



Death traps

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

The tardy response of the Centre and the State of Meghalaya to the plight of at least 15 workers trapped in a rat-hole coal mine since mid-December has exposed the extraordinary indifference in government to labour welfare and the law. Two workers have been found dead in a second mine in the East Jaintia Hills district. The primary responsibility for the operation of illegal mines lies with the State government, and it should be called to account for ignoring the directions of the National Green Tribunal to close them and levy punitive royalties on those that extracted the coal. Several appeals are before the Supreme Court in connection with a ban ordered by the Tribunal on rat-hole mining and the transport of already mined coal. It should be possible at least now to put an end to it. The Meghalaya government has been evasive on the issue of the continued operation of the illegal mines, in spite of the adverse findings of the Justice B.P. Katoki committee appointed by the NGT. It avoided taking action even after a similar mine-flooding accident that claimed 15 lives in 2012 in South Garo Hills, and the subsequent ban. Although the NGT has ordered the State to deposit ₹100 crore with the Central Pollution Control Board for environmental restoration in the wake of the recent disaster at Ksan in East Jaintia Hills, the first-order priority is to close the rat-hole mines. It is the responsibility of the Centre and the State to rehabilitate the workers from impoverished communities, reportedly including some child labourers, who are ready to undertake the risky labour because of the higher-than-average wages paid. This should not be difficult, considering that the value of extracted coal stored in Meghalaya was officially estimated at over ₹3,078 crore four years ago, and mineral resources should be treated as state property.

The scale is high: as interpreted from satellite images and reported by the Katoki panel, it could be of the order of 24,000 mines, many of them illegal. If illegal mines continue to operate in flagrant violation of rules under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, the responsibility lies with the State government. Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has said a ban on coal mining is not the solution, given the economic conditions in the region. Yet, the State government has done little to implement reforms and diversify employment away from dirty mining under primitive conditions over the years, in spite of judicial orders. In fact, authorities in Shillong continue to ignore such directions, as the accident at the Lumthari mine in East Jaintia Hills shows. As recently as in December, Parliament was informed that 22 States had constituted a task force to review illegal mining and act on it, but Meghalaya does not figure in that list. A clean-up is overdue.

The wizards in Oz

Pujara, Pant and a spirited bowling attack cast a fine spell over Australia

Dark clouds hung over the Sydney Cricket Ground on Monday, holding off India's bid to win the Test series against Australia in greater style. Yet, the final 2-1 result is historic, with India for the first time defeating Australia in Australia in a Test series. Having flourished at Adelaide and Melbourne, the two victories split by the solitary loss at Perth, Virat Kohli's men were in good spirits when they reached Sydney. Their soaring confidence found validation through a first innings total of 622 for seven (declared), a challenge to Australia that built upon Cheteshwar Pujara's 193 and Rishabh Pant's unbeaten 159. Australia scored 300 and suffered the ignominy of following on before bad light and wet weather rescued the hosts. But India had done enough to retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. The triumph is doubly delicious as it was seized within Australia, an achievement that eluded previous Indian squads. Since its maiden Test at Lord's in 1932, India gained strength as a powerhouse at home but remained diffident overseas. England, West Indies and Pakistan were humbled on their home turf but Australia, until now, never wilted. It remained unconquerable, unleashing fiery fast bowlers and marauding batsmen. Lala Amarnath's men were the first to tour Australia for the 1947-48 series and they returned after losing 0-4. Later Indian teams were either defeated or ended up forcing a stalemate.

When Kohli's men set foot Down Under, there was the weight of past losses to contend with, besides a need to prove that their No. 1 Test ranking could stand scrutiny when they travelled beyond the subcontinent. It didn't help that an enfeebled Australia, following the ball-tampering crisis of 2018, was expected to collapse. The expectation this time around was direct and strident: India had to win. Kohli's men did that gloriously against Tim Paine's men, who fought for large stretches before discarding their spirit towards the business end. It wasn't easy and India did have its headaches. Midway, it had to jettison the malfunctioning opening pair of Murali Vijay and K.L. Rahul. Lead spinner R. Ashwin, after choking the Aussies at Adelaide, picked up a side-strain, and the ambiguity over his fitness level before the concluding Test triggered some conspiracy theories. The squad missed two regulars, who were tending to injuries: wicket-keeper Wriddhiman Saha and opener Prithvi Shaw. Still, India found the right men for different occasions. Kohli scored a ton, Pujara did even better, delivering three centuries, amassing 521 and averaging 74.43. The fast bowling unit was incisive and Jasprit Bumrah sizzled with 21 wickets. Pant caught well and provided valuable runs lower down the order. The latest achievement in Australia has to be savoured. Now South Africa remains the "final frontier", as it were – India is yet to win a Test series there.

