



All gore

Regulating jallikattu remains an impossible challenge for district authorities in Tamil Nadu

With animal rights activists at the head of the campaign against jallikattu, more attention seems to have been paid to cruelty to the bulls than the inherently dangerous nature of the bull-taming event, that puts both spectators and participants at risk. Two onlookers have died in the space of two days in the jallikattu events in Palamedu and Avarangadu in Tamil Nadu as the barricades separating the spectators from the arena were inadequate. Two others were killed in the manjivirattu (a variant of jallikattu) at Siravayal when the bulls were unleashed outside the earmarked arena, a violation of due procedure. Clearly, the safety arrangements monitored by the district administration at these annual events in the Pongal season failed to prevent death and injury. With some of the events inducting more than 400 bulls and almost twice as many tamers, jallikattu has become a disorderly spectacle, making a mockery of even well-laid-out plans. The Animal Welfare Board of India, which was earlier in the forefront of documenting instances of mismanagement in the organising of jallikattu events, seems to have shifted its stance with a change of office-bearers. Other than spotting some “small mistakes” and “human errors”, the AWBI team’s convener, S.K. Mittal, found little amiss in the Palamedu event. The concern, instead, was on preserving “native breeds” of bulls. After last year’s protests against the Supreme Court ban on jallikattu, when thousands of people gathered in public places in Tamil Nadu demanding a revival of the sport, the authorities have been wary of condemning bull-taming during Pongal. They now speak the language of custom and tradition, one that is similar to that of the jallikattu enthusiasts.

When the Supreme Court banned jallikattu on the basis of submissions made by the AWBI, which recorded instances of cruelty to animals in regulated events, it did so on the ground that regulations were not working. Following public protests and political pressure, and on the strength of hurriedly drafted legislation, jallikattu is now back on the Pongal calendar. But nothing much has changed on the ground. Of course, participants and bulls are screened before being allowed into the arena. But the bulls do not heed the barricades that are meant to fence off spectators from the arena. Also, there is the risk of hyper-excited miscreants releasing the bulls outside the arena: this is what happened in Siravayal. District authorities have so far failed to find better ways to regulate the events, but more than the size of an event, the scale is the challenge. In short, there are too many events in too many places within a period of a few days, making regulation next to impossible. It is one thing to have well-regulated jallikattu. But we are far from staging it in a manner that leaves nothing to chance and that is insured against damage wreaked by a rampaging bull.

Face the inevitable

Staggering the losses of banks due to a spurt in bond yields is no solution

The sharp rise in bond yields has hit banks with losses on treasury operations dominated by sovereign bond holdings. Rating agency ICRA believes the fall in bond prices on expectation of the Central government breaching its fiscal deficit target has led to banks suffering a loss on paper of over ₹15,500 crore in the quarter that ended in December. The yield on Indian 10-year benchmark government bonds has risen steeply, from about 6.5% at the end of August to 7.56% on January 16. Even the yield on newly issued 10-year bonds that would mature in 2028 has inched up 27 basis points since January 5. Bankers have pleaded that the Reserve Bank of India allow them to stagger the reporting of these losses over several quarters. In seeking leeway, they have pointed to the huge burden imposed on their balance sheets by non-performing assets clogging the banking system. After all, India’s banks, flush with cash since demonetisation, are the largest (and captive) holders of government bonds, thanks to a regime that requires them to maintain a high proportion of assets in them. That deposits have grown while credit offtake has not, makes matters worse. But seeking regulatory forbearance is not the solution. This argument may not find much traction with the banking regulator, going by Deputy Governor Viral Acharya’s remarks on Monday.

Any kind of accounting chicanery that makes the books look rosy will come at the cost of the accuracy with which banks reflect their financial health. Banks, which are supposed to be good at assessing not just creditors’ credibility but also the broader trends in the economy and the financial markets, cannot feign surprise at a rise and fall in bond yields. As Mr. Acharya has pointed out, banks understand the impact of interest rate movements and the risks of bond investments, and they perhaps choose to ignore this thanks to a “heads I win, tails the regulator dispenses” mindset. Just as banks need to be held accountable for their lending decisions and their advances, treasury operations and bond investments also need accountability and risk management systems. After all, there are trained professionals handling their large bond market operations who know of the principles of asset allocation and the hedging of risks. Banks should simply step up their game and address the reasons for their investment losses instead of resorting to measures aimed at hiding their problems. Any temporary measure, such as the request to stagger the recognition of bond losses, will only worsen it. Moreover, irrespective of the accounting standards banks are asked to follow, the markets can easily call this bluff and bid down their share prices.

