



Congress and cow

The Madhya Pradesh government's use of the NSA for cattle offences is out of line

The detention of five people under the National Security Act in Madhya Pradesh last week, all of them alleged to have committed offences related to cattle laws, amounts to gross misuse of a law meant solely to prevent activities that endanger the country's security or public order. India has unfortunately become habituated to the abuse of preventive detention laws. In recent times, they have been wrongly invoked against political dissenters and vocal critics, with total disregard for constitutional freedoms. The latest instances point to a new form of misuse. This is possibly the first time that a law that provides for a maximum of one year in prison through an executive order without trial or bail is being used against those suspected of offences against cows. The implications are terrifying. It means that law-enforcers will stop at nothing to demonstrate ideological adherence to majoritarian beliefs. This poses a grave danger to the freedom of movement and vocation, as well as the dietary choices, of sections of society that do not share the majority community's reverence for the cow. In the first case in Khandwa district, the police, who recovered a cow carcass, traced three men who had allegedly killed the animal. In the second case, authorities in Agar Malwa district claim there was some disturbance due to two men who were allegedly transporting cows. The ostensible reason to book them under the NSA is that they were likely to cause disruption of peace. This is too flimsy a ground to invoke so stringent a law, especially when there is no evidence of security or order being under grave threat.

In its order last year directing a series of measures against mob violence and public lynching, of which those transporting cows were frequent victims, the Supreme Court had warned against the dangers of a socio-political framework based on disrespect for an inclusive social order, and wanted the state to take preventive and remedial measures. In its apparent eagerness to prevent incidents that may lead to a communal backlash, the Madhya Pradesh government is detaining potential victims to prevent them from indulging in provocative acts! In invoking the NSA in respect of minor offences, solely out of fear of aggressive protests by right-wing Hindu groups, the Congress regime in Madhya Pradesh is displaying utter cravenness. It is not clear why the police is not content with prosecuting them under laws that ban cow slaughter. There is some unease among Congress leaders over these actions of the party's new government in the State. However, it is not enough for the party to voice mild disapproval of the Kamal Nath regime's actions: its leadership has to denounce the gross misuse of the law to mollify cow vigilantes and the short-sighted aim of neutralising the BJP's campaign that the Congress is against Hindu beliefs. The State government must revoke the detention.

No zero-sum games

India and the U.S. must work to halt trade hostilities urgently

There are alarm bells in India over a possible decision by the U.S. Trade Representative to withdraw the Generalised System of Preferences status. Under this, India is able to export about 2,000 product lines to the U.S. under zero tariff. The revocation of the GSP, which was first extended to India in 1976 as part of a global concession by the U.S. to help developing countries build their economies, will be a blow to Indian exporters, and the biggest in a series of measures taken by the Trump administration against India to reduce its trade deficit. President Donald Trump's case on what he calls "unequal tariffs" from India rests on the trade relationship in favour of India: Indian exports to the U.S. in 2017-18 stood at \$47.9 billion, while imports were \$26.7 billion. The measures are in line with Mr. Trump's campaign promises. On the matter of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, he spoke directly to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on at least three occasions, demanding that India zero out tariffs to match U.S. rates on Indian motorcycles. In March 2018, the U.S. began imposing tariffs on several Indian products, and in April, the USTR began a review of India's GSP status, based on complaints of trade barriers from India it had received from the dairy industry and manufacturers of medical devices. In November the U.S. withdrew GSP status on at least 50 Indian products.

In retaliation, India proposed tariffs of about \$235 million on 29 American goods, but has put off implementing these five times in the past year in the hope that a negotiated trade settlement will come through. The latest deadline expires on March 1. India has also attempted to address the trade deficit with purchase of American oil, energy and aircraft. There have been dozens of rounds of talks between officials over the past few months, but no breakthrough. U.S. officials say the decision on data localisation for all companies operating in India, and the more recent tightening norms for FDI in e-commerce have aggravated the situation. Both sides should work towards calling a halt to trade hostilities and speed up efforts for a comprehensive trade "package", rather than try to match each concern product by product. The U.S. must realise that India is heading into elections, and offer more flexibility in the next few months. India must keep in mind that the larger, global picture is about U.S.-China trade issues, and if a trade deal with the U.S. is reached, India could be the biggest beneficiary of business deals lost by China. The visit of U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to India this week will be watched not as much for substance, as for signals that New Delhi and Washington understand the urgency in breaking the deadlock.

