

How states illegally rejected land claims

Applications were summarily rejected by forest guards instead of forest rights committees and the decisions were not communicated to the claimants

NIHAR GOKHALE

Breaking the law isn't something one is usually proud of. But for Devi Lal, a resident of a forest village in southern Rajasthan, a court summons for encroaching on forest land in 2002 is a prized possession.

A quiet, tall man dressed in a dhoti, kurta and a colourful turban, the 64-year-old from an indigenous community called Bhils, proudly showed off the terse order—neatly laminated and stored in a bag—that demanded his presence before a forest official's court, where he would stand trial. Since the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was introduced in 2006, these summons became evidence that Lal had lived on the land in question before that, and became vital evidence to support his claim under the Act.

Nearly three years after he and 60 others in the villages of Rawathbata block applied for land titles, the applications were rejected in 2015. They do not know why; they were never informed of the rejection, a violation of the FRA, which says that decisions to reject or modify claims have to be communicated to the claimant in person, so that they have the opportunity to appeal the rejection within 60 days.

Such government violations of the law are common not just in Rajasthan but nationwide, as 1.9 million families of indigenous people—roughly 9.5 million people at five persons per family—are at risk of being evicted from their homes in forests. Such violations include, as this story will detail, allowing forest guards to illegally decide claims and demands made by governments, and asking tribals to furnish satellite imagery and non-existent 75-year-old records.

On February 13, the Supreme Court ordered that all households whose rights claims under FRA have been rejected should be evicted from forests by July 2019. After widespread criticism and protests, and a petition by the central government, the Supreme Court temporarily stayed its own order on February 28, 2019.

The 21 states involved must now explain to the Supreme Court how the FRA claims were accepted or rejected.

The petitioners before the Supreme Court, namely Wildlife First, Nature Conservation Society and Tiger Research and Conservation Trust, have argued that rejection of an FRA claim implies that the claimant is an encroacher and not a *bonafide* forest dweller. But growing evidence from the ground indicates that a large number of rejections were illegal and arbitrary.

The Forest Rights Act recognises individual rights of tribals over forest areas, if they can prove occupation before

December 13, 2005. The claims over forest lands are processed through a three-tier system: the *gram sabha*, where the claims are first submitted; a sub-divisional-level committee (SDLC) headed by a government officer; and a district-level committee (DLC) headed by the district collector.

Every forest claim must be accompanied by two documents as evidence, which could be: documents issued by the government; research studies; statement by elders; and even physical evidence of possession or use of land, such as wells.

Here is how the claims are processed: Accompanied by officials from the revenue and forest departments, the *gram sabha's* forest rights committee verifies claims by a field visit, collecting additional evidence, if needed, from claimants and witnesses. The committee then submits its opinion to the *gram sabha*, which approves or rejects the claim. Approved claims are forwarded to the SDLC for review. If approved, the claim is forwarded to the DLC, which is the final legal authority to approve or reject claims.

Appeals against rejection follow the same order. If the *gram sabha* or SDLC rejects a claim, the claimant can appeal to the SDLC or DLC.

The law says that claimants must be granted a personal hearing before claims are rejected, and they must be given—in writing—the reasons for rejection. But the process does not work as it should.

As of November 2018, nearly half (46 per cent) of all FRA claims had been rejected nationwide, according to the latest monthly progress report prepared by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. *Adivasis* (forest dwellers), experts—and, increasingly, the courts and the government—have not been convinced that every other forest dweller in India is actually a post-2005 encroacher. In Jharkhand, decisions on forest rights claims are often influenced by the local forest department, said Father George Monipally, a priest based in Latehar in central Jharkhand, who has worked on forest rights in the state. "Only the village-level bodies are empowered to verify claims but the committees often take decisions based on statements by forest officials," he said.

In Chhattisgarh—where forests cover 41 per cent of the area and a third of the 25 million population belongs to a scheduled tribe—the government illegally included *patwaris* (village-level revenue officials) and forest guards in the forests rights committees, said Tushar Dash, an



independent forest rights researcher in Odisha. "More than half the rejections in Chhattisgarh were found to be at the *gram sabha* level," said Dash. "But many of these rejections were decided by forest guards or *patwaris*."

One case documented by Land Conflict Watch, an independent network of researchers and journalists documenting land conflicts across India, revealed how a forest-rights claim was rejected by a range forest officer on the grounds that the claimant did not live on the land before 2005. Range officers are not authorised to reject FRA claims; they can only provide recommendations to claims committees. Although the FRA rules list numerous kinds of admissible evidence, including statements from village elders, permanent improvements to land such as bunds, and genealogy tracing ancestry to persons mentioned in old land records, states often make additional demands that are not a part of the Act.

In Gujarat, for instance, a third of the 118,000 claims filed until 2008 were rejected by SDLCs due to "insufficient evidence", according to a Gujarat High Court judgment delivered in 2013. The government insisted on records of the forest department as documentary evidence, and demanded satellite imagery to be sourced only from a Gandhinagar institute, according to the petitioners in the High Court case, the Gujarat-based non-

profit, Action Research in Community Health and Development.

