



Open acres

The new hydrocarbon policy makes exploration more attractive for investors

The recently unveiled Open Acreage Licensing Policy and the National Data Repository together are a significant and welcome step towards opening up the hydrocarbon exploration and production industry in India. By placing greater discretion in the hands of explorers and operators, the Licensing Policy attempts to address a major drawback in the New Exploration Licensing Policy, which forced energy explorers to bid for blocks chosen by the government. Companies can now apply for particular areas they deem to be attractive to invest in, and the Centre will put those areas up for bids. This is more attractive for prospective operators because in the past, the blocks chosen by the government often were large swathes of land or sea in which only a small fraction had hydrocarbon reserves. By offering companies the freedom to choose exactly the areas they want to explore, and their size, the government has a better chance to woo serious energy investors in an effort to help achieve a more cohesive framework of the country's energy security. Tied to this is the National Data Repository, which is envisaged as a centralised database of geological and hydrocarbon information that will be available to all. Besides allowing potential investors to make informed decisions, this will open up a new sector in India. There are a number of companies around the world that make it their business to simply explore hydrocarbon basins and sell the information they gather. The new initiative seeks to incentivise such prospectors.

Companies may also submit applications through the year and not just at designated and often infrequent points, as was the case earlier. The Directorate General of Hydrocarbons has said that while the auctions will be held twice a year for now, the frequency could be increased as soon as the industry grows accustomed to the new system. This, too, will lend more flexibility to the industry. However, there are still some concerns about the implementation of the overall Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy. The policy awards an extra five points to bidders for an acreage if they have already invested in the exploration and development of that area, but it is doubtful if this is enough of an incentive, since the investment needed to simply explore is significant. By contrast, no such preference is given to mineral explorers while auctioning mining rights – instead, a revenue-share from mining operations is their recompense for exploration efforts. This could be considered for the hydrocarbon sector as well. Another concern is whether India can attract enough investment to meet the government's objective of reducing oil imports by 10% by 2022, especially given the past experience investors have had with large projects such as KG-D6. There are after all proven reserves in other parts of the world, such as the Gulf of Mexico, that could still keep investor appetite for Indian acreage weak.

The delta miracle

The steady loss of mangroves in the Sundarbans makes conservation efforts vital

Fresh evidence of loss of forest cover in the Indian Sundarbans, which represent a third of the largest contiguous mangrove ecosystem in the world, is a reminder that an accelerated effort is necessary to preserve them. Long-term damage to the highly productive mangroves on the Indian side occurred during the colonial era, when forests were cut to facilitate cultivation. As a recent Jadavpur University study has pointed out, climate change appears to be an emerging threat to the entire 10,000 sq km area that also straddles Bangladesh towards the east, and sustains millions of people with food, water and forest products. There is also a unique population of tigers that live here, adapted to move easily across the land-sea interface. The Sundarbans present a stark example of what loss of ecology can do to a landscape and its people, as islands shrink and sediment that normally adds to landmass is trapped upstream in rivers by dams and barrages; such a loss is not compensated by the limited benefits available elsewhere in the islands from additions. As a confluence zone of freshwater brought by the big Himalayan rivers and high concentrated salinity, these islands are a crucible of biodiversity that helps the 4.5 million that live on the Indian side. It is remarkable, for instance, that the mangrove tree species, including the Sundari, which has historically helped the local economy in the construction of boats and bridges, make up as much as a third of the global trove of such trees. Understandably, the region has attracted a large number of settlers, and the population within Indian boundaries has risen from 1.15 million in 1951 to 4.4 million six decades later.

Parts of the Sundarbans are legally protected as national parks and sanctuaries, and there is a special focus on tiger conservation. Yet, its future now depends on local actions that will protect the banks from erosion, and policies that address the pressures created on natural resources by lack of human development. Suggestions for fortification against erosion on the lines of the dikes in The Netherlands merit scientific evaluation. Strengthening them with endemic plant and tree species that can thrive in changing salinity conditions can provide co-benefits to local communities. Carefully considered ecotourism holds the potential to raise awareness and funds, since the Sundarbans harbour a raft of bird and animal species. There is also a strong case for international climate finance to be channelled to India and Bangladesh for the region's preservation, given its global uniqueness. It is vital that local communities are pulled out of poverty, which would also relieve the pressure on natural resources. Climate research and social science thus have a synergistic role in giving the Sundarbans a greater chance of survival.

The organising principle of lynch mobs

The executors of violence know that strong-arm tactics send powerful signals of who belongs and who does not



NEERA CHANDHOKE

What encourages Indians who subscribe to different religious persuasions, speak different languages, and hold different conceptions of the good to believe that they are equal members of a democratic political community? Many features bind us together: shared memories of a massive struggle against colonialism, the spectacle of and general enthusiasm for elections, love of cricket and fascination with Bollywood. The most important bond that welds disparate people into a political community is, arguably, constitutional democracy and the fundamental rights granted by the Constitution.