Still nothing to show for

Imran Khan appears to be banking on the establishment to help him and Pakistan out of its economic crisis



S. AKBAR ZAIDI

In October last year, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan in a public address stated that Pakistanis should stop worrying, "Ghabrain nahin, hausla rakhain (do not worry, have fortitude)." But after five months of waiting for the government to deliver on its numerous promises, perhaps it is now time to really start worrying.

A different mandate

In each of the three recent elections in Pakistan, in 2008, 2013 and last year in July, a different political party won and formed the government. The Pakistan Peoples Party in 2008, following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, had two Prime Ministers in its five-year tenure; but with Asif Zardari as President of Pakistan, this five-year tenure is better known as Mr. Zardari's government. Similarly, after 2013, the Pakistan Muslim League's Nawaz Sharif made a remarkable reappearance in Pakistan's political scene and became Prime Minister for the third time, only to be debarred and removed from office, and subsequently imprisoned, and was replaced by one of his party members as Prime Minister. The 2013 government, even with Mr. Sharif behind bars, was known as his government. The third transition, or 'experiment' as it has been called since last year well before the elections took place, was for Pakistan's military and judiciary, the so-called 'establishment', to work together and

ensure an electoral victory for the third political party in as many elections, with Imran Khan winning.

The electoral results in 2008 and 2013 were not unexpected. After Benazir Bhutto's killing, a sympathy wave led to her party winning enough seats to form a coalition government, but with its particularly poor performance in its five-year tenure, Mr. Sharif's victory was also not unexpected. Despite the incarceration of Mr. Sharif and the multiple cases against him in 2017 and 2018, the general perception was that his party would probably get re-elected, albeit with a smaller majority. Mr. Khan's victory followed on a multi-month strategy by the establishment to ensure that he would win, with ample evidence suggesting that he was ushered in with much help from behind the scenes. His shell-shocked victory speech a few hours after the elections suggested that even he was taken aback when victory was handed to him.

Five months on

Five months is a long enough time to be able to assess what a new government has done and the direction it intends to follow. Both the Zardari government of 2008 and the Sharif government in 2013 quickly went into taking numerous decisions soon after being elected. In 2008, with support from the Opposition led by Mr. Sharif, Mr. Zardari and his government worked together to jointly address issues concerning the economy, and to remove the then President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, by initiating a process to have him impeached, leading to his resignation. Differences emerged between Mr. Sharif and Mr. Zardari



over issues about an amnesty granted to political leaders and about the reinstatement of members of the judiciary dismissed while General Musharraf was President. Nevertheless, the main purpose apparent from the beginning had been served and was clear from the start, to reclaim popular political space from the military, and to reassert the sovereignty of the law. Mr. Sharif, when he was elected in 2013, from the very first moment, started work on addressing Pakistan's biggest problem at that time, the electricity crisis which was crippling the economy. After taking several decisions within days of assuming power, he started to put the economy on some track, and agreed to an International Monetary Fund programme.

The most noticeable demonstration of Mr. Khan's government over the last five months has been best reflected in its ineptitude, indecision, bumbling, sanctimoniousness. For the past five months, we have been waiting for some major policy direction, vision, even just a simple decision on what to do next, but nothing so far has emerged. Other than the 'we will put all the corrupt politicians in jail' mantra, this government has been lacking in foresight and a sense of purpose. It is not in experience which is the cause for

The un-Gandhian cane

The crossover of symbols that defined Gandhi – from benign to malevolent – is a revealing comment



JANAKI NAIR

Over the last few years, battles over symbols – for long an Indian pre-occupation – have reached a crescendo and show no signs of abating. Perhaps no historical figure has been mined as thoroughly as M.K. Gandhi (although B.R. Ambedkar today comes a close second). No government would dare dislodge his endorsement of all Indian currency notes, no matter what colour or denomination they come in, even though we know that this would have been the most distasteful of associations for someone like him.

We are only too painfully aware that this glut of images of Gandhi, avowed with such passion, frees the Indian people of any obligation to practise Gandhian ways of living, let alone uphold political principles or economic values. Neither a passionate adherence to truth nor an ardent desire for non-violence is the mark of our public life today.

But the reduction of the halLOWed figure of the Mahatma to a social worker with a broom, from which no more than a pair of spectacles has been distilled, was an

achievement like no other of the present government at the launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission in 2014. The spectacles have assumed a menacing ubiquity, looming large on bus stops and calendars, even as sewer deaths, manual scavenging and a deep-seated aversion to public hygiene (linked no doubt to caste) continue to remind us of what really needs to be fixed for a cleaner, healthier and sustainable India.

