



A global slowdown?

Policymakers will have to bust recessionary fears with more than just monetary policy

Stock markets across the world had very little reason to celebrate in 2018. They witnessed the return of extreme volatility after many years, and most of them recorded their worst performance in a decade. Much of this gloom has to do with the rise in fears that global economic growth could come to a grinding halt in the near future. The economic expansion in the United States, which began after the 2008 recession, is now the second-longest in history. Many believe that a recession is overdue now. China is another major concern as the People's Bank of China's earlier moves to rein in a massive credit-fuelled bubble have been dampening momentum with a lagged effect. The country's private manufacturing sector contracted in December for the first time in 19 months and the official manufacturing PMI (purchasing managers' index) number dropped below 50 for the first time since mid-2016. Other major economies such as Europe and Japan have also shown signs of a potential slowdown in growth. Global stocks have been pricing in these very real risks, particularly with major central banks such as the U.S. Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank remaining on the path to normalise interest rates from near-historic lows. The steep fall in the price of oil is another indicator of faltering demand for commodities as the global economy cools down. The tightening of monetary policy has often been followed by a slowdown in economic growth, and this time may be no different.

Going forward, a major worry for policymakers globally will be the lack of sufficient central bank firepower should the global economy move into a full-fledged recession in 2019. After years of adopting a monetary policy regime marked by near-zero interest rates, central banks like the Fed now have very little room to lower rates if they want to fight a recession. This is despite the gradual tightening of rates and unwinding of asset purchases in the last few years. The next recession may thus witness central banks adopting even more unconventional methods to stimulate their economies. Some hope that governments will ramp up spending to compensate for the lack of monetary policy leeway. But it is unlikely that any fiscal stimulus will fully compensate for the absence of an accommodative monetary policy, particularly when most governments are already deeply mired in debt. Further, the overuse of monetary policy will eventually lead to diminishing returns. A further escalation in the trade war between the U.S. and China is another imminent risk to global growth as additional tariffs could increase the overall tax burden on the economy. In order to tackle the next recession, policymakers will have to come up with reforms to boost economic productivity, instead of just relying on an ultra-easy monetary policy to boost their economies.

Left out, abused

The shocking neglect of child care institutions must be urgently reversed

Child care institutions in India have been trapped in an administrative blind spot, as revelations of the sexual abuse of inmates in a *balika grih* at Muzaffarpur in Bihar showed last year. A home meant to protect girls rescued from exploitation itself turned into a den of predation. The shocking rot in the management of such shelters has now been reported by a Central government committee. It studied 9,589 Child Care Institutions and Homes, mostly run by NGOs, that come under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act. Only an emergency measure to address the serious lacunae can bring some semblance of order to these faceless shelters. Most of the inmates are orphaned, abandoned, sexually abused, trafficked or victims of disasters and conflict. Among them are 7,422 children in conflict with the law, and 3,70,227 in need of care and protection, including 1,70,375 girls. That they often have to live in facilities without proper toilets, secure compounds or the opportunity to vent their grievances as provided for under law underscores the painful reality that they remain virtually invisible. Reform of this depressing system, as the Ministry of Women and Child Development seeks, can be achieved only through systematic scrutiny by State governments. This could be done by appointing special officers whose task it would be to ensure that all institutions register under the JJ Act, account for funds received by each, and enforce mandatory child protection policies during adoption.

As per the recently disclosed study, only 32% of Child Care Institutions or Homes were registered under the JJ Act as of 2016, while an equal number were unregistered, and the rest were either empanelled under other schemes or awaiting registration. The priority should be to bring about uniformity of standards and procedures, evolving common norms for infrastructure, human resources, financial practices and external audits. The panel found child care standards were poor in many institutions, sans proper bedding, food and nutrition and sanitation. Some States obviously have too few homes, giving authorities little incentive to take up cases of children in distress. Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Kerala together account for 43.5% of all shelters. A few States do not have even one home of every category, such as child care, observation and adoption. The Ministry's study lays bare the disconnect between civil society and the welfare system for children, and the poor engagement elected representatives have with such a vital function. The imperative now is to turn the findings of the Ministry's committee into a blueprint for action. Credentialed NGOs should take a greater interest in this effort, holding the authorities to account.