About the right to life

Logically, the one right that enables us to possess and exercise other rights is the right to life granted by Article 21 of the Fundamental Rights Chapter of the Constitution. It states explicitly that no person shall be deprived of her life or personal liberty, save by procedure established by law. In 1950, the Supreme Court, in the case of *A.K. Gopalan vs the State of Madras*, interpreted the phrase "procedure established by law" as any procedure laid down in a statute enacted by a competent legislature. For 23 years, the court did not interpret the right to life as a principle of natural justice, but as a fragile right that could be taken away by arbitrary legislation.

Over the years the Supreme Court changed its stance. In 1973, in the case of *Prabhu Dayal Deorah vs the District Magistrate, Kamrup*, the court ruled that anti-social activities can never be reason to invade the personal liberty of cit-



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izens. The history of personal liberty is the history of observance of procedures; this is the only bastion against 'wanton' infringements of personal liberty. In the *Maneka Gandhi* case (1977), the court ruled that the right to life had to be read along with the right to equality and the right to freedom, granted by Articles 14 and 19 of the Fundamental Rights Chapter. Any procedure that could possibly infringe on the right to life and personal liberty had to be right, just, and fair, and not arbitrary, fanciful and oppressive. The court would decide whether a procedure is just.

Watching in silence

According to this interpretation, the recent spate of attacks on Indian citizens, the lynchings and slaughter, can be rightfully construed as 'wanton' assaults on personal liberty and the right to life. What is worrying is that individuals are emboldened to perform acts of indescribable violence on bodies of fellow citizens. They have reason to know that they will get away with these repulsive violations of a primary fundamental right.

In most cases, police personnel prefer to look elsewhere. Elected ministers of State governments defend actions that maim and murder on flimsy and unsubstantiated grounds, such as transportation of cattle. In a recent case, a

young man was brutally killed because he was reportedly carrying meat. Surely those who design and execute violence should be penalised severely for breaching the basic right to life and liberty. But our democratically elected Central government watches in near silence even as its citizens are subjected to reiterative brutality.

Elusive expressions of distress by politicians who command immense power, and who possess control over the means of coercion, is simply not enough. Perpetrators of violence must be punished, aspirant wrongdoers must be deterred, and civil liberties must be restored. If India has some claim to constitutional democracy, the sanctity of fundamental rights must be upheld by our power elites.

Markers of protest

It is precisely this message that for the past three years has been delivered by Indian citizens. Writers, poets, and dramatists returned honours given by the state. Citizens march to protest against atrocities perpetrated on our students, on our own people who are Muslims or Dalits, and on our democratic sensibilities. Last week thousands of Indians assembled across the country to state unambiguously: 'Not in My Name.' The marker of the protest can be read in two ways. It can be interpreted as dis-

tancing ourselves from the barbarism that has been unleashed on vulnerable Indians. But this reading is untenable. This form of protest is one of the most spectacular expressions of loss of confidence in elected leaderships, a mass no-confidence motion. We are no longer 'the people' in whose name you rule.

Democratic citizens need to deepen protests, because lynching and murders are not random or isolated incidents. The link between the issue of cow protection and Hindu-Muslim communal violence has been clear since the late nineteenth century. Worship of the cow was one of the reasons why Muslims felt excluded from the construction of an overtly 'Hindu' nation, built around pure and impure food and the consequence of consumption.

A project of consolidation

Today, the project of consolidating a Hindu nation has been stepped up. The larger intention of the Hindutva project is to cast a miasma of fear and trepidation over entire regions, and to put minorities and the so-called lower castes 'in their place'. The project seems to have worked. Now people have to be careful where they live, and how they travel, for anyone, anywhere can be subjected to intimidation.

The prospect is frightening. We are going to live in desolate cities, because vulnerable communities, in search of protection, will migrate to ghettos overflowing with their own people. We will be living and working in blank and bleak urban (and some rural) spaces, where no one reaches out to the members of another community. They simply do not know what the outcome is going to be.

This is the exact fate of Ahmedabad, a once bustling textile town. Though repeated communal violence led to ghettoisation in 1969, some Hindus and Muslims continued to live in mixed neigh-

bourhoods. By the 1990s only a few mixed neighbourhoods remained. Spatial segregation was almost complete after 2002. The fate of a ghettoised city is depressing. Residential exclusion narrows the cultural and political horizons of communities, closes off options, pre-emptively creative mingling of perspectives and prevents solidarity.