Experiments with clothing

Gandhi himself spent a good part of his busy life experimenting with the symbols – particularly styles of dress – that would enhance his message. His experiments with the national cap pre-occupied him for some years during 1915-1919: from wearing a top hat, a sola topee, a turban, an embroidered Kashmiri cap, he 'came to the conclusion that the Kashmiri cap was the best. It is light as well as elegant; it is easy to make, it can be folded, which makes it easily portable' (his words) And he fixed on white khadi for this headgear, which simultaneously promoted handspun, easily showed up dirt, and was one of the most powerful symbols of anti-colonial nationalism. He himself wore it for just two years, but the symbol sent many dedicated nationalist wearers even to prison.

We don't know as much about his cane, his indispensable walking aid by the late 1920s. We do know that the cane (lathi) as wa-



K. RAMESH BABU

pon, rather than as loveable third limb, has attained unprecedented importance in our national life. It is this crossover of symbols – from benign to malevolent – that artist B.V. Suresh brought to his installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in December 2018. Like so many young Kannadiga men growing up in the 1960s, B.V. Suresh was not impervious to the attractions of the local RSS shakha for the opportunities it gave the young to collectively exercise/play sport. Like so many young Kannadiga men of his generation, the attractions were very short lived.

A comment on the new India

B.V. Suresh's installation was no less than a comment on how thoroughly the Indian republic as we know it has been gutted in the last few years. He allowed his alarm – and indeed sorrow – about the new India that is taking shape to be seen and heard in the space of a semi-darkened, large godown space at Aspinwall. The dull, uneven thud of lathis was audible as

this. Although Mr. Khan has not held a job for many years – his last paid job was probably as Pakistan's cricket captain – most of his Ministers and advisers have been in government with one political party or another. In fact, many worked with General Musharraf when he was President. The many claims that Mr. Khan makes about strong leadership seem to be undermined with him in charge of Pakistan's government.

Perhaps the most urgent and pressing problem facing Pakistan today is that of an economy quickly going into a crisis state, largely on account of inaction and uncertainty created by the Finance Minister. Pakistan's growth rate in the fiscal year ending in June 2018 was 5.8%, the highest in 13 years. For the current fiscal year the expectations are that it will be closer to 3%. Inflation today is the highest in six years, and interest rates have been driven to double-digit levels with the Pakistani rupee depreciating 34% in 12 months. There is a growing balance of payments crisis, with exports stagnant and imports still rising, along with a fiscal deficit of more than 6% of GDP. The stock market has fallen, as have investor confidence and ratings of the economy. Foreign direct investment has fallen drastically since early 2018. The China Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was touted as Pakistan's 'Marshall Plan', seems to have completely gone off the radar for now, as the Chinese rethink their strategy for Pakistan. Knowing all this, Mr. Khan and his finance and economic team have done little to stabilise Pakistan's economy, to draw a strategy to address these exacerbating problems. Other than begging for loans from the only three friends

Pakistan is left with – Saudi Arabia, China and the UAE – there has been an absence of ideas about what to do. The populist promises of the election manifesto of Mr. Khan, of making Pakistan a model welfare state on the lines of the Prophet's Medina, of providing millions of jobs and houses to Pakistanis, will all come undone unless the economy is first fixed.

A controlled democracy

The single most prominent feature of Mr. Khan's five months has been his repeated pronouncements that he and his government are 'on the same page' with Pakistan's military and judiciary. Unlike Mr. Zardari and Mr. Sharif, both fairly astute and experienced politicians, and not having had any government experience, Mr. Khan probably doesn't realise the consequences of what this means and how being on the same page with dominating and powerful unelected institutions undermines and stifles the agency of elected governments. Rather than having used the short breathing space following his electoral victory by taking some resolute decisions, his inactions may not only reflect his inability to understand how to run a government but might simply be because he expects others on this 'same page' to do his bidding. In many ways, with a media that is strangled, and politicians of the Opposition being hounded in the name of 'accountability', Pakistan may be back to its tried and trusted model of controlled democracy.

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one approached, but nothing prepared you for the sight of dozens of them pounding the floor on two sides of the room. Two really long bamboos, like scaffolding, shielded a spotlit white Indian national bird: by draping the posts with some diaphanous synthetic material, rather than the more predictable khadi, B.V. Suresh self-consciously averted banality.

For this was no celebratory monument but a cry of despair, a warning, as the two videos that flanked the central arrangement – the now dismembered peacock – combined with the audio of a speech to darkly warn: both the tagdeer (fate) and the tasvir (picture) of this nation will be changed. On the wall facing the entrance, cast in a reddish hue, which allowed the decaying brickwork of the godown to show through, was finally an encounter with the man of peace, striding with his own cane. But here too he slowly dissolved as the Rudra Hanuman image loomed menacingly into view, a masculinist, muscular and militaristic (and angry) portrait that many cars have today made popular.