After the inevitable exit

India must be prepared for the potential consequences of withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan



SUHASINI HAIDAR

Despite the White House's spirited denial of reports that it has issued no orders for the pullout of U.S. troops, the course seems set for a thinning of American presence in Afghanistan. U.S. President Donald Trump had promised this during his campaign, and several advisers have said since then that he is keen to bring back most, if not all, troops before his re-election bid in 2020. If anything, Mr. Trump's ill-judged remarks this week only underline his desire to leave: he suggested that regional players like Russia, India and Pakistan should be more involved in stabilising the situation, and mocked India for not doing enough.

As a result, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, that began as revenge for the 9/11 attacks, evolved into a mission for ensuring democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan. In recent years, challenged by the resurgence of the Taliban, it has now become a mission mainly to ensure an honourable exit. This isn't the first time the U.S. has sought to do this: President Barack Obama had faced similar challenges in 2010, just before he announced the big drawdown. As Mr. Trump now moves to cutting American presence to a few well-guarded military bases, India must consider the consequences closely.

Shift in policy

To begin with, it is time to recognise that the U.S.'s South Asia Strategy for Afghanistan, as announced by Mr. Trump in August 2017, has been discarded. Mr. Trump had defined the strategy with three features: that U.S. troops would remain involved in the country until "conditions", not a timeline, mandated their return; that the U.S. would put Pakistan on notice for its support to the Taliban and a political settlement with the Taliban would only follow "after an effective military effort"; and that the policy would hinge on further developing the strategic partnership with India.

Sixteen months later, it is easy to see that each element of the U.S.'s policy on the ground has shifted, if not been entirely reversed. The appointment of special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in September to lead talks with the Taliban after a particularly brutal year shows that the U.S. is no longer waiting for military operations to take effect. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report to the U.S. Congress, casualties of Afghan National and Defence Security Forces in May-September 2018 were the "greatest it has ever been" compared to corresponding periods since 2001, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "documented more civilian deaths in the first nine months of 2018 than they had during the same nine-month reporting period since 2014".

Mr. Khalilzad's direct talks with the Taliban that cut out the National Unity government (NUG) in Kabul reportedly didn't even have President Ashraf Ghani in the loop until after the first talks were held in Qatar - this reversed the previous U.S. position not to engage the Taliban until it engages the NUG. Far from the tough talk on Pakistan for support to the Taliban, Mr. Trump wrote a letter to



Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan thanking him for his efforts. Afghanistan's High Peace Council members also disclosed that Mr. Khalilzad was on a deadline: Mr. Trump has reportedly given him six months to show results with the talks process, failing which the pullout may be speeded up.

The departure from the avowed U.S. position on an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" process has clearly ruffled feathers in Kabul. In December, Mr. Ghani appointed two aides of former President Hamid Karzai known for their hardline position on the Taliban and Pakistan as his Defence and Interior Ministers. Putting the seal on the clear drift in the U.S. Afghanistan and South Asia policy from the past was the exit of Defence Secretary James Mattis, author of the South Asia policy. Mr. Mattis had pushed most strenuously to keep India in the Afghan game by swinging a waiver for India on Chabahar and Iran oil purchases. It remains to be seen whether Mr. Trump will continue those waivers past May this year.

The internal situation in Afghanistan is aggravated now by the uncertainty of the democratic process. Parliamentary elections were held in October after being delayed by more than two years,

but even their preliminary results haven't yet been declared, casting doubt on the government's ability to conduct elections. Presidential elections have been postponed till July, despite the constitutional clause that they were to be completed by April 22, 2019. Meanwhile, Mr. Ghani has been unable to keep his commitment to hold a Loya Jirga (grand council of representatives) to turn Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's post in the NUG into an executive Prime Ministership.

A pragmatic view

For India, these developments may appear discouraging, but a more pragmatic view is necessary to deal with all possible outcomes. The U.S.'s eventual pullout as Afghanistan's peacekeeper is inevitable, and it would make more sense to prepare for it than to deny it will happen. New Delhi was caught off guard in 2010 when Mr. Obama planned the drawdown and discouraged India from a stake in projects there in an effort to placate Pakistan.