The Gujarat government also decided to process only those claims that could prove possession before 1980, contrary to the law. In its 2013 verdict, the Gujarat High Court struck down these requirements, observing that "to demand from such a class of citizens strict proof as regards their rights would frustrate the very object with which the Act has been enacted."

The problem of evidence is worse for "other traditional forest dwellers"—those who do not belong to a scheduled tribe—who need to prove "continuous existence" in the forest for 75 years. "Karnataka put in a rule that said even the documents submitted as proof have to be 75 years old," said a former consultant to India's ministry of tribal affairs, speaking on condition of anonymity. "How is that even possible? Would that document not turn into dust?"

As of November 2018, the latest month for which data are available, Chhattisgarh had rejected most individual claims (455,000), followed by Madhya Pradesh (350,000) and Maharashtra (120,000).

The missing files
Lal and others of the Rawathbata block were never informed that their claims were rejected or why. The tribals filed the claims between 2010 and

2012 to their homes and agricultural fields, no more than a hectare each—size of two football fields. That was the last they saw of their claim papers. They did not get a receipt or any acknowledgement that the file was received, and had not kept a copy for themselves. Not having heard about their claims, the farmers prepared fresh applications in 2017, but when they tried to submit these

to the *gram panchayat*, they were told that their earlier claims were rejected by the SDLC, so they could not file a new claim.

That is when the farmers began filing applications under the Right To Information (RTI) Act to track their claims. The documents they sourced through RTI showed that the *gram panchayat* had in 2012 sought records from the forest department for each of the claims, and a letter from the department had acknowledged that the request was under process. There is also an undated document from the SDLC listing 61 rejected claims, including all applicants from two hamlets, Amba and Bevda ki Khal.

The SDLC's actions violate several of FRA provisions, such as Section 12 (A) (3) that says a rejection should be conveyed "in person" so that the claimant can file an appeal within 60 days; and Section 12 (A) (10) that says the reasons for rejection must be recorded in writing.

Instead, the RTI responses suggest that even a forest rights

committee was not formed in the village when the claims were rejected. "We went to the houses of the FRC [forest rights committee] members," said Lal. "None of them had any idea that they were on any such committee. Some of them work in the *panchayat* and were simply made members."

Amit Kumar Verma, the sub-divisional magistrate and head of the SDLC, said he was not aware of the case of Lal or the others, as he had taken charge only in late 2018. But, Verma said, his office was willing to rectify any errors, if "brought to my notice" by the applicants.

According to the files that Verma examined before this reporter, the SDLC had dispatched the orders rejecting the 61 claims on June 4, 2015. However, copies of the orders or the reasons for rejecting them were not available in Verma's office. Verma said all the orders and files had been dispatched to the office of the *panchayat samiti*, an intermediate office between the sub-divisional magistrate and the *panchayats*. At the *samiti* office, the block development officer, ML Sharma, said he, too, had taken charge only recently, but according to his office records, the forest rights rejection orders had been forwarded to the Bhainsrorgarh village *panchayat*—which governs the hamlets where Lal and other claimants live—to be distributed to the claimants. At the *panchayat*, an official who did not wish to be identified

went through all forest-rights records, but found no record of FRA rejections.

In the *panchayat samiti* and *gram panchayat* offices, officials gave reasons for rejecting the claims but on condition of anonymity. The reasons varied: Some said the land was unsurveyed, others said the claims were rejected because the hamlets Amba and Bevda ki Khal fall within the nearby Jawahar Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary.

None of these are valid reasons under the law. The claimants have indeed received encroachment notices from the forest department, but if a wildlife sanctuary is involved, the FRA states that the relocation of forest dwellers is only the last resort; rights must first be settled.

In a plea filed before the Supreme Court on February 27, the tribal affairs ministry argued that the court's order should be modified to stall evictions until all states had reviewed the rejections. The affidavit said the ministry was aware of concerns around rejections, including a high rate of rejections and "non-communication of rejection order (sic)".

Back in Chittorgarh, such a modification might provide not just relief from eviction but perhaps also help locate the documents the Bhils filed seven years ago to claim their land rights.

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There goes a strange, helpless animal

More predators have come together to cause havoc in perpetually troubled Gurugram

ANJULI BHARGAVA

Urban life in Gurugram has very little to offer its citizens. Young children are routinely on inhalers, water and electricity is at a premium especially in colonies under the Haryana Urban Development Authority administration, outbreak of viral diseases act as a natural check on its growing numbers by claiming lives every season, many internal roads are re-laid after every monsoon and no matter how wide the arterial roads become (there have been visible improvements in this regard), they appear inadequate and unreasonably clogged with traffic.

In fact, every time I head from the airport towards soul-less Gurugram with its ever increasing steel, chrome and glass facades and its dust-ridden, smoggy air that colours everything in hues of grey and brown, I can't shake off the feeling that the world is truly coming to a conclusive end.

That's why I was horrified to learn that the Haryana administration took a collective step to make things worse. A bill (amendment to the Punjab Land Preservation Act) appears to have been passed without much ado by the upper house of the state Assembly to allow real estate developers to encroach and destroy whatever little forest cover the state can lay claim to.

The Aravalli hills — already encroached upon and reduced to their knees — are to give way to