Rituals of random violence have their own rationale, the maintenance and reproduction of dread of the unknown, or even of the known. The consequences are clear. People in search of protection cluster together. The political community fragments, and the collective self of India is once again fractured. We are set back a hundred years when neighbours turn on neighbours. Today, matters are worse, because people video-record the torture of their neighbours in the name of cow-protection. They then post these videos on the social media. What could be more perverse and more threatening?

The splitting up of the political community in India and the dissolution of solidarity, spatial segregation as the vulnerable seek shelter, and mindless violence seem to be part of a larger project of the extreme right. The executors of violence know that strong-arm tactics send powerful signals of who belongs and who does not. These seemingly indiscriminate and arbitrary instances of violence, murder, and mayhem are not isolated. They add up to a project that is politically dangerous because it threatens defenceless people. In 1947, India was partitioned into two countries. In the 21st century, Indian society seems to be fated to undergo another sort of partition, spatial segregation born out of fear. The right to life has lost meaning in an India where vigilante groups rule who will be targeted and how.

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HARINI NAGENDRA

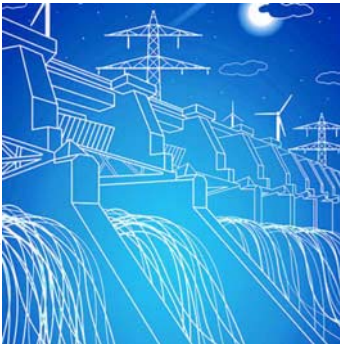
Since Independence, between 25 and 60 million people have been displaced from their homes and uprooted for India's development projects. Most end up living in abysmal poverty and deprivation. That we do not even know the exact numbers of those affected – in a country that prizes bureaucratic record keeping – is a clear indication of the callous disregard we have for these lives.

Disregarding years of sustained non-violent protest and an iconic mass movement that drew national and global attention, the Narmada Control Authority decided on June 17, 2017 to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam to its full height, by ordering the closure of 30 gates. It was announced in time with the arrival of the monsoon. Once the dam is at its full height, it will submerge one town and at least 176 villages, displace close to 20,000 families, flood productive agricultural land, and destroy hundreds of acres of biodiverse forest. Proponents argue that (someone

else's) sacrifice is essential for (their) development. They tout the benefits: the dam will generate hydro-energy, extend irrigation and bring drinking water to drought-affected, arid areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat. But beyond the hype, the facts are in question. Ecologists, hydrologists, economists and engineers have produced detailed documentation that brings into doubt the claims of water provisioning, economic growth and safety made by the project.

Choked with silt

Siltation is one of the biggest challenges faced by dams worldwide, and constitutes one of the biggest challenges to the long-term success of this dam. The steep slopes of the Narmada valley are prone to erosion: they have been protected so far because of the dense forests that line the sides of the valley. Once these trees are lost, soil from the denuded slopes will flow unchecked into the river, turning the water muddy. The Central Water Commission's 2015 compendium on siltation of India's reservoirs reports alarming figures. For instance, in 85% of India's dams, the actual rates of siltation are higher than those anticipated during their design. An alarming one in four dams has sedimentation rates more than five times as high as ex-



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pected! Siltation is most rapid in the early years after dam construction and quickly begins to take effect. The problems are likely to be especially severe for giant dams such as the Sardar Sarovar, which cannot be easily desilted. Apart from directly reducing water storage capacity, siltation also decreases water capacity due to increased evaporation loss. As a result, the capacity to generate hydropower is affected. A dam choked with silt creates a river prone to risky situations of potential flooding in the backwaters.

A poor record

Compensation to the displaced, when given, has often come in the form of land unsuitable for farming or living, located either on riverbeds at the risk of flooding, or in rocky areas which cannot be

ploughed. Resettlement sites lack basic facilities: no wells, drinking water pipelines, or grazing land for cattle, let alone schools or road facilities. The poor track record of the past is clear. Despite this, tens of thousands of additional households are now being asked to rely on resettlement without an adequately provisioned place to move. This leaves the once self-reliant people of the valley with no option but to work as daily wage labour and crowd into urban slums – often to be resettled again for other developmental or smart city projects.

The Narmada valley is one of the most fertile ecosystems in India, brimming with biodiversity, and with abundant fish, birds and trees. The dams along the Narmada have changed this, blocking normal water flow, leading to downstream habitat change and impacting biodiversity. The Narmada estuary, where the river meets the sea, has become increasingly saline because of the decrease in fresh water flow after the dams came up. Fish catch of some species has now declined by as much as 75%, signalling the almost complete collapse of the once famous fishing industry. Thousands of commercial and subsistence fishermen affected by this change are not classified as dam-affected

though. Neither are the people who and industries which depended on the once-abundant supply of fresh water in the delta. (Water has now suddenly turned saline even to the depth of borewells.) Neither will the invisible tribal communities who depend on the lush forests of the valley – forests that will now be submerged. Only those who can produce evidence of losing homes or agricultural plots are counted as "project-affected", and can lay claim to compensation.

