



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

WITH SHOBA ARUN

## 'In homes, male domination is still the norm'

This sociologist looks at why there are signs of regression in Kerala's famously progressive cultural fabric

NAVAMY SUDHISH

Shoba Arun calls the Malayali woman an enigma, but not in an obscure, romanticised way. "A State with an inspiring political past, yet no iconic woman leader. A land of labour reforms, yet Pombilai Orumai never had the backing of any trade union. While support poured in from all corners last month for a symbolic effort like the women's wall, the nuns fighting for justice never saw such solidarity. A society so progressive, but the victim of a sexual crime is slut shamed in public. The well-cited Malayali woman is definitely not what you think her to be, her identity has more complexities and contradictions," says the sociologist who lectures at Manchester Metropolitan University, U.K.

In her book *Development and Gender Capital in India: Change, Continuity and Conflict in Kerala*, Arun tries to explore the paradox that is the Kerala woman by placing her within the theoretical framework developed by French intellectual and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and adopted by feminist Bourdieusians.

She argues that despite very good socio-demographic indicators, the Kerala woman's role in the development discourse is marred by increasing misogyny. "When you check the

gender development index in the 90s, you find that Kerala always forged ahead. But the situation now is more complex. Today, Kerala has high literacy levels and a mass of highly-educated women, but you also see many of them sacrificing their careers to meet the demands of domesticity. And to top it all, the purity of the woman's body has emerged as a major topic of discussion, which again is a regressive trend." As a Malayali migrant who grew up in the Nilgiris, Arun was always intrigued by the stark reality of unequal 'life experiences' based on gender. "My parents were often asked why they wanted to educate their daughters when my peers were married off soon after puberty."

### Gender capital

Arun builds her book on the concept of gender capital or more specifically, 'female' and 'feminine capital', that is, the way women are socialised into a gender role. Female capital is about the biological notion of gender, where forms of capital can be accumulated, for example, through education. Feminine capital is the gender capital advantage through socialisation and social construction around gender roles. "As a woman, you acquire certain traits, skills and attitudes that fit the generally-accepted template of femininity. You are not accepted

into fields that demand dominance or aggression and, at the end of the day, you are reduced to a particular gender role. And because of that, there are limits to how much we can progress or how female and feminine capital can be accumulated or converted into other forms of capital." She also observes that women in Kerala, as in many male-dominant cultures and contexts, straddle the

**Our movie dialogues drip misogyny. Look at how women are portrayed in most films — they are either domesticated, subordinated idols or objectified sirens**

female and feminine capital construction and accumulation process.

Arun's book also zooms into specific groups — adivasis and semi-rural livelihoods — as ethnicity and class are crucial in defining femininity. She also finds many intersecting influences on gender. "In many areas, we stand far above the national average, but the adivasi capital in Kerala is always represented as deficit. The average adivasi woman is still caught in a loop of abuse and exploitation; she is always the 'other'. So when we talk about Kerala women, we are not talking about a heterogeneous

cross-section. Not all women in Kerala can increase their social, cultural and financial capital on equal terms." Arun says that a paradigm shift from mere representation to a more embedded transformation is needed. "This should take into account the 'lived experiences' of women in Kerala."

### Matriliny reversed

Arun began mapping Kerala women and their diversity of experience two decades ago and she points to the reversal of matriliny as a major change. The kinship system that appreciated and valued feminine capital had women as inheritors of family property. "I started working on the subject in the 90s and later revisited the same communities and households multiple times, covering three generations of women. Even in the 90s, many families followed polyandry, but now this female-centric social structure has dissipated," she says.

Arun finds definite signs of regression in Kerala's cultural fabric. "Our movie dialogues drip misogyny. Look at how women are portrayed in most films — they are either domesticated, subordinated idols or objectified sirens. And when we analyse the infamous actress attack case and the discourse it generated, what we see is varying degrees of victim shaming. This is no stray incident; more and more women face cyber bullying today."