Mr. Trump's administration has no doubt been much more welcoming of Indian investment in Afghanistan, but that itself is symptomatic of his desire to pare down "Pax Americana" in every part of the world. The removal or reduction of the U.S. presence from most theatres of action has created space for regional players: leaving Syria to Iran and its allies; Yemen to Saudi Arabia; Afghanistan to players like Russia, Pakistan and Iran; and Pakistan to China.

Some other hard truths must be faced: India cannot replace Pakistan's position geographically, nor can it ever offer the U.S. or any other force what Pakistan has offered in the past, including bases and permission for U.S. forces to

bomb its own territory. The decision to abandon the SAARC in favour of groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) may have provided some short-lived returns in "isolating Pakistan", but it has had the effect of cutting Afghanistan loose from Indian leadership of South Asia as well. India's best course with Afghanistan remains its own regional strategy, not becoming a part of any other country's strategy. Close bilateral consultations like this week's visit of Delhi to National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib may not always yield dramatic headlines, but are the basis of India's ability to help Afghanistan according to its needs, not India's ambitions, and the reason for the immense popularity and goodwill India continues to enjoy in Afghanistan.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise the cyclical nature of interventions in Afghanistan, which has been called the "graveyard of empires" for forcing all world powers to retreat at some point or the other. The words of Rev. George Gleig, a soldier who survived the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), are worth remembering: "A war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it." Greig's description of the British retreat could ring true for Soviet forces in the 1980s, and American forces post-9/11 as well.

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The Hindutva overhang

The BJP's loss in the recent Assembly elections is not enough to merit cheer about India's secularism



SHAIKH MUJIBUR REHMAN

Despite the loss of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three Hindi heartland States - Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh - there is little to cheer for India's secularism. Looking at the campaign and manifestos of the two national parties, it is apparent that the campaign framework was generally defined more by competitive Hindutva. Let there be no illusion: the mere electoral defeat of the BJP does not mark the end of Hindutva as such, not even its retreat. Given the hegemonic position that the BJP has established at present, even a defeat in 2019 could be only a transitory retreat. Given that the difference in vote share between the BJP and the Congress was so small in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the BJP could easily return to power after the next Assembly elections with even mild anti-incumbency.

In the early 1980s, economist Pranab Bardhan described the Indian state as a patronage dispensing one, a formulation that remains valid even during India's liberalisation post-1991. With the dimming of the Modi wave on the electoral landscape, though it took longer than expected, the 2019 parliamentary election will likely be party-driven and, more specifically, candidate-centric. Thus, a candidate of any party with a profile to offer better patronage could have a higher chance of succeeding at the hustings, implying greater decentralised use of money and muscle power.

Some of the buzzwords of the 2014 campaign - such as the Gujarat model, 56-inch chest, or even Congress-mukt Bharat - will not dominate 2019. Indeed, talk of the Gujarat model has receded from the campaign vocabulary of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for quite some time now.

Meaning of 'Congress-mukt'

Unfortunately, serious academic research on the Congress party is rather limited and has been far less compared to what we have on the BJP or the Left parties, or even the Aam Aadmi Party. The deeply



intertwined narrative of the Congress party with modern India has many complex layers. The fact that the Congress sometimes deviated sharply from its founding values was often felt by many of its stalwarts, both before and after the Gandhi family monopolised its leadership. Without trivialising heroic contributions made by non-Congress leaders, it would be fair to say that the dissenting Congress leaders often played stellar roles in leading movements against the Congress governments, so much so that they literally helped set up almost all the non-Congress governments till 2014.

Consider the role of former Congress leaders such as Chandra Shekhar and Morarji Desai in 1977;

V.P. Singh in 1989; I.K. Gujral and even P. Chidambaram from 1996 to 98; or Mamata Banerjee as part of the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance in 1999. Regardless of our view on the Congress party, any dispassionate and objective study calls for critical scrutiny of the centrality of the Congress party's role in the making and un-making of modern India. But Mr. Modi's clarion call to make India Congress-mukt, without doubt, has been ideologically inspired and can be traced to the Hindu Right's ambition in the 1920s to build a Hindu Rashtra. To say that such a call by Mr. Modi is mainly inspired by the Gandhi family's misrule would be a gross misreading of the ideological evolution of India's political history.

Targeting minorities

On Muslim representation, the story is not particularly inspiring either. The BJP fielded only one Muslim candidate each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and both lost. The Congress fielded 15 in Rajasthan, out of whom seven won. In the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, there are only two Muslim MLAs.