B.V. Suresh's installation included two mechanically rotating sets of brooms and cloths, which swept up dust, and re-distributed, rather than removed, it as a comment on the ambiguous achievements of Swachh Bharat. But it is the invitation to reflect on the travesties of our contemporary world that are

startling and touching. B.V. Suresh himself said that he did not intend the installation to be overtly political, but one could not think of a more apt instance of fearless speech, a comment by one of the multitudes who today feel increasingly suffocated as writers, artists, teachers, ordinary citizens all, crouching in fear of 'the people's' wrath.

So it was appropriate that the installation was called 'Canes of Wrath': 'Jiski lathi, uski bhains' – at no earlier time in our independent nation's life did one feel so acutely the bestial power of the lathi, unrestrained in its authority when wielded as a 'people's weapon' especially against the most defenceless. At no earlier time has Gandhi been rendered so irrelevant as now; would his heirs in the Congress party dare to praise, as Gandhi did in 1915, that first devout Hindu and Indian nationalist, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who declared, "Please publish it abroad that I am not a Hindu" when he was requested to push an overtly Hindu political agenda?

We have a lot to thank B.V. Suresh for, but especially for sharing this deeply contemplative perspective on our present, and the portentous and dystopic mood of the hour.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Rafale, in Parliament

It appears that the government is in direct confrontation with the Opposition on the Rafale fighter aircraft deal. It is strange that the Prime Minister, who has been closely involved with the deal, maintains a stony silence while Ministers in his cabinet, some of whom have had no role in the deal, have been left to defend it. It is high time that all political parties realise that in trying to fulfil their political aspirations, they are also testing the patience of the general public. People have been shocked by several scams where public money has been misused by those in power. In its defence of the Rafale deal, the government cannot make the excuse of saying that previous governments (largely the Congress) too indulged in corruption. The

point of national security cannot be used when convenient if asked about transparency in government dealings. There is definitely something amiss with the Rafale deal; there is the strong perception that proper procedures were not followed.

RAHUL CHOUDHARY,
Jodhpur, Rajasthan

■ Perturbed by the point-by-point replies by Union Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the Congress and its allies have only a one-point agenda in Parliament: to create a ruckus in the House. This only shows that the Congress and the rest of the Opposition are scared of hearing the truth. If the government maintains a dignified silence, it is accused of being cowardly and having no answers. If it places the facts before the

august House, the speech is obstructed. The Congress party is the mother of all scams in India. Therefore it sees everything with jaundiced eyes.

K.V. SEETHARAMAIAH,
Hassan, Karnataka

Literary freedom

In 1644, at the height of the English Civil War, poet John Milton called on Parliament to bring to an end the state licensing of newspapers, with the request, 'give me above all liberties the freedom to speak.' That notion of liberty to free speech and print being above all liberties, endured for centuries till technology upended it. On the other hand, there is a price to pay for sponsoring and pursuing the freedom of speech and print. It is sad that few are prepared to defend the very sap that nurtures the spirit of men, society and nations. Free

expression is a product of application of sane human intellect to the issue at hand. Today, intellectualism per se is sought to be branded as anti-national and deserving of being suppressed by the might of the state (Editorial, "Removing fear", January 7).

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

Sabarimala reports

The defence put up by the Readers' Editor is not very convincing (From the Readers' Editor, "The Sabarimala coverage", January 7). The headlines speak volumes about the coverage, which was most often toeing the line of the Kerala government and the CPI(M). There was very little coverage/space given to the views of Opposition parties or other social organisations that were speaking in support of devotees.

P. MAHESH,
Chennai

The Readers' Editor should realise that readers of *The Hindu* are so devout and possessive that they find even a mild shift towards a certain position unacceptable. They certainly do not want their dear paper to go the other way. While I am totally in agreement with the Readers' Editor that a newspaper has to report every story or event as it happens, there is certainly ample room for being a bit more discreet while choosing

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

>>In "IndiGo plans daily flights to Istanbul" (Jan. 7, 2019), there was a reference to the airline's plan for launching non-stop flights to Turkey's capital city of Istanbul by March. The capital of Turkey is Ankara.

>>There was a reference to 'top quark' (one of the particles that make up protons and electrons) in the story titled "At Science Congress, a 'Vedic' rebel seeks physics glory (Jan. 6, 2019). It should have been 'up quark' (one of the particles that make up protons and neutrons).

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com

and coining headlines.

SVAMAMI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

Win, Down Under

It was a great pleasure to witness India's series win on Australian soil. It has indeed been a long wait. I never dreamed of seeing this historical achievement in my lifetime.

S. JANAMAJAYAN,
Chennai

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