



In search of friends

Against a united opposition in 2019, the BJP will need to keep all its allies together

A friend in need is the friend who comes a-calling. After four years of being in a situation where it was a much sought-after ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party is now reduced to the role of a supplicant before potential electoral partners, the Shiv Sena and the Shiromani Akali Dal. The Sena has always been a difficult ally for the BJP, despite a close ideological affinity. Even so, an editorial in the Sena mouthpiece *Saamna*, insisting that the Sena would fight the coming elections alone, ahead of the meeting between BJP president Amit Shah and Sena supremo Uddhav Thackeray, revealed a new level of assertion in a stormy relationship. Unable to adjust to its role as a junior partner of the BJP, the Sena is eager to return to its pre-2014 status as the unquestioned leader of the alliance. Indeed, Mr. Thackeray is under some pressure to demonstrate that he is as domineering as his father Bal Thackeray was in dealings with the BJP. And if he doesn't retrieve the ground ceded to the BJP in the last four years, the Sena might forever be pushed around in Maharashtra. The Sena, which began as a Marathi chauvinist party, took to Hindutva and allied with the BJP in an attempt to widen its support base; but despite its efforts to be more strident in its Hindutva, the party could only watch helplessly as sections of its newly created support base moved toward the BJP. True, the two parties need each other to retain power in Maharashtra, but the relationship equations are unstable. The Sena believes the BJP should allow it to lead the alliance in the Assembly election in return for support it would give the BJP in a Lok Sabha election, and the BJP wants the Sena to recognise the changed political equilibrium in Maharashtra.

What exactly Mr. Shah achieved through the outreach meeting, other than to signal to the allies that the BJP is willing to be accommodative in sharing seats and power, is not clear. Accommodation, the party must have recognised, was necessary in the context of its defeats in the recent by-elections and the desertion by the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh. The outreach effort took Mr. Shah to Punjab as well, where its senior ally, the SAD, is seen to be in decline. In the BJP's assessment, the anti-incumbency sentiment against the SAD hit the party as well, with the alliance finishing third in seat share terms behind the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party in the last Assembly election. But dumping its traditional ally is no option at all for the BJP in what could be a tight Lok Sabha election. The BJP will also need allies in the southern States if it is to make significant gains in terms of seats. But potential allies are few, except perhaps the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu. With opposition parties uniting against it in several States, the BJP will need all the allies it can get in the coming year.

Violence in the hills

The Meghalaya government must remain firm against nativist demands in Shillong

The spark for the week-long incidents of violence in downtown Shillong was a lie spread through WhatsApp, the ubiquitous messaging platform that has increasingly become an unfiltered medium for hate and rumour-mongering. A scuffle between members of the Mazhabi Sikh community, long-time settlers in the Punjabi Lane area of the city, and a Khasi youth and his associates over a local matter was amicably settled between representatives of the communities. But a fabricated story that the youth had succumbed to injuries sustained in the scuffle led to large numbers of Khasi protesters laying siege to Punjabi Lane, demanding that the Sikh residents move from the area. That the "settlers" have been in Shillong for more than a century and a half, having been originally brought there by the British colonials to work as manual scavengers, and have since integrated themselves within Shillong, has not insulated them from being described as outsiders. The administration did well to protect the dwellers of Punjabi Lane from physical harm, but mob violence persisted until curfew was imposed and the Army put on stand-by. Spokespersons of the Khasi Students' Union, whose members were part of the agitation, continue to insist that the Punjabi Lane residents be moved from Shillong's commercial heart to its outskirts. Picturesque Shillong is no longer just an idyllic hill station; it is a bustling city that has grown in an unplanned manner and requires reforms such as zoning regulation. But the agitators' demand to shift the Sikh residents is unreasonable and must be resisted. In fact, the Meghalaya High Court had stayed an order by the District Commissioner to evict the residents from Punjabi Lane (also known as Sweepers' Colony) in 1986.

Tribal angst over economic issues leading to the scapegoating of non-tribal long-time residents reflects the continued failure to forge a more inclusive politics in Meghalaya. Today, there are enough provisions of affirmative action for the tribal people – 80% reservation for the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo and other tribes in jobs and professional studies. Yet, discontent persists over the lack of adequate jobs in the State, especially in urban areas. A Labour Bureau report on employment in 2015-16 found Meghalaya to have among the highest urban unemployment rates (13.4%). Discontent over lack of opportunities in the past had led to incidents such as the violent targeting of the Bengali community in 1979 and Nepalis in 1987, many of whom then fled the State. To prevent a repeat of those incidents, the government must stand by and protect the Sikh residents, and not give in to the nativist arguments of the protestors. And as calm is restored, Meghalaya's politicians and civil society leaders must forge a more inclusive vision of the State's demographics.