She finds that the Malayali woman, who is considered an achiever of feminist goals and human rights, is often victimised and subjugated in a wider context of material, economic and political equations. She says it's an 'anomie' which, in Kerala's context, does not mean normlessness but an incongruity of norms, and a bias that legitimises social hierarchies. "There are terms like 'appropriate dressing' and 'modesty', and how women are 'not expected to be seen in public after dark', that point to gendered notions concerning the body, morality and safety. Often, the feminist notions of equality and liberation are inappropriate within homes — a private sphere where male domination is a cultural norm. Even when we look at the Sabarimala issue, we find a multitude of voices, where the root of the issue relates to women's bodies as polluting and unequal. And despite the impressive pointers of women's progress, violence against women is also high in Kerala," she says.

What Arun recommends is a perspective beyond the mere rhetoric of gender autonomy, which is often confined to examples of women's solidarity such as Kudumbashree. "At one level, we see the Malayali woman as this icon of empowerment, but Kerala could have achieved more in terms of transforming gender relations in a number of spheres, including work, political representation, and social justice. While women in other States are quickly achieving more, we are slowly slipping back to regressive social structures. We need a new discourse that addresses the wider, heterogeneous reality."

■ Has a Master's in Applied Economics from Bharathiar University, and an M.Phil from JNU

■ Completed Ph.D from University of Manchester in 1999, and began teaching at Ulster University in Northern Ireland

■ Visiting fellow at Chandragupt Institute of Management Patna, and member of editorial board, International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology

■ Her research focuses on gender matters in the global society and the knowledge economy

## WHO

## Masood Azhar, wanted jihadi behind a wall

For a short and portly man, who once himself said that he was unfit for Jihadi training, the Pakistan-based Masood Azhar has cast quite a wide shadow in the world of terrorists. In the limelight once again for the Pulwama attack, Azhar has survived and continued to build his group,

Jaish-e-Mohammed, in Pakistan.

## What did he mastermind?

He was jailed in India for five years, inspiring the 1999 hijacking that led to his release by the Indian government. The JeM, led by Azhar, carried out an assassination attempt on a Pakistani President (Gen. Pervez Musharraf, 2003), masterminded the attack on the Indian Parliament and worked in tandem with al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden on a number of terror projects. Far from paying for his crimes, intelligence sources say Azhar has built a veritable fortress in Bahawalpur town, adding new sections to the JeM's infrastructure there regularly. In 2009, U.S. news

portal McClatchy was able to send a reporter to the JeM's latest five-acre compound "surrounded by a high brick and mud wall," which included a tiled swimming pool, stables, and even an ornamental fountain.

## What is the Kashmir link?

In recent years, the JeM has been accused of a series of attacks in Jammu and Kashmir and the Pathankot attack. The JeM claimed responsibility for the Pulwama strike, yet Azhar appears to retain a free hand from the government in Islamabad, and has Beijing's powerful backing. China, despite okaying a ban against the JeM more than a decade ago, has vetoed all attempts to place

Azhar on the UN Security Council's list of terrorists. India, the U.S., France and the U.K. have tried at various times to have Azhar branded as a global terrorist by the 1267 Committee, but China has vetoed the move by putting technical holds. If Azhar is listed as a terrorist by the Security Council, he will face a global travel ban and assets freeze.

## Where did he train?

Details of his early life come from Azhar's confession during interrogation by various agencies in Jammu and Kashmir after he was arrested there in 1994. Born in Bahawalpur on July 10, 1968, Azhar, whose father was the headmaster of a



government school, was sent to study at the madrasa in Karachi's Binori mosque after completing his Standard VIII examination. The Binori mosque's Jamia Islamia was

seen as a training school for Jihadis internationally at the time (he graduated in 1989). Azhar recorded studying with "like-minded" students from Bangladesh, Sudan and various Arab countries, who then went to fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, funded in part by the U.S. Azhar too enlisted to fight with the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen at the time, but owing to what he called his "poor physique" he couldn't complete the mandatory 40 days of training, and was put to work in bringing out the terror outfit's monthly magazine *Sada-e-Mujahid*. In the years that followed, as militancy grew in Jammu and Kashmir, and changed leadership from local groups that were

essentially "pro-independence" like the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front to the Pakistani-controlled groups like the Hizbul Mujahideen, Azhar was tasked with merging two splinter groups, Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami (HuJI) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, into the Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA). It was during Azhar's visit to the Kashmir Valley to meet with the cadre in January 1994 that security forces arrested him. During his years in prison, Azhar continued to radicalise fellow prisoners, but as in the past, was hampered by his girth from anything more active. When HuA commander Sajjad Afghani tried to help Azhar out from prison, the plan failed and Afghani was killed, as

Azhar couldn't fit in the tunnel they dug out of the Kot Balwal prison.