Mob lynching is perhaps the most pernicious consequence of

the growing aggression of Hindutva politics since 2014, and the pattern it has set poses the most mortal threat to India's secular fabric. Yet, lynching barely figured as an issue of secularism during the campaign in the recent Assembly elections - although India's first 'Cow Minister' in Rajasthan, Otar Dewasi of the BJP, lost to an independent candidate.

The secular test

From Dadri in 2015 to Bulandshahr in 2018, a new trend has appeared, representing the changing face of violence against Muslims, in which victims are presented as perpetrators and the latter often enjoy the active state patronage. The end of state complicity in perpetuating violence and harassment against Muslims is the least that could be expected from the newly installed Congress regimes in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Those who wish to play the secular card in 2019 must recognise that they need to promise a lynch-free India to begin with.

Shaikh Mujibur Rehman teaches at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and has edited the recent book 'Rise of Saffron Power'

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.

Women in Sabarimala

The entry of three women into the Sabarimala temple is as far-reaching a change as the Channar revolt that won Nadar women the right to wear upper-body clothes and the consecration of a Shiva temple at Aruvippuram by Sri Narayana Guru ("Breaking barriers", Jan. 4). It is clear from the protests that it is not the male Ayyappa devotees who are against the judgment; it is those who are trying to foment unrest in a bid to gain some relevance in Kerala politics. What is shameful is that the Congress in Kerala has become the mirror image of the BJP and is making common cause with the latter to perpetuate a discriminatory custom.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode

are seen as polluting and impure. It is shameful that menstruation is seen as impure when it is a natural occurrence. Archaic practices and beliefs cannot continue in the name of tradition.

SANGEETA KAMPANI,
New Delhi

By entering the temple, the women have hurt the faith of millions of devotees. If they were true devotees, they would not have done something against a long-standing tradition and in such a furtive manner. Their act shows not devotion but a dogged determination to simply break tradition.

M. PRADYU,
Kannur

If the verdict of the court does not appeal to a group of people, they should take the legal route to question it, not resort to violence. And priests cannot take political decisions and

confuse the public; they are not outside of the law.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur

I wonder what would have happened if Muslims had protested against a court order in the manner that is happening in Kerala. They would have probably been branded as 'lawless' and 'enemies of the state'. The Prime Minister says Sabarimala is about tradition and triple talaq is about gender equality. The government and the courts should either look into the question of gender equality in all religions (in which case laws and judgments should be respected by all) or wait for social reform to unfold on its own.

It is not the temple that needed to be "purified" through rituals; it is our mindset. What a pity that despite having a great

Constitution and a Supreme Court, priests decide what is the correct thing to do. This is a country where goddesses are venerated; yet, when women enter a temple, people want to rid it of "impurities".

SHUBHAM YADAV,
Lucknow

What was the need for the government to implement the court order in such an emotionally charged atmosphere? It could have asked for time. Given that Kerala is recovering from the terrible floods of last year, there was anyway little time to make security arrangements.

VISWANATHAN P.K.,
Palakkad

Judicial overreach is what has led to the distressing situation in Sabarimala. The matter is one of faith, not of a constitutional right. The court should not have taken up this case. There have been many instances of

judicial overreach recently, notable among them being the ban on fireworks last Deepavali. Instead of taking up cases like Sabarimala and the cracker ban, the court should concentrate on resolving the cases already at hand.

S. KAMAT,
Santa Cruz

Trump mocks India

It is typical of U.S. President Donald Trump, an anti-intellectual preoccupied with military might as a means of shaping a better world, to mock the building of a library ("Trump's

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A sentence in the Business page story headlined "Object of IBC paramount, says NCLT" (Jan. 4, 2019) read: "The original promoters of the beleaguered steel firm [Essar] had put in a higher bid after the last date was over. A day later, the CoC decided in ArcelorMittal's favour." Actually, in the evening of the same day on which the Essar bid was received, the CoC decided in ArcelorMittal's favour.