Following the grain trail

Many States have initiated ‘reforms’ of the public distribution system that are hurting millions of people



JEAN DREZE

India’s public distribution system (PDS) is in danger of being derailed in several States across the country. Recent disruptions of the PDS have taken different forms, from compulsory biometric authentication to so-called direct benefit transfer (DBT). The consequences are alarming, but tend to go unreported.

Biometric mix-ups

Jharkhand is a prime example of this problem. By mid-2016, the PDS in Jharkhand had greatly improved, partly due to a series of reforms inspired by Chhattisgarh’s experience and intensified under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Instead of completing these reforms, for instance by removing private dealers, the Jharkhand government made Aadhaar-based biometric authentication compulsory for PDS users. The consequences, documented in a recent study published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, were sobering. Large numbers of people, especially among vulnerable groups such as widows and the elderly, found themselves excluded from the PDS. Those who were still able to buy their food rations faced considerable inconvenience due to connectivity and biometric failures. Worse, there was a revival of corruption, as PDS rice meant for those who failed the biometric test was siphoned off with abandon.

The damage was made worse in mid-2017, when the Jharkhand government mass-cancelled ration cards not linked with Aadhaar. On September 22, the government claimed that Aadhaar had enabled it to cancel 11 lakh “fake” ration cards, but this figure stands no

scrutiny, and indeed, it was retracted later. Many of the cancelled ration cards actually belonged to families that had been unable to link their card with Aadhaar for no fault of their own. The family of Santoshi Kumari, an 11-year old Dalit girl who died of hunger on September 28, was among them.

The mass-cancellation of Aadhaar-less ration cards, without verification and without even informing the victims, was both inhuman and illegal. The State government received some flak for it from the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) – it is another matter that UIDAI is participating in the crusade to make Aadhaar-based biometric authentication compulsory in various contexts. But far from learning from this mistake, or doing anything to repair it, the Jharkhand government launched a further attack on people’s food entitlements: the monthly PDS rations of 5 kg per person were restricted to those whose individual names had been linked with Aadhaar in the ration-cards database. The following sort of situation is now very common in rural Jharkhand: a family has five members, but only three are listed along with their Aadhaar number in the database, so the family ends up getting 15 kg of rice per month instead of 25 kg. This restriction, incidentally, is a flagrant violation of the instructions issued by the Food Ministry in Delhi on October 24, in response to the uproar that followed Santoshi Kumari’s death.

The cash route

All this, however, is just a trailer. Preparations are on for a much bigger assault on the PDS in Jharkhand: the transition to so-called “direct benefit transfer”. Under the DBT system, people have to collect their food subsidy in cash from the bank before using it to buy rice from the ration shop at ₹32 per kg. Until now, they were



able to buy rice from the ration shop at ₹1 per kg. Direct benefit transfer is an odd term for the new system, whereby the food subsidy is provided in a very roundabout way.

The DBT system was initiated in Nagri Block of Ranchi district last October, on an experimental basis. The State government is planning to extend it in other parts if the experiment works. But it seems to have decided in advance that the experiment is a success, without paying serious attention to the ground realities.

In Nagri, it does not take long to discover that the new system is a disaster, and that most people are angry with it. The main problem with DBT is that people waste enormous time shuttling between the banks, *pragya kendras* (common service centres) and ration shops to get hold of their money and then use it to buy rice at the ration shop. For many of them, this is a three-step process. First, they go to the bank to find out whether the subsidy has been credited and update their passbook. Second, they go to the *pragya kendra* to withdraw the cash, as the bank often insists on their doing so from these centres. Third, they take the cash to the ration shop to buy rice at ₹32 per kg. At every step, there are long queues, and for many people the bank or *pragya kendra* is also far away. For people with mobility problems, like

the elderly or disabled, this entire process is a nightmare. One elderly woman we met had to be taken to the bank each time by two relatives – one to drive the motorbike and one to hold her from the back seat.

The ordeal was particularly trying in the last few weeks, when people had to adapt to the new system. Many families have several bank accounts, but apparently, they were not told where to look for their subsidy. Even the bank manager we met in Nagri, or for that matter the Block Development Officer, did not know which account is selected for DBT when a household has several bank accounts. As a result, many people had to run from bank to bank to find out where their subsidy had been deposited. This is all the more difficult as the food subsidy is not always easy to distinguish from other bank credits.

If people had cash reserves, the system might work better: PDS purchases would not be contingent on bank transactions. What is striking is that so many people in rural Jharkhand, even in a relatively developed block like Nagri, have so little cash. And even those who have some cash, it seems, prefer to use the DBT subsidy to buy rice from the ration shop, partly because they are not clear about the rules of the game.

Incidentally, the State government announced last year that Nagri was all set to become Jharkhand’s first “cashless block”. Today, it is forcing people to handle more cash than they want to.

Beyond Jharkhand

Even as the people of Nagri fume and protest against the DBT experiment, the State government is trying its best to project it as a success and justify its extension to the whole State. If this happens, millions of people will face renewed food insecurity.

Jharkhand is among the worst

cases of destabilisation of the PDS, but similar moves are happening in other States. Most of them are under tremendous pressure from the Central government to impose Aadhaar-based biometric authentication or move towards DBT. In Bihar, I am told, DBT failed in the pilot block (Kasba in Purnia district), but the failure went largely unreported. In Rajasthan, the biometric authentication has caused enormous damage, evident even in the government’s own transactions data. Even Chhattisgarh, known for its model PDS, is under pressure to follow the diktats of the Central government and adopt Aadhaar-based technology. In all these States, we know senior officers in the Food Department who understand the inappropriateness of this technology and privately oppose it. Yet, they have no choice but to follow the Central government’s instructions. This is symptomatic of a larger malady in India’s social sector: growing centralisation and technocracy.

The most disturbing aspect of this trend is a lack of concern for the hardships that people face. Aadhaar-less ration cards are cancelled without notice. Pensions are discontinued without the victims being told what the problem is. Job cards are cancelled just to meet the “100% seeding” targets. Elderly persons with rough fingerprints are deprived of food rations without compensation. Cash payments are automatically redirected to Aadhaar-linked bank accounts that people sometimes know nothing about. In effect, they are treated as guinea pigs for undependable technologies, without any effective arrangements for grievance redressal or even information sharing. Let people perish if need be, Aadhaar must prevail.

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The people connection

Young Israelis visit India in huge numbers each year, forging a stronger acquaintance



JAEL SILLIMAN

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is accompanied on his visit to India by a large delegation drawn from the defence, cyber, and agricultural sectors; he intends to boost trade, investment, and tourism between the two nations. This year, Israel’s Ministry of Tourism will spend \$5-6 million in India in a bid to boost tourism to Israel. The goal is to have one lakh tourists visiting Israel in 2018.

Once distant

When I was growing up in Kolkata in the 1950s and ‘60s, India had virtually no relations with Israel. I remember a singular exception: an Israeli school friend of my brother’s who was sent to study at La Martiniere. His father was posted in Nepal on deputation to the Air Force. Yusef would tell us colourful stories of life in Israel. There were a few other Israeli visitors who held dual passports (Israel allows this) who were able to come to India. Several people from the Israeli foreign service visited India to help make arrange-

ments for those Jews who wished to make *aliyah* – the right of any Jew to “ascend” to Israel. As the Marathi Jews were always the largest in number among India’s Jewish communities, they made the largest *aliyah*.

Most Israelis knew little about India until about the mid-1990s. Some of the European pioneers of Israel were familiar with Tagore’s writings, and a street in Tel Aviv is named after him. Many Israelis knew of Mahatma Gandhi. Few know about the 800-year-old Indian hospice that was set up at the site where the Sufi saint, Baba Farid, is said to have prayed and meditated when he visited Jerusalem in the 13th century. It serves as a guesthouse for pilgrims of all faiths who come to Jerusalem to pray at Al-Aqsa mosque.

India recognised the state of Israel in 1950, and in 1953 permitted it to open a consulate in Mumbai. Despite there being no formal relations, Israel provided India with crucial intelligence information during several wars. Full diplomatic relations were established between India and Israel until 1992 when India opened its embassy in Tel Aviv.

Though there are many Indian Jews living in Israel – over 80,000 – they have remained a relatively quiet and somewhat “invisible”



community. In Israel, Indian Jews are largely subsumed into the larger “Mizrahi” community of non-white Jews from North Africa and West Asia. Few in Israel know about the Jews of India, their varied histories, and the marked cultural and ethnic distinctions between them. This is largely due to where in Israel the Indian Jews settled, which, for economic and political reasons, was primarily in peripheral towns. When Jews from India first arrived in the 1940s and ‘50s, the darker-skinned Bene Israel and Cochin Jews faced discrimination from the predominantly powerful European (Ashkenazi) Jews.

The Jews from Cochin settled mostly in “*moshavs*”, or community farms, in southern Israel. There, they became very successful at flower growing and export. The Bene Israel Jews from the Konkan were in a range of middle-class, modestly-paying professions. They settled in smaller towns such as Ashdod, Ramla, and Lod. In the 1960s, the Bene Israelis fought and won a major case to be fully accepted as Jews.

Fewer in numbers were the Baghdadi Jewish arrivals from Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata. They became part of the much larger Iraqi Jewish community or integrated with other English-speaking immigrants to Israel. In the last few years, about 2000 Bnei Menashe Jews from Manipur and Mizoram have made *aliyah* as well; many of them have been placed in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The Indian Jews in Israel have always held strong ties to India. They celebrate Indian Independence Day and Republic Day, and many of them, especially the Bene Israelis, listen to Indian music and watch Indian films, hold Indian cultural events for community members, and open Indian stores which stock the groceries and spices. They have formed their own associations, issue their own

community publications, and keep their Indian Jewish traditions alive. However, very few Israelis in the past came to know about India from the Indian Jews who lived there.

‘A human bridge’

Indian Jews were feted during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Israel last year. This visit commemorated 25 years of diplomatic ties between the two nations. Mr. Netanyahu called the Indian diaspora “a human bridge” between the two nations. I would argue that it is young Israelis who have flocked to India over the last 25 years, and who have come to know India first-hand, who have played a more significant role in familiarising Israelis with India.

More than 40,000 Israelis visit India each year. For a country with a population of 6.5 million, that is a considerable number. India is now almost an obligatory visit for Israelis after finishing their compulsory army service. They live in the smaller towns and villages of India for as long as their money can last them, and revel in the freedom India offers them after their rigorous term of service.

Jael Silliman is an author, scholar, and women’s rights activist based in Kolkata

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.

Revolt of the judges

One cannot agree with the writer’s concluding line that a public debate on the issues that have been brought to light by the four dissenting judges should be put to an end (“Restoring order in the court”, Jan. 16). It is this very opacity in the functioning of the judiciary that has led to the present situation. The writer has criticised both the judges and the Chief Justice of India, but he also seems to be against discussions on the subject in the media and sees criticism by political parties as “fishing in troubled waters”. He does not see that citizens are shocked and concerned about the fact that cases are assigned

“selectively to Benches of the CJI’s preference” and given a “quiet burial”. While an independent judiciary is needed, transparency in the institution is one of the foundations of a democracy.

P.R.V. RAJA,
Pandalam

While the four judges have resumed their work after raising the banner of revolt, there are no indications yet that internal dissension in the judiciary is over. Differences within the apex court cannot be allowed to fester considering the debilitating impact that it would have on the functioning of our democracy. Given the

credibility that the judiciary enjoys among the public as the most trusted institution in the country, it is time for all the judges to resolve their differences.

M. JEYARAM,
Sholavandan

There’s one silver lining in this episode, which is that judges and various Benches will now be aware of the fact that people will be watching them hawk-eyed, especially when they are delivering judgments in sensitive cases involving tall political leaders.

FIONA WALTAIR,
Chennai

It was a good sign that Anuj Loya held a press conference and said that

there is no mystery surrounding the death of his father, B.H. Loya. This case is being exploited by some Opposition parties to gain some political mileage and the internal rift in the Supreme Court has added fuel to this. The judiciary should not be stained by political interference.

PAVAN SANKURU,
Guntur

Gored to death

The old ghost has come back to haunt a section of the people of Tamil Nadu (“Spectator gored to death”, Jan. 16). Jallikattu is a primitive and crude sport. When hockey goalkeepers and cricket batsmen wear helmets, and when we wear safety jackets while going

boating, the fact that bull-tamers have no safety gear is incomprehensible. If it is contended that jallikattu is a cultural sport, it must also be conceded that it is a dangerous sport. Last year’s experience will prevent the present government from interfering with the conduct of jallikattu. There will invariably be a loss of lives. But who will monetarily compensate the families of the affected?

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur

True colours

Now UIDAI says they’ll bring in facial recognition for validation of Aadhaar (“Enabling a form of supersurveillance,” and “Face recognition for

Aadhaar validation”, Jan. 16). The cat is out of the bag. It is obvious that false claims were being made to defend the indefensible. Likewise, the fact that Aadhaar has progressed from a voluntary identity document for the uncovered to a universally mandatory enrolment requirement reveals the true colours of the project. The way the government has gone ahead to spread the Aadhaar net, without waiting for the judgment of the court, shows its own commitment to the rule of law and democracy.

FIROZ AHMAD,
Delhi

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