Caught between two extremisms

Wahhabi influence and Hindu nationalism are responsible for the radicalisation of a small segment of Muslim youth



MOHAMMED AYOOB

News reports about occasional acts of terrorism outside of Jammu and Kashmir, which for historical reasons forms a special case, attributed to young Indian Muslims have appeared intermittently in the press. In addition, several recent reports suggest that global jihadi organisations such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have recruited a few Indian Muslim youth primarily by exploiting the latter's local grievances to serve their own global goals.

Many analysts, Indian and foreign, had assumed until recently that Indian Muslims were immune to extremist propaganda because of both the syncretic and moderate nature of Indian Islam and the democratic and secular character of the country which made them feel they were equal participants in the political process. Both these assumptions are now problematic, as several factors have been at work in the past three decades that challenge this conventional wisdom.

Wahhabi influence

The first is the increasing influence of Saudi Wahhabism and related forms of Salafism on Islam as practised in the Indian subcontinent. This is the result of several inter-related variables but the most important of these is the vast increase in employment opportunities in the energy-rich West Asian countries following the oil

boom of the 1970s. This resulted in many Indians of all faiths temporarily locating to these countries in search of higher earnings. While a much larger number of Indians belonging to other religions moved to West Asia in search of lucrative jobs, both white and blue-collar, the religio-cultural impact of the encounter with the fundamentalist form of Islam followed in these countries, especially Saudi Arabia, on a section of Indian Muslim emigrants was qualitatively different.

Several of these temporary migrants returned to India enamoured with the obscurantist ethos of these oil-rich countries. This fascination was publicly exhibited above all in the adoption by a section of Muslim women, often under patriarchal pressure, of an ultra-conservative dress code, including the niqab, or full face covering, popular in Saudi Arabia and some other West Asian countries. This dress code is very different from the traditional concept of purdah (covering up or modesty) practised by conservative Muslim families in the Indian subcontinent.

Protected by Sufism

But this display of presumed orthodoxy constituted merely the tip of the iceberg. The impact of Wahhabi/Salafi Islam on the mindset of a segment of returnees, who also passed on their preferences to a much larger group of relatives and acquaintances already impressed by the former's newly acquired prosperity, was more profound. Islamic beliefs and practices among some Indian Muslims began to approximate the harsh Wahhabi dogma, which stands in stark contrast to the indigenous version of Islam in India. The vast majority of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent belong to the Hanafi sect based on



the most liberal school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Moreover, traditionally Indian Islam has been greatly influenced by Sufi teachings and is, therefore, tolerant and accepting of religious diversity. Visitors to major Sufi shrines, such as those of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi, where people of all confessions come to pray and seek blessings, can testify to the syncretic spirit of Indian Islam. Consequently, it harbours natural defences against extremism in belief and practice. The ideological infiltration of Wahhabism/Salafism has eroded some of these defences and made a section of Muslims more insular and, therefore, open to extremist ideas.

Equally important, the spectacular rise of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism from the 1990s has had a major psychological impact on a section of Muslim youth, prompting their estrangement from the national mainstream. Inter-religious riots in which Muslims suffered disproportionately had been common in India since Independence. In some cases the police killed Muslim youth in fake encounters. The Hashimpura massacre in Uttar Pradesh by members of the Provincial Armed Constabulary in 1987 was the most macabre example of such incidents.

However, until the 1990s the vast majority of Indian Muslims

treated such occurrences as aberrations and their belief in the secular and non-discriminatory character of the Indian state remained unshaken. The demolition in 1992 of the Babri mosque by a Hindu mob under the direction of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) luminaries and the riots that ensued, in which scores of Muslims lost their lives, shook the confidence of many Muslims in the secular character of the Indian state. What was most galling was the Central government's apathy in the face of this brazen act of mob violence despite the fact that it had been forewarned. This event began the process of alienation among a section of Muslim youth from the Indian state.

This feeling grew exponentially a decade later in 2002 with the massacre of about 1,000 Muslims in Gujarat under BJP rule to avenge the death of 59 kar sevaks who were burnt to death in a train at Godhra after an altercation with local Muslims. What added insult to injury was the inaction, or, as the Human Rights Watch report on the bloodbath put it, the refusal of the state machinery to protect Muslim citizens.

More recently, the disenchantment caused by these earlier events has been reinforced by the lynching of several Muslims in northern and central India on the pretext that they were taking cows for slaughter or eating beef. The lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri, in western Uttar Pradesh, in 2015 on suspicion that he had stored beef in his house was the most chilling example of such incidents. It was followed by additional acts of mob violence carried out with relative impunity by the so-called gau rakshak (cow protector) vigilantes. Such incidents have led to a widespread feeling among In-

dian Muslims that the state, instead of providing security to them, now colludes with those determined to intimidate them into submission. This series of actions and reactions makes it evident that the growth of Hindu nationalism has acted as a major stimulus for the radicalisation of a section of Muslim society in India and that the two phenomena feed off each other.