## Who protects him?

In December 1999, when Azhar and other terrorists were handed over by Indian officials, including the then Intelligence Bureau operative and now National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, in Kandahar, few imagined that a man so publicly released in exchange for hostages would still pose the threat that Azhar does two decades later. Or that Pakistan would protect him with impunity, while the international community appears helpless.

SUHASINI HAIDAR

## WHAT

## The lowdown on Trump and the Mexico wall

## What is it?

Although the definition has periodically changed shape, mostly due to U.S. President Donald Trump's different characterisations of it, "The Wall" refers to Mr. Trump's pet project of constructing a physical wall along (parts of) the U.S.-Mexico border.

## How did it come about?

The Wall, as a continuous physical structure that stretches "from sea to shining sea" along the 2,000 mile U.S.-Mexico border, has not come about yet. Only 654 miles of the 1,954-mile border has some form of physical barrier at the moment. Mr. Trump started putting out his idea of a wall to check immigration on social media as early as 2014. In 2015, his statements suggested that he was settling on the idea of building a structure for a total of 1,000 miles, saying there were physical barriers for the rest.

## Why does it matter?

The existence of a wall matters for many reasons. Building a wall is ethically questionable. As per international law that the U.S. has signed up to, it is the right of individuals to present themselves at the U.S. border to seek asylum. The wall is also likely to put thousands of lives at significantly greater risk. Those fleeing drug and gang violence in Central America and making the dangerous and arduous journey across the U.S. border are unlikely to be deterred by a wall. It is the centre-piece of the Trump administration's extreme border policies, which have included separating migrant children from their parents.

The wall also matters because it has come as a policy agenda that is often not substantiated by facts or is based on what is only partially true. Mr. Trump's reasons for building the wall have been based on partially or wholly untrue claims related to the volume of illegal migrants being apprehended at the border, the cost of immigration and the danger posed by illegal migrants. The wall is a



divisive issue – a stand-off between Congressional Democrats and Mr. Trump resulted in the longest-ever partial federal government shutdown in December and January that affected some 800,000 workers. The wall drive will be a part of his 2020 re-election campaign.

## What next?

After Congress granted Mr. Trump just \$1.3 billion of the \$5.7 billion he had requested for the wall, the President declared a national emergency to redirect monies from military construction funds, anti-drug funding and the Treasury Department. Earlier this week, 16 States filed a case against Mr. Trump, arguing that Congress controls spending. Prior to this lawsuit, two cases had been filed by Texas landowners and environmental groups. These battles are likely to end up in the Supreme Court, where they could go either way. The House and Senate can pass a joint resolution ending the emergency and the House is likely to pass one when it reconvenes after recess. Even if the Senate were to pass the resolution, Mr. Trump could veto it. Ending the emergency would then need a super-majority in Congress to override a presidential veto. The House could also potentially sue the administration or join another party's lawsuit.

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN

## WHEN

## February 24, 2019

**The countdown begins:** Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* and Peter Farelly's *Green Book* are the frontrunners for Best Picture as The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences prepares for Oscars night on February 24 (Monday morning for viewers in India). British rock band Queen will be among the performers, Reuters said. The 91st Academy Awards will open without a host and an opening monologue for the first time in 30 years after the withdrawal of comedian Kevin Hart because of past homophobic tweets. Picture shows a closed section of Hollywood Boulevard in front of Dolby Theater, where the ceremony will be held. AFP

## WHY

## Are the Gujjars agitated?

## What are the grounds for this?

The nine-day-long renewed agitation of Gujjars in Rajasthan earlier this month, seeking 5% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions, has again shifted focus on the community's demand which has generated considerable political heat and disrupted public life several times since 2007. As many as 72 Gujjars have so far died in police firing during the quota agitation. Gujjars, who had initially demanded the Scheduled Tribe status in Rajasthan, point out that their main occupation is agriculture and animal husbandry and they have been left behind in educational and economic progress because they did not have the clout enjoyed by other influential communities. The caste structure among Hindus excluded them from the fruits of development, as they lived mostly in the remote areas of eastern Rajasthan districts. Though they were included in the Other Backward Class (OBC) list in 1994, the



dominant Jat community has taken away the lion's share of the quota.