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"Far from accepting responsibility and offering help, the government and the corporation left the workers who were suffering from silicosis to fend for themselves." The quartz mines near Elkatta in Telangana's Ranga Reddy district where the workers were employed. (Below) The women whose husbands died from silicosis narrate their stories. ■ K.V.S. GIRI

Telangana's 'villages of widows'

In the 1970s, hundreds of women from Mahbubnagar's villages lost their husbands to silicosis, an occupational hazard in quartz mines that could have been prevented if safety protocols had been followed. Even after four decades, justice remains a distant dream for the affected families, reports **K. Venkateshwarlu**

Only someone could read them, the wrinkles on Narsamma's face would tell an epic tale of agony and tragedy spanning four decades. Narsamma was a teenager when she married Chandramouli in the 1970s. What decided the match, as was the trend in those days, was his job in a public sector undertaking – at a quartz-mining and crushing factory of the Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation (APMDC) at Elkatta, a dusty village, 5 km from Shadnagar, in Telangana's Ranga Reddy district (earlier in Mahbubnagar district).

For the first four years, things went smoothly for the couple. They had a baby boy in 1980. Narsamma's relatives envied her good fortune: she was married to a man with a secure job and a good salary. For the people in this drought-hit district, mining quartz promised jobs and prosperity.

But soon things began to go downhill. In 1981, Chandramouli returned home one night with a persistent cough. "Initially, we dismissed it as common cold," Narsamma says. "But his cough worsened, and he found it difficult to breathe. We took him to a private doctor in Shadnagar, and then to a big hospital in Hyderabad. We ran from pillar to post in search of a cure. Some said that he had tuberculosis (TB). We mortgaged the house to pay for his treatment and ran up huge debts. But we could not save him."

There are many stories like Narsamma's in Elkatta, Rangampally, Chowlapally, Kamsanipally and Peerlaguda villages in Ranga Reddy district. These places are known locally as "villages of widows", as most of the women there have lost their spouses to silicosis. All of them belong to poor Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste, Backward Class, or minority communities.

The mystery illness

Silicosis, an incurable disease, remained shrouded in mystery for a long time due to misdiagnosis and the delayed manifestation of symptoms. The locals called it "guttala bimari", or "the disease from the hills". The APMDC, now known as the Telangana State Mineral Development Corporation (TSMDC), ran the mines from 1965 to 1974, and then shut them down abruptly when they saw that the workers were succumbing en masse to silicosis.

But until the shutdown, whenever a worker fell sick, he was simply told that his cough was a temporary phenomenon and that he would get better. The workers were not told that they were victims of silicosis. Instead of being given proper medical treatment, they were given pieces of jaggery as some kind of an antidote.

According to the villagers, around 350 workers were employed in the mines and the crushing unit, and a majority of them were exposed to silica dust. The technologies of mining and crushing, the working conditions, and the safety protocols in the early 1970s were so primitive that most of the workers were exposed to heavy doses of silica dust on a daily basis. Quartz was mined at Chowlapally and brought to

the crushing unit at Elkatta, where it was heated to 1,000°C in a kiln, broken into smaller pieces, and turned into fine dust in an oblong closed shed.

This shed proved to be a virtual death trap, as the workers kept inhaling the odourless silica dust that gave them a racking cough and led to shortness of breath. Over 100 employees were involved in this crushing process in each of the three shifts daily. When they fell sick, the women rushed them from one hospital to another, fighting against a disease that would soon turn into an unending battle for compensation.

Suppressing the truth

Far from accepting responsibility and offering help, the government and the corporation left the workers to fend for themselves. The authorities quietly abandoned the quartz-mining and crushing activities in 1974 though the mining lease was valid till 1985 and the mineral was available in abundance. When they realised that the health of the workers was deteriorating, instead of acknowledging the toxicity of the workplace as the issue, the corporation told the workers that operating the mine had become uneconomical. The workers were laid off in batches and paid paltry amounts instead of the full compensation and severance package that would have been their due had the legal process of closure been followed.

"Clearly, this was done to avoid the liabilities under Section 25-O of the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 and Section 6 of the Metalliferous Mines Regulations, 1961 (which mandates that the mine owner should submit a notice to the Chief or the Regional Inspector, stating reasons for abandoning the mine and the number of persons affected)," says M. Sambasiva Rao of the NGO, Banjara Development Society (BDS).