Onus on governing elites

Opinion leaders and religious scholars from within the Muslim community have the primary duty to confront and defeat the malign Wahhabi-Salafi influence on Indian Muslims in order to preserve the liberal and syncretic nature of Indian Islam thus pre-empting the spread of extremist ideology among Muslim youth. However, the impact of the growth of Hindu nationalism on the Muslim psyche can be countered only by the policies and actions of the governing elites at the Centre and in the States. Only they can take concrete steps, such as quick and impartial action against those responsible for creating mayhem in the name of religion, to reassure Muslims that the state will not shirk its responsibility of providing them physical security and ensuring that they are treated with fairness and dignity. This will be the best antidote to the percolation of radical ideas among Muslim youth by removing their sense of alienation from the Indian state that in the long run can threaten the country's security.

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The solution is universal

Strengthening the MGNREGA would be more prudent than a targeted cash transfer plan like PM-KISAN



RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN & DEBMALYA NANDY

Rural distress has hit unprecedented levels. According to news reports, unemployment is the highest in 45 years. To allay some misgivings of the distress, one of the announcements in the Budget speech was that "vulnerable landholding farmer families, having cultivable land up to 2 hectares, will be provided direct income support at the rate of ₹ 6,000 per year".

This cash transfer scheme has been called Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN). The Ministry of Agriculture has written to State governments to prepare a database of all eligible beneficiaries along with their Aadhaar numbers, and update land records "expeditiously". The letter further states that changes in land records after February 1, 2019 shall not be considered for this scheme.

A comparison

Undoubtedly, farmers' distress needs urgent attention but let's see if the PM-KISAN is a reasonable solution. Let us first compare some basic numbers with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). For example, if two members of a household in Jharkhand work under MGNREGA (picture) for 30 days, they would earn ₹10,080 and

a household of two in Haryana would earn ₹16,860 in 30 days. Jharkhand has the lowest daily MGNREGA wage rate, and Haryana the highest. Put simply, a month of MGNREGA earnings for a household is more than a year's income support through PM-KISAN anywhere in the country.

PM-KISAN is a targeted cash transfer programme and MGNREGA is a universal programme. Any rural household willing to do manual work is eligible under the Act. According to the 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census, around 40% of rural households are landless and depend on manual labour. The landless can earn through the MGNREGA but are not eligible for the PM-KISAN scheme. Notwithstanding the meagre amount, the PM-KISAN might be pitting the landless against a small farmer.

Further, it is unclear how tenant farmers, those without titles, and women farmers would be within the ambit of the scheme. There is also substantial evidence to demonstrate that universal schemes are less prone to corruption than targeted schemes. In targeted programmes, it is very common to have errors of exclusion, i.e., genuine beneficiaries get left out. Such errors go unrecorded and people continue to be left out. It is in some of these contexts that strengthening an existing universal programme such as the MGNREGA would have been a prudent move instead of introducing a hasty targeted cash transfer programme.

The Agriculture Ministry's letter states that "funds will be electron-



ically transferred to the beneficiary's bank account by [Government of India] through State Notional Account on a pattern similar to MGNREGS". There are important lessons to be learned from the MGNREGA implementation. The Centre has frequently tinkered with the wage payments system in the MGNREGA. It's creditable that timely generation of pay-orders have improved, but contrary to the Centre's claims, less than a third of the payments were made on time. And in contempt of the Supreme Court orders, the Centre alone has been causing a delay of more than 50 days in disbursing wages.

Field realities

Moreover, repeated changes in processes result in a hurried bureaucratic reorientation on the ground, and much chaos among workers and field functionaries alike. Field functionaries are pushed to meet stiff targets. Being short-staffed and inadequately trained, this results in many technical and unforeseen errors. A case in point is the rushed manner in which Aadhaar has been implemented for the MGNREGA.

Several MGNREGA payments have been rejected, diverted, or frozen as a consequence. In the

last four years alone, more than ₹1,300 crore of the MGNREGS wage payments have been rejected due to technical errors such as incorrect account numbers or faulty Aadhaar mapping. There have been no clear national guidelines to rectify these. There are numerous cases of MGNREGS payments getting diverted to Airtel wallets and ICICI bank accounts. In a recently concluded survey on common service centres in Jharkhand for Aadhaar-based payments, it was found that 42% of the biometric authentications failed in the first attempt, compelling them to come later. This continued harassment faced by people would have been a more humane question to address rather than brushing them aside as "teething problems" and build a new scheme on similar shaky platforms.