## What is the status of quotas?

At present, Rajasthan gives 21% reservation to OBCs, which covers 90 castes of both Hindu and Muslim communities. The Scheduled Castes get 16% reservation and the Scheduled Tribes 12%. This brings the total reservation to 49%, which is 1% less than the 50% ceiling mandated by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney judgment. Gujjars, along with nomadic communities Banjara, Gadia-Lohar, Raika and Gadariya, were given 1% quota in the "most

backward" category, in addition to the OBC benefit, in 2010. The State government has tried thrice in the past to give 5% reservation to Gujjars as a "Special Backward Class," but the legislation was struck down every time by the Rajasthan High Court, which ruled that the quota had not only exceeded the 50% limit, but was also not supported by quantifiable data.

## What is the govt. stand?

The newly elected Congress government passed a Bill in the Assembly during the Budget session on February 13, giving 5% reservation to Gujjars and four other nomadic communities as an 'Extremely Backward Class' and made a "recommendation" to the Centre that the legislation be included in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution to protect it from being challenged in courts. This has resulted in the quota exceeding the 50% limit. The Bill, which amended an Act of 2017, made a mention of the Constitution Amendment Bill passed by the Union government to extend quota to the poor, which breached the 50% ceiling. The 10% reservation for the poor in the general category introduced by the Centre has also

been implemented in Rajasthan, taking the total quota to 64%.

## Are Gujjars satisfied now?

Gujjar Aarakshan Sangharh Samiti convener Kirori Singh Bainsla, who along with his supporters occupied the Delhi-Mumbai rail tracks in Sawai Madhopur district for nine days, lifted the blockade after the government gave a written assurance of legal steps to safeguard the quota. Col. Bainsla (retired) says Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has promised the Gujjars that he will intervene if an issue arises later.

## What is in store?

Though Gujjars have been granted the Extremely Backward Class status for the time being, the community expects the State government to effectively implement the special Deonarain scheme for their welfare, fill backlog of vacancies and consider withdrawal of criminal cases registered during the earlier agitations. The fate of reservation will depend on the courts taking a view on the new statute in the light of interpretation of the ceiling under exceptional circumstances.

MOHAMMED IQBAL

## WHERE

## In Chennai, expansion of Metro Rail network

After a protracted delay, Chennai Metro Rail phase I, covering 45 km of the city, was completed, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurating the final 10 km stretch from AG-DMS to Washermanpet on February 10. The line connects north Chennai with the airport through the Chennai Central railway station and runs through the arterial Anna Salai, serving what is perhaps the busiest stretch of the city.

After the Union government accorded approval to this project in January 2009, it raised towering expectations, with a promise to open both corridors – Chennai Central to St. Thomas Mount and Washermanpet to the airport – by December 2015. But the project was plagued by delays as a chain of pressing issues emerged.

## What led to the delays?

Initially, there was a delay because of land acquisition. Subsequently, as the issue was ironed out, two contracts had to be terminated because of poor progress of construction. Chennai Metro Rail (CMRL) lost several months in awarding new contracts. Officials said there was difficulty in carrying out tunnelling work for the underground network because of unpredictable soil conditions. Plodding along, CMRL managed to get trains running in 45 km of phase I, in sections, over the last four years.

## Why is there lack of patronage?

After the opening of the entire 45 km network, there are between 82,000 and 85,000 people travelling every day. But sources say they had expected it to be at least one lakh. A host of factors, including inadequate feeder services such as mini-buses for last-mile connectivity, and high fares (ranging from ₹10 to ₹60) contribute to poor footfalls. There are cycles for last-mile connectivity at many stations, and share autos and share cars too operate, but only at select stations. The Common Ticketing System, where a commuter can use CMRL's smart cards in buses too, has not been implemented yet.