The Thoothukudi fables

They demonstrate that civil society must be an embedded part of the new knowledge society



SHIV VISVANATHAN

The Thoothukudi firings of May 22 have been read as linear narratives, as specific reports without possessing the power of storytelling. The Thoothukudi violence needs a storyteller to capture the eloquence, the poignancy of anecdotes. One has to see the fables not as remote fragments, morsels of a marginal India, but as a microcosm of what is happening everywhere. Thoothukudi has to be treated as an early warning system for the emerging threats to Indian democracy.

Three tales

One cannot even begin with a "once there was" because Thoothukudi is a collection of three tales. Time determines the depth and level of story. It is, first, a tale that began over 20 years ago when the Sterlite plant shifted from Maharashtra to Tamil Nadu. It is also a tale that began 100 days before the firing, when housewives, children and villagers created a community of protest which found its one-lakh-strong epicentre at Thoothukudi. Yet the tale from Thoothukudi is just over a fortnight old when we focus around the scandal of the firings.

The euphemism of media reports is intriguing. They are generally dubbed as shootings or firings, they are not called killings, blatant acts of murder. The symbolism of a sniper and the needlessness of his violence no longer belongs to the Gaza strip. Terror is at home in

Thoothukudi and elsewhere as state terror extends its tentacles world-wide.

Thoothukudi is global and local in a different sense. It reflects the new conversation between a decade of oral history, the complaints, the everyday gossip of people dying, of children fainting in school, the moment when the eventless history of environmentalism clashes with the trauma of the Internet. That the Internet was suspended in the area after the killings makes one realise that it is not in Kashmir alone that such events take place. Time becomes critical because suddenly the silence of waiting, the epidemic of little prayers, the little protests around every village combine to show that Sterlite is not just one company town but a state of mind. It introduces us to the company towns of the mind, the new panopticons which are spreading like dictatorships across the world. The ease with which environmental tribunals and scientific laboratories are subverted needs to be chronicled. Words such as sustainability or corporate social responsibility become acts of hypocrisy, the new oxymorons of ethics created by a corporate world indifferent to everyday suffering. As an ecologist friend of mine observes, there are more protests outside the Vedanta office in London than in India. It is almost as if patriotism and security are concepts designed to protect corporate greed.

About Section 144

As a fable, the events at Thoothukudi threaten the very fabric of democracy. It is a strange democracy where people are suspect and hunted down. As a DIG investigating Thoothukudi told me, "I have



never seen a more cynical use of Section 144." What the police confronted was a community of women and children carrying food, school bags. Instead of facing a community in a democratic sense, the government created the myth of outsiders as anti-socials. It is almost as if ordinary people are not citizens but subjects to be continuously disempowered. It is evident now that police went far beyond the area under Section 144 of the CrPC and killed people. Yet our bureaucrats hide truth behind the norms of procedure, as if table manners are more important than the truths of governance. The police reportedly beating disabled people makes one wonder if barbarity is a part of the new training, where every citizen is to be treated as a Naxal by definition. The psychology of fear that they have created is the new model of Section 144 where an old law and order project now becomes an effort to create an ecology of fear, where every citizen is suspect by definition.

In fact, it is around areas like Thoothukudi that one has to write the new history of violence

Sustaining earth for the future

India is in need of a massive new effort to catalogue, map and monitor all life forms



KAMAL BAWA

Life is a unique asset of our planet. India is blessed with an extraordinary richness of life. A myriad of unusual and exquisite species occur in the countless ecosystems spread across our vast lands, rivers and oceans. Woven into this rich fabric of biodiversity is a stunningly vibrant and colourful tapestry of peoples, cultures and traditions.

This unique bio-cultural tapestry has been resilient to change for centuries, but with the unleashing of unprecedented economic and environmental forces, it is now subject to increasing wear and tear. Ultimately, these forces could even destroy our tapestry of life, cultures and traditions – and in the process, ourselves.

Biologists all over the world have been documenting the ongoing loss of life forms. Modern extinction rates are more than a thousand times greater than the rates of the geological past. In recent decades, populations of more than 40% of large mammals have declined and insect biomass has decreased by more than 75%. Natural habitats all over the world have shrunk. For these losses, our

country ranks higher than most.

We have entered what scientists are calling the Anthropocene era – a new period in earth's history, when humans have begun to impact our environment at the global scale. We have seen our forests degrade and diminish, our rivers vanish, and our air become unfit to breathe. We constantly talk about cleaning up the Ganga, as if it were the sole festering wound, but we overlook that the whole tapestry covering our body is slowly disintegrating. All life requires nurturing.