The success of the PM-KISAN is contingent on there being reliable digital land records and reliable rural banking infrastructure – both are questionable at best. While ₹75,000 crore has been earmarked for this scheme, the MGNREGA continues to be pushed to a severe crisis. The MGNREGA allocation for 2019-20 is ₹60,000 crore, lower than the revised budget of ₹61,084 crore in 2018-19. In the last four years, on an average, around 20% of the Budget allocation has been unpaid pending payments from previous years. Thus, subtracting the pending liabilities, in real terms, the Budget allocation has been lower than 2010-11. Despite a letter to the Prime Minister by citizens and MPs in January 2019, (as of February 8) all MGNREGA funds have been ex-

hausted. While the country stares at an impending drought, workers languish in unemployment. The MGNREGA is neither an income support programme nor just an asset creation programme. It is a labour programme meant to strengthen participatory democracy through community works. It is a legislative mechanism to strengthen the constitutional principle of the right to life. That the MGNREGA works have demonstrably strong multiplier effects are yet another reason to improve its implementation. Despite all this, the MGNREGA wage rates in 18 States have been kept lower than the States' minimum agricultural wage rates. This acts as a deterrent for the landless. Yet, work demand has been 33% more than the employment provided this year – underscoring the desperation to work. By routinely under-funding this Act, the Bharatiya Janata Party government continues to undermine the constitutional guarantee.

In an employment programme, adequacy of fund allocation and respectable wages are crucial, so meaningless claims of "highest ever allocation" and other dubious claims through a management information system are unhealthy for democracy.

At a time of such acute distress, does it not behave the Central government to improve the existing universal infrastructure of the MGNREGA before plunging into a programme pretending to augment farmers' income?

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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 deal revelations

It was surprising that *The Hindu* should have printed half-truths without ascertaining the full details, and given ammunition to Congress President Rahul Gandhi who has exhausted his torrent of abuse against the Prime Minister and has only been looking for additional material with which to denigrate the country's leader (Page 1, 'Exclusive', "MoD protesting against PMO undermining Rafale negotiations", February 8). The ethics of journalism warrant that the comments by the then Defence Minister should have also been published. Mr. Gandhi is only misleading people with 'shoot and scoot'

comments for his political gains. His unjustified and abusive comments against the Prime Minister will surely rebound on him and the Congress party.

R.V. REDDY,
Secunderabad

■ An indelible impression has gained currency that there is some hidden agenda/motive behind the publication of the "exclusive". Officials associated with the Defence Ministry and the Indian negotiating team have categorically denied the charge of the Prime Minister's Office having been involved in parallel negotiations. The highest court of the land too did not find anything adverse in the

deal. There is not even an iota of evidence to show any kickback/quid pro quo. Then why jump the gun and cry foul? Defence procurement deals and negotiations are highly classified and are not subjects for discussion and debate in the public domain. As a well-wisher, I find it disturbing that the paper's enviable image of upholding the highest standards of professional journalism stands tarnished.

S. SESHADRI,
Chennai

■ I am shocked by letters from some readers castigating *The Hindu* for its revelations. As a long-time reader, I appreciate the efforts of the paper to bring out the truth in the public

domain – which no other media outlet has done. Notwithstanding stout denials from the government, there remain unanswered pertinent questions. The common man wants to know: how a new company was preferred over a well-experienced defence public sector unit; why there was a three-fold increase in the price of the jets and whether the private company which has now been given the contract is indeed capable of meeting its contractual obligations in light of the problems being faced by its parent company.

J. ANANTHA PADMANABHAN,
Tiruchi

■ That the then Defence Minister – who is naturally a

part of the politics of his party and its government – tried to soothe the concerns raised by his Ministry officials is neither surprising nor pertinent to the report. The report was specifically about the negotiating team's concerns and frustration over the PMO's interference. Those readers who appear to be "disappointed" that the *Hindu's* "standards", "reputation" and "credibility" have been "besmirched" should well remember that it was this very same newspaper that exposed the corruption in the Bofors deal. It is hypocritical if these readers who are reverential about this paper's reportage on Bofors back then, feel angry now over the reporting on

the Rafale deal. Instead, as it was then, the government is now morally bound to order an impartial inquiry. 'Rafale' is an issue that has everyone, political or otherwise, asking for answers.

S. SANKAR,
Thiruvananthapuram

On Test cricket

Muttiah Muralitharan, the world's highest wicket-taker in Test cricket, may feel that Test cricket will slowly lose its charm ('Sport' page, February 10). But for true cricket fans, Test cricket is real cricket. An ODI or a T20 match is a game of chance. Test cricket is a game of skill.

K. PRADEEP,
Chennai

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