Perhaps because the APMDC was a government undertaking, the regulatory agencies under the Mines Act and the Factories Act looked the other way. Many even wonder if the unit had any of the other mandatory permissions apart from the mining lease. Whether in overlooking the operations, putting in place safety protocols, or taking care of the sick workers and their families, the APMDC's track record has been of consistent neglect and callousness.

For the stricken families, getting to the bottom of "guttala bimari" was itself quite a task. Exposure to large amounts of silica can go unnoticed as it is a non-irritant and does not cause any immediate health effects. The symptoms of silicosis – shortness of breath, cough, fever and bluish skin – show up only after prolonged exposure to silica dust, according to the World Health Organisation. "As silicosis is incurable, clinical management includes removing the worker from the industry and giving symptomatic treatment," the WHO says.

When the quartz mine workers who fell sick were taken to the local government hospitals, they were wrongly diagnosed as having TB and were referred to TB hospitals in Vikarabad and Hyderabad, 50 km away. As they continued to get treated for TB, there was no clinical



"Our government negotiates nuclear liability clauses aggressively in international fora but doesn't care about domestic industrial disasters."

M. SAMBASIVA RAO
Banjara Development Society, an NGO

management of silicosis. For years after the shutdown, workers kept dying of silicosis with no remedy in sight.

"The doctors were either clueless or deliberately suppressed the fact that the workers were suffering from silicosis," says Rao, who has been ferrying victims to hospital and fighting for their compensation for over two decades. "Our government negotiates nuclear liability clauses aggressively in international fora but doesn't care about domestic industrial disasters. It's been more than four decades since the quartz mine was abandoned and the workers died without proper care. But the families haven't got a single rupee as compensation despite approaching so many government bodies and regulatory agencies, including the APMDC, the Directorate General of Mines Safety, the Directorate of Factories, the Labour and Health departments, the National Human Rights Commission, Assembly, Parliament and the High Court. It is a total failure of governance."

Saga of insensitivity

What emerges from a study of the chronology of the events is a sordid saga of bureaucratic red tape and insensitivity. To start with, no government agency was willing to recognise the disease as silicosis. This was despite the fact that two of the victims, G. Narayana and Chandramouli, who had privately ap-

proached a chest physician, Dr. Jaichandra, in Hyderabad in 1987, were certified as afflicted by silicosis.

A medical camp set up in 1991 in Mogiligidda village (near Elkatta) by Dr. Mahender Reddy, a private doctor, also confirmed silicosis among the workers. In 1993-94, a joint move by the BDS and Dr. R. Vijai Kumar, a pulmonologist at MediCiti, a private hospital in Hyderabad, revealed 69 cases of silica dust-induced illness among the workers, with 58 suffering from silicosis and 11 from silico-tuberculosis. By as late as 1994, Dr. Kumar remained the only doctor who agreed to give evidence before a government agency. But the government hospitals either vacillated or dismissed the cases as TB.

In 1991, five affected persons and their family members filed petitions before the Commissioner for Workmen's Compensation in Hyderabad. Two years later, they were referred to the Andhra Pradesh Chest Hospital for the checking of "past exposure and present morbidity and mortality". A committee formed for the purpose refused to give its view and passed the buck to the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESI) hospital, Hyderabad. The ESI hospital, too, declined to get involved, on the grounds that mines are not covered by the ESI Act. The Commissioner for Workmen's Compensation then referred the matter to the National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), Bengaluru. But the NIOH too refused to take it up.

It is telling that the government's first efforts to medically examine the cases came a good two decades after the closure of the mines and the crushing unit. It was only on September 1, 1994 that the government of Andhra Pradesh issued a letter to the Andhra Pradesh Chest Hospital, after which the superintendent of the hospital held a medical camp in Shadnagar on "respiratory problems faced by people in these villages". The letter made no mention of silicosis. But even this late intervention turned out to be a non-starter as the critical equipment, a mobile X-ray unit, was "not available". Apparently, the Andhra Pradesh Chest Hospital authorities could not arrange for one to be brought from their hospital in Hyderabad to Shadnagar.

In response to a complaint filed by

the BDS and a Delhi-based NGO, Society for Participatory Research in Asia, the Director General of Mines Safety conducted an inquiry and seized the employment and other relevant records from the APMDC in 1995-96. But no action was taken though the Director General could have invoked Section 75 of the Mines Act to prosecute the APMDC.