Taking stock

To protect life on earth, the famous American biologist E.O. Wilson has described an ambitious project he calls "Half-Earth". He calls for formally protecting 50% of the earth's land surface in order to conserve our rapidly disappearing natural heritage. Others have rightly argued that in the past conservation efforts have often disregarded issues of social justice and equity. Thus the goals of "Half-Earth" should not compromise the rights of indigenous people.

Clearly, we must do more to safeguard biodiversity and the ecosystem services that support all human endeavours. India's forest policy calls for forests to cover almost a third of the country, and if we include other natural systems such as grasslands and wetlands, the area to be protected could amount to almost 40%. In a popu-



lous country such as ours, that would be a huge achievement. Some areas could be fully protected while others might be managed by stakeholders for sustainable use and enrichment of biodiversity.

We need a massive new effort to catalogue, map, and monitor life, using fundamentally different approaches. Current efforts to map India's biodiversity are largely restricted to forestlands, while plans for species monitoring are even more inadequate. We have the digital tools and artificial intelligence today to efficiently catalogue, map, and monitor life's fabric in a manner never before attempted – and with the potential engagement of millions of students and citizens. This mapping effort would include not only all life, including cultures, ethnicities, and dialects, but also the use of biodiversity and its vulnerability to changes in land use and climate.

New ideas

Cataloguing, mapping and monitoring life will give us a glimpse of

around the body. The state of the body is symptomatic of the vulnerability of the body politic. Ironically, it is the people who look for democracy, while the state and Sterlite seek to subvert it. Words like 'public and citizens', once anchors of the democratic imagination, now have become suspect words in the new games of corporate life. Doctors who meet patients from Thoothukudi villages complaining of cancer, skin diseases call these symptoms 'Sterlite symptoms'. In a similar way, we can talk of the symptoms of a 'Sterlite democracy', a disease as debilitating as majoritarian authoritarianism. Yet the answer to the death of democracy is a more intense democracy, stemming from the inventiveness of the community. We have to understand it is communities rather than movements which are resisting the regime, a fact that the regime finds difficult to respect.

Thoothukudi demonstrated this through the resilience of the bar and traders' associations which worked day and night to get arrested people released. It reminded one of what the sociologist Émile Durkheim said in his classic *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, that only the ethics of professions like law and medicine can counter the rapacity of corporations and the emptiness of the state. Thoothukudi proved this in ample measure. It also demonstrated that civil society has to be an embedded part of the new knowledge society. The reports of civil society have to become testaments and testimonies for the emerging issues of democracy. For example, the government inquiry commission, State Human Rights Commission or National Human Rights Commission reports are unlikely to go beyond

legal and procedural issues. Civil society reports carry a wider burden and responsibility, playing sociologist, ethicist, environmentalist and storyteller. A civil society report on an act of violence has to relate law and order to law and justice, and also to law and democracy, reflecting on knowledge and truth in new ways. For example, experts should not be allowed to get away behind esoteric language. A people's sensorium of touch, taste, smell has to be translated into science to create new warning signals. Thoothukudi showed the importance of a people's idea of knowledge to counter expert knowledge. In fact, it suggests the importance of a people's ombudsman to accompany so-called expert committees.

Proactive citizenship

Yet such civil society reports cover not just past and present. They are warning bells for the future. If one juxtaposes the reports on Thoothukudi with the nuclear site at Koodankulam, one senses the deep suspicion about proactive citizenship. Government attempts to create the bogey of the outsider as antisocial, alien, intruder, missionary, Christian are dangerous steps and need to be challenged. The citizen as a person of knowledge must be seen as central to democracy. Only a proactive citizenship and an experimentally open civil society can challenge, question and domesticate the emerging "Sterlite democracies" as the new diseases of our age. This then is the emerging fable of Thoothukudi.

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what we have, and what is most vulnerable. But how do we reconcile the growing needs of society with the need to sustain our vanishing natural heritage?

We still have only the most basic understanding of how society interacts with biodiversity, and how economic, social and political forces can erode the biodiversity that ultimately sustains us. We are just beginning to learn how myriad species interact to drive our ecosystems, and how these systems in turn maintain our soils, water and breathable air. Wild pollinators, the microbiota of soils, and the many enemies of agricultural pests – these and many other natural services underpin our agricultural productivity and mitigate climate change.