## How can it increase passengers?

Gitakrishnan Ramadurai, professor at the IIT-Madras, says, "Firstly, commuters should have access to good footpaths that encourage them to walk to stations or authorities could ensure there are adequate numbers of bicycles at all stations. Also, all buses must stop at the respective station in each area so that commuters can easily switch between various modes of transport." Activists say that unless the fares are reduced at least by another 10%, there may not be an increase in the number of passengers. V. Subramani of the Traffic and Transportation Forum says, "Currently, trip cards offer about a 20% discount, but they have to provide another 10% or give unlimited number of trips for a fixed amount per week or month. They could also offer some concessions to senior citizens and students." CMRL officials say they have been taking steps to improve last-mile connectivity at all 32 stations.


## What next?

The focus has shifted to finishing the construction of Phase I's extension project, which when completed next year will link the northern areas of the city – Wimco Nagar and Tondiarpet – to the network. It also plans to start the mammoth 119 km Phase II later this year, as it has received substantial funding. While this project looks promising as it aims to connect all major areas of the city and its suburbs, it is crucial that it is executed without inordinate delays.

SUNITHA SEKAR

## DHAKA

# Bangladesh's war on drugs, far from over

 In Teknaf, about 100 drug traffickers gave themselves up at a rare ceremony that played out at a local school on February 16. The coastal town that borders Myanmar rose to infamy as a hub of yaba trade.

The surrender of traffickers, brokered by the government, is the latest effort in Bangladesh's crackdown on drugs. About 300 people have died in the so-called crossfires and 25,000 others have been arrested since the government started its nationwide anti-drug raids in May 2018.

The crackdown came after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a speech pledging to curb drug problems. Many likened it to the Philippines's controversial war on drugs that has triggered criticism from rights groups.

Security forces separately claimed that the deaths were a result of gun violence during anti-drug operations. The deaths occurred in clashes either between drug dealers and law enforcement officials, or between rival gangs. However, some relatives of the dead claim that the victims were taken from their homes by law-enforcement officers and executed.

The surrender by traffickers on February 16 emerged as a major symbol. The traffickers submitted 30 kg of yaba tablets and 30 weapons in exchange for flowers in a show of cooperation.

## Most popular stimulant

Bangladesh recorded 9,069 narcotics cases in January, accounting for 52% of all police cases, according to the latest government data. Some seven million people use drugs in Bangladesh, with yaba being the most popular stimulant, according to the Department of Narcotics Control. Security forces seized a record 53 million yaba pills in 2018.

Inspector-General of Police Mohammad Javed Patwary vowed to expand the initiative to every district as Bangladesh's drug war appears far from over. "All forms of legal support will be provided to those who have turned themselves in to the police. We will try to complete their cases within a short time," Mr. Patwary said in the presence of his boss, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, during the surrender.

Mr. Patwary pledged to free Bangladesh from the scourge of illicit drugs and ordered his deputies to continue anti-drug operations against the banned

methamphetamine-based substance. "This formal surrender is part of the government's ongoing war against drugs," said Mr. Khan at the programme. "Those who



**A peaceful surrender by about 100 traffickers notwithstanding, the country continues to face questions on its approach to solving the drug menace**

surrendered would be given a second chance to live a normal life. Those who haven't yet will face dire consequences," Mr. Khan said.

Not everyone is convinced. "The government has been talking about steps to stop drug abuse over the last 12 years, but has failed to bring it down. What you're seeing in the name of yaba traffickers' surrender is a farce," said Khandaker Mosharrif Hossain, a senior leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, an Opposition group that opted out of parliament.

Jatiya Party's Fakhru Imam, a member of the Opposition camp in Parliament, also raised questions over the involvement of former Awami League MP Abdur Rahman in the government's efforts to prevent drug peddling. Mr. Rahman, popularly known as Bodi, reportedly tops a government list of drug lords, wielding huge influence over the yaba route from Myanmar's border areas to Teknaf in southeastern Bangladesh.