There has to be a clear, transparent public accounting of livelihoods lost and jobs created, of profits accrued at the expense of great misery and injustice. For who are we to decide who wins and who loses? Large dams have forced the displacement of millions of India's small farmers and landless peasants from across the country, forcing them into urban slums and shanties, breaking apart families and sending them into a downward spiral of degradation and penury. The tragedy of the Sardar Sarovar Project is that it has failed to learn from history, condemning tens of thousands more to the same fate.

Harini Nagendra is a Professor of Sustainability at Azim Premji University

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.

Ties with Israel

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Israel, the first by any Indian Prime Minister, is one of great historic significance. Israel has always been a friendly country even when India eschewed its friendship. When most Arab nations have supported Pakistan in its conflicts with India, Israel has been the one that has steadfastly stood by India. Israel was perhaps the first country which fought against terrorism with its hallmark courage and daring. Today, India is also a victim of terrorism, and in its fight against this evil it has a lesson or two to learn from Israel. ("On eve of PM's tour, Palestine hopes to keep India ties firm", July 3).

K.R. JAYAPRAKASH RAO,
Mysuru

■ Significant for many reasons, the expectations of a 'strategic partnership' with Israel in non-defence sectors such as innovation, agriculture and need-based

research signal a fresh dawn in India's outlook, prioritising the socio-economic welfare of its people rather than the pursuit of relentless defence procurement. There are many takeaways from the way in which Israel has strengthened its innovation sector, turning agriculture into a profit-making industry with technological inputs, aligning its universities with its local requirements, and emphasising cooperation between technology companies and research outputs – all this in a resource-scarce environment compared to the vast potential of a resource-rich India.

AJAJZ HUSSAIN MALIK,
Sonim-Kunzer, Baramulla, J&K

Swiss bank accounts

Citing the record low balances held by Indians in Swiss banks last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the tough steps taken by his government against black money in the

last three years have started yielding the desired results ("One lakh suspect firms deregistered", July 2). Mr. Modi need not feel complacent. Funds parked in Swiss banks have long flown to other tax havens instead of coming back to India. In such matters, the knowledge of our political leaders and bureaucrats, who are said to form a major chunk of Swiss bank account holders, is miles ahead.

P.G. MENON,
Chennai

The aerosol effect

The finding on the huge role aerosols play in weakening the monsoon should push policymakers to combat pollution. India's agriculture is still dependent on a good monsoon for enhanced productivity. The failure of the monsoon and its after-effects are well known in creating chaos. Measures to boost afforestation with a thrust on improving forest cover, switching over to

renewable sources of energy to meet our ever growing energy needs and zero-tolerance to keep a check on aerosols will go a long way in improving the prospect of a good monsoon.

M. JEVARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

■ Now that pollution has been named as a major factor in affecting the monsoon, monitoring air quality using systems such as the System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting And Research (SAFAR) is a must especially as India is wholly dependent on these seasonal rains. In addition to monitoring vehicle sales, the government can strengthen its commitment to reducing hazardous pollutants by having an odd-even number plate policy and no car days on a pan-India basis. There must also be tighter control over vehicular emissions. Most of our public transport vehicles and even autorickshaws can be seen

belching thick fumes of smoke.

ARCHANA VENKATA MADHVA RAJ,
Thoothukkudi, Tamil Nadu

There are papers to show that sulphur dioxide emissions from Europe are causing problems in the progression of the monsoon. But what about the vast quantities of SO₂ being produced in our coal power plants? They are sure to be causing havoc somewhere. While there appear to be concerted efforts in Europe to contain SO₂ emissions from coal power plants, most of our own power plants do not have them. As a matter of fact, it is only recently that our pollution control measures have started including SO₂ control to the list but we cannot be sure that even the very few power plants which have been mandated to have scrubbers to contain SO₂ are effective. Can there be a white paper on this?

SHANKAR SHARMA,
Mysuru

Roots of a dilemma

To dye or not to dye is a mid-life dilemma that seizes every one and continues till the end ('Open page' - "Looking for that silver lining", July 2). Having gone through the entire experience of the stages of dyeing – from black to slight grey, and then from white to blacker than black and finally surrendering to the nature – I remember wasting valuable time and money on the futile exercise. A friend of mine made me realise the fact that it is only grey hair that befits a senior executive and adds dignity to his looks. I stopped dyeing my hair. My wife continued with the process for a little longer, just to please the children. And, ultimately, she too gave up the process gracefully. Our friends say we look great and we like to hear this being said again and again.

KRISHNAMURTHY,
Chennai

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