In many of our academic institutions, the 'Life Sciences' are still restricted largely to the study of cells and molecules – life at microscopic and submicroscopic levels. In such cases, the words Life Sciences sadly misrepresent a vast area of inquiry vital to humanity's survival. Our institutions need to place far more emphasis on the scientific study of life at higher levels. We also need a comprehensive inquiry into how our society is shaping as well as responding to changes in biodiversity. A new biodiversity science is taking shape across the globe, focused on the intimate interweaving of nature with human societies. India has not been, but must be, at the fore-

front of this emerging science, because nowhere on Earth are natural and human systems tied together more inextricably than on the subcontinent.

The way forward

Fortunately, some in the Indian science establishment, such as the Departments of Biotechnology and of Science and Technology, have recently started programmes and initiatives in the broader areas of science and society. Several non-government think tanks in the civil society sector have strong interdisciplinary programmes in environmental sustainability. The India Biodiversity Portal has the ambitious goal of mapping India's biodiversity with the engagement of civil society though the portal relies largely on private support.

However, the scale of the problem is so massive and its importance so vital for our future that government and private philanthropy need to bring together multiple stakeholders to develop a programme to document, map and monitor all life, and develop a new knowledge enterprise to fully explore various dimensions of biodiversity and ecosystem services and their critical link to our future.

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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.

Waiver wave

The political class appears to be supporting the demand for comprehensive farm loan waivers without thought ("Congress's M.P. battle begins in Mandsaur", June 7). There is no doubt that the agriculture sector needs government support, but loan waivers are not the solution. On the contrary, expenditure on loan waivers will eventually leave less fiscal space for public expenditure in agriculture. India needs 'massive investment in areas such as irrigation, water conservation, better storage facilities, market connectivity, ensuring minimum support prices for crops, and, finally, agricultural research'. The problems affecting Indian agriculture are structural and need long-term solutions. Loan waivers will only end up complicating the problem. The Indian

economy has suffered due to competitive populism in the past. It's time parties and governments addressed the real issues.

K.M.K. MURTHY,
Secunderabad

■ There is no doubt that the agrarian sector is in distress but no government has taken steps to resolve the issues. This is because almost all political parties consider farmers as vote banks. Solutions should be in the form of uninterrupted supply of water, electricity, quality seeds, fertilizers and pesticides at concessional rates; top class storage and marketing facilities; modern techniques in farming such as organic farming and drip irrigation. Instead of demanding these facilities from governments, it is a pity that farmers want just a waiver of farm loans. The government and the farming community need to work in

tandem to make agriculture a profitable industry. Short-term gains in the form of subsidies, waivers and freebies should be phased out.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO,
Hyderabad

Cantonment roads

It is sad and shocking to see some in the Army criticising the government's decision to open cantonment roads for public use ("Cantonment roads to stay open", June 6 and "Encroachments on defence land in focus", June 7). There should be no second thoughts about going ahead with the move keeping in mind the difficulties of the common man in cities as many key roads are out of bounds under the guise of security. The Defence Minister can give a patient hearing to the families of Army personnel but should also make them understand that they have had too many

benefits under the "Army" tag.

T.V. SREEKUMAR,
Puducherry

■ The step may spell great relief to lakhs of civilians but the Defence Minister cannot ignore the security concerns of the families of Army personnel. The criticism by wives of officers should be considered and a balanced approach arrived at.

K.R. SRINIVASAN,
Secunderabad

Selfless gesture

The exemplary gesture of R.S. Gopakumar, a health officer attached to the Kozhikode Corporation, in carrying out the last rites for Nipah virus victims (when their kith and kin refused to do so in some instances) should motivate and inspire many doctors to render much needed social service besides providing medical treatment in such extreme

circumstances ("Undaunted, doctor performs last rites for Nipah victims", June 7). Dr. Gopakumar's proactive stance should also serve as an eye-opener in the context of the growing commercialisation of medical care in the country.

G. RAMASUBRAMANYAM,
Vijayawada

■ In this day and age where people don't even care for others, Dr. Gopakumar has shown the way, unmindful of the risk of contracting infection. One hopes that there are more noble souls who come forward to help

others in distress, inspired by his moving gesture.

R. PRABHU RAJ,
Bengaluru

■ By this magnanimous act, Dr. Gopakumar has set himself as a role model for the younger generation of doctors, a majority of whom shy away from practising in rural areas where there is a dearth of medical staff. One must congratulate him for his steadfast commitment to the medical profession.

P.K. VARADARAJAN,
Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The opening sentence of the Life page story headlined "Assam boy is India's youngest writer at 4" (June 6, 2018) ran thus: "Ayan Gogoi Gohain was unable to speak after his third birthday." It should have been: "Ayan Gogoi Gohain was unable to speak until his third birthday."

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