Mr. Rahman denies any connection to illicit drug trade. Amid a public outcry over his alleged links to yaba trade, the Awami League handpicked his wife Shahin Akhtar as the candidate for the December election. After winning the polls, Ms. Akhtar and her husband vowed to fight yaba trade in the tourist district of Cox's Bazar and asked the traffickers to surrender.


The ceremonial surrender by the traffickers does not end Bangladesh's struggle to contain drug problems. In parallel, the killings of offenders in anti-narcotics raids are continuing. More deaths in "gun violence" have been reported from different districts since the surrender. That means Bangladesh will face further questions over its handling of drug lords as the killings violate the offenders' right to life and a fair trial.



**Arun Devnath** is a journalist based in Dhaka

## COLOMBO

# Sri Lanka's unanswered human rights questions

 It is that time of the year when Sri Lanka's war-hit north and east come under sharper focus. The 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council will commence on February 25 and go on till March 22 in Geneva.

A "core group" on Sri Lanka, comprising Canada, Germany, Macedonia, Montenegro and the U.K., is expected to present a resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka. The group will continue to work in partnership with Sri Lanka, in a bid to take forward the joint resolution that Sri Lanka co-sponsored in 2015. In 2017, Sri Lanka obtained a two-year extension to implement it. The upcoming resolution essentially ensures continuing international oversight.

While the current government takes pride in setting off some significant initiatives to fulfil its commitments, its critics see them as 'merely checking the boxes' to please the international community.

Meanwhile, there is some buzz around the government constituting a Truth and Justice Commission – reportedly mooted by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in the Cabinet – but there is little clarity on the political consensus to establish it.

The question of accountability for the Sri Lankan state's war-time excesses has remained a touchy issue for southern leaders, as many in their constituencies hail soldiers as war-heroes, and subjecting them to any scrutiny is a political risk. Conversely, the aversion among southern leaders to any truth-seeking mechanism puts off Tamil campaigners, desperately seeking a resolution of burning questions, be it on the truth about a missing relative or the mystery surrounding the whereabouts of a relative they saw surrender to the Army.

## Time to forget the past?

When Mr. Wickremesinghe, during his recent visit to the north, said it was time to forget the past and forgive those who committed "mistakes" and move ahead towards reconciliation, it didn't go down well with many in the north or south. All the same, his development drive is witnessing some belated, but welcome momentum.

He oversaw the \$45 million-project around the Kankesanthurai harbour, supported by India, and spoke of developing it into a commercial port to help build an economic hub around it. The government yet again announced its plan to upgrade Palaly airport in Jaffna into an international airport,



**Though the current government has overseen some initiatives to address the UN's concerns, critics see the efforts as merely checking the boxes**

with direct flights to India, Australia, Japan, Europe and West Asian countries. Following his visit, Mr. Wickremesinghe instructed Minister for Transport and Civil Aviation Arjuna Ranatunga to commence development work on it.

Meanwhile, the Finance Ministry and the Central Bank are focussed on addressing the widely-prevalent household debt problem, pressuring thousands. Caused mostly by exploitative microcredit by way of expensive loans, indebtedness has emerged as a key post-war issue.

From former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's time, it was the gap between massive infrastructure development and people's fundamental bread and butter issues that led them to predatory credit. The roads and electricity that Mr. Rajapaksa built did little to address poverty and the requirements of a community ravaged and dispossessed by a three-decade war. That, along with the present administration's insufficient push, has left residents of the north and east in a dire economic situation. Nearly 10 years may have passed since the war ended, but there is little evidence in people's lives showing any progress in that time.

Even matters as basic as housing for the war-displaced have seen inordinate delays. After a controversial project for prefabricated steel houses was rejected by the community, activists and the Tamil political leadership, the government is yet to initiate an alternative scheme, despite the Cabinet approving the construction of 25,000 brick houses in the northeast almost eight months ago.

The war-affected community's basic needs have awaited attention and action for a decade. Like in India, it is election year in Sri Lanka. Politicians should not wait until they can make another poll promise.



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