After the BDS lobbied with some MLAs, the issue was raised in the Andhra Pradesh Assembly in 1997. The NGO ferried 54 workers from their villages to the Andhra Pradesh Chest Hospital in Hyderabad for a proper medical examination. But again there was no report. In the absence of any succour from any of the government agencies, the victims, with the help of the BDS, petitioned some MPs. Responding to a question raised in the Lok Sabha in 1997, the Union Health Ministry released a note prepared by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). The note blandly stated that a team of doctors from ICMR visited Hyderabad, Mahbubnagar and the office of the Mandal Revenue Officer, Shadnagar, from February 20 to 22, 1997.

The team's findings were baffling. First, it found that no cases of silicosis had been reported to the Director/Inspectorate of Factories. Second, it observed that though there may have been cases of deaths due to silicosis, no authentic records were available to establish this. These findings, however, fly in the face of a report from the Society for Participatory Research in Asia that was submitted to the ICMR team. The report, based on a house-to-house survey on deaths due to silicosis in select villages of Mahbubnagar district, stated that 136 people (85 men and 51 women) died from silicosis. Most of those who died were 40 to 49 years old.

A perusal of all the documents pertaining to these deaths leads to the conclusion that the ICMR team, instead of getting to the bottom of the causes behind the workers' deaths, simply washed its hands of the whole mess with a perfunctory note. This non-response remained the norm with nearly all the government agencies.

Judicial intervention

Things began to move only after the issue was taken up by the National Human Rights Commission following a representation filed by the BDS in 1995. Five years after the petition was filed, the Commission issued a notice to the Chief Secretary of the Andhra Pradesh government, asking why no effort was made to find the cause of the illnesses and ameliorate the suffering of the victims. The government formed a committee under the leadership of Dr. K.J.R. Murthy, an expert in respiratory medicine, and ordered another round of tests on those willing to come to Hyderabad. The committee members examined 143 people in late 2000. Twenty-nine of them, including 11 women, were found to be suffering from silicosis. It was after this exercise that another silicosis victim, N. Sevia, died while returning to his village. Yet again, the entire exercise yielded nothing concrete for the

affected families – no compensation and not even an allowance for those taking care of the victims.

More than 20 years after the death of their husbands, the women of these villages were still to see a glimpse of either justice or compensation. Distraught, they then approached the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2000. Helped by the BDS, three petitioners, including Narsamma, moved the court under Article 226 of the Constitution. The case was effectively argued by human rights activist K. Balagopal.

After more than a decade of litigation, the High Court converted the writ petition into a Public Interest Litigation on September 13, 2012, and passed the final order in February 2013. It directed the authorities, including the APMDC, to propose a scheme to safeguard the life and liberty of the persons suffering from silicosis. On March 5, 2013, the Advocate General, appearing on behalf of the APMDC, placed a scheme before the court. It entailed the APMDC agreeing to pay the silicosis-affected workers compensation as decided by the Compensation Commissioner under the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923.

The High Court gave two weeks to the affected persons to obtain the necessary documents from the authorities and another two weeks for the latter to complete the task. Fully aware of how bureaucracies tend to function, the court noted, "If any help is required from the Revenue authorities by the persons who were affected, generosity shall be shown and shall be dealt with on humanitarian ground."

Another five years have passed since the court order. Only on December 19, 2018 did an official team of the TSMDC start a preliminary survey of the villages. While the visit has triggered hope among the families of the victims, there is also an unmistakable note of cynicism. What will they do after so many decades, the families wonder.

Their despondency is hardly surprising. The scheme submitted to the High Court is good but it again talks of submission of proof of employment and confirmation and verification of workers who suffered silicosis. The government and the TSMDC are still struggling to put together a list of victims and their families who are eligible for compensation. G. Deepti, general manager, sales and marketing, TSMDC, however, says that the corporation would ensure that the families are compensated.

Rao has his doubts. He wonders how many of these poor families will have 40-year-old records and documents, given that the Director General of Safety had seized most of the employment-related records. "The authorities should show their human face and be generous in extending compensation instead of forcing the victims to again visit offices and hospitals seeking assorted documents to prove their misery," he says.

Will these families, devastated by a deadly combination of industrial callousness, medical tragedy and official neglect, ever find closure? "I am not sure," a weary Narsamma says. "Let's see if I get something in hand."

