality. Data collected by the foundation in June 2016 showed faecal coliform levels at 41,00,000/100 ml near the Assi confluence and 53,00,000/100 ml at the Varuna confluence. The rivers Assi and Varuna, which flow through the city and have given it its name, have turned into nullahs now and carry the city’s sewage to the Ganga.

According to Prof. Mishra, the government has not taken a practical approach to the problem. Varanasi has only one functional sewer line which is over 100 years old. The second one is being built, but against the slope, which means a pump would be required to carry the sewage to the plant when it is ready. With power supply being erratic, even if this sewer line and the pump become functional, it is anybody’s guess how effective they will prove.
THE Cover Story (August 31) was an unputdownable compendium of Kalaivanar and his times and was a rich tribute to the departed leader. A simple lad from a remote village came up in life relying only on his own talents and metamorphosed into a legendary leader whom learned scholars followed. His experiences and achievements can be an inspiration to youngsters.

B. RAJASEKARAN
BENGALURU

THE demise of Karunanidhi, one of Tamil Nadu’s tallest leaders, has left the State orphaned. Dravidian politics may never be the same again with the loss of both Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi. The million-dollar question is whether the legacy of the DMK patriarch will be carried forward with the same zeal and spirit in the face of the bitter dispute in the family.

Although Karunanidhi’s contribution to the literary landscape is noteworthy, his relentless fight for the cause of social justice and the oppressed is what gave a fillip to his political career and endeared him to the masses, who remained loyal to him until his last breath. Despite his weaknesses on certain fronts, he will be remembered by present and future generations.

K.R. SRINIVASAN
SECUNDERABAD, TELANGANA

Karunanidhi played multifaceted roles in public life for a long time. His script for the famous classic Tamil movie “Parasakthi” had a tremendous impact in the world of Tamil cinema. His hard work and the path he traversed are ample proof of the love he had for Tamil and the Tamil community. The huge emotional response from Tamils and the peaceful funeral function sent positive vibes across the nation. Karunanidhi’s political career and Tamil writing will live on forever and inspire many people.

P. SENTHIL SARAVANA DURAI
MUMBAI

KUDOS to Frontline for its excellent commemorative issue covering the whole gamut of Karunanidhi’s life. He was indeed a great scriptwriter, orator and astute politician. He took the Dravidian ideology to the masses. His schemes for the poor and the needy and his efforts towards ensuring property rights for women and 69 per cent reservation for the backward classes mark him out as a social reformer. However, one should try not to avoid Karunanidhi’s flip side.

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN
CHENNAI

THE special issue is a worthy tribute to the former Chief Minister. Tamil Nadu is beholden to him for the many reforms he brought about in all sectors of administration. As a teacher, I can vouchsafe to his deep commitment to improve the status of teachers. There were three different scales of pay for teachers. Government schoolteachers were paid higher than their counterparts in local bodies and in private schools. Kalaivanar brought in a uniform pay structure for all teachers in 1971 in spite of the huge financial commitment involved.

Similarly, the retirement benefits of government servants were extended to teachers and employees in private schools and local bodies. This paved the way for teachers getting the concessions or benefits granted to government servants. He was easily accessible and never refused to meet any representative of unions.

One black mark in Kalaivanar’s relationship with teachers was when he sent more than 25,000 graduate teachers to jail for protesting against pay anomalies. When I met him to plead their cause, he expressed great displeasure at their agitation when he had granted several concessions. He ordered their release only after they gave unconditional letters of apology. He was under the mistaken impression that the Kamaraj faction of the Congress was behind the agitation.

S.S. RAJAGOPALAN
CHENNAI

Assam

THE fate of the nearly 40 lakh people excluded from the draft list of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a huge humanitarian problem waiting to
Letters

be resolved (“Assam’s anxiety”, August 31). It is possible that all these people are not “illegal” immigrants but had their names excluded only because they did not submit the right papers. It remains to be seen how many of them will get into the NRC finally after submitting their papers again.

The authorities may find it difficult to brand those left behind as illegal Bangladeshi citizens. How Bangladesh will approach the matter of taking back some citizens as its own is also a matter of speculation. So far, Bangladesh has not commented on this issue. India needs to give a serious thought to the possible future of those who end up not getting into the NRC.

D.B.N. MURTHY
BENGALURU

Israel

THE Security Council must intervene on behalf of Palestinians because Israel’s Nation-State Law reduces them and other minorities to second-class citizens (“Legalising racism”, August 17). Full democratic rights to all citizens of Israel regardless of their race or religion must be constitutionally assured. Jewish and Arab ethnic groups must live peacefully in Israel. A viable Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital, must be set up before a terrible war breaks out in this volatile region.

THOMAS EDMUNDS
CHENNAI

Football

FIFA World Cup 2018 witnessed the emergence of new teams that humbled established teams (“A cupful of surprises”, August 17). The crowning of France as champion was the culmination of the team’s month-long stellar all-round performance. The finale proved to be a battle of equals and was a visual treat for football lovers.

While the ignominious exit of Germany together with the heartbreaks for Brazil and Argentina will be talked about for a long time, this World Cup will be remembered for the spirited performance of the Japanese team, which won many hearts with its outstanding conduct both on and off the field.

Kudos to Frontline for its in-depth coverage and analysis.

B. SURESH KUMAR
COIMBATORE, TAMIL NADU

Seymour Hersh

A JOURNALIST like Seymour Hersh can flourish in the U.S. only because of media freedom (“America’s reporter”, August 3). This is a must for true journalism and strengthens democracy. Credit should also go to the newspapers and editors who carried his reports. One cannot imagine the head of a state being criticised by the media, and the public, in any other nation but the U.S., where the First Amendment of its Constitution guarantees free speech.

There are bright journalists who are dedicated to the profession and whose efforts go unsung. Such journalists, who work for small publications, should also be written about. The plus point for journalists in Pakistan, where they can get killed or have their computers and phones taken away by armed men and where they have to get themselves relocated to a liberal nation for their own safety.

DEENDAYAL M. LULLA
MUMBAI

Corrections

In the commemorative issue on M. Karunanidhi (August 31, 2018):

In the article “One who set the agenda for half a century”, it is wrongly stated that after the DMK victory in the 1967 Assembly elections, senior party leaders “travelled from Chennai to Erode and got Periyar E. V. Ramasamy’s blessings”. They met Periyar in Tiruchi and not Erode.

In the above article, the following sentence is incorrect: “As per the electoral pact, out of the total 40 Lok Sabha seats (including Puducherry), 30 were given to the Congress and 10 to the DMK.”. The Congress got 10 Lok Sabha seats, including one in Puducherry, thanks to hard bargaining by Karunanidhi. It won all the 10 seats.

In the article “Friend of Muslims”, the second sentence should read as follows and not as published: “As T. Nagar grew slowly into a township, in 1970, behind the bus terminus and adjacent to the police station, where Muslims were promised land for their prayers, overnight a Ganesha idol emerged.”

In the tribute “A transparent leader”: N. Sankaraiyah, it is stated that “the CPI (M) could not come to an electoral understanding with the DMK in the 1957 and 1962 general elections”. The reference in the tribute is to the united CPI. The CPI(M) was formed in 1964.

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Vacations are over but, fun learning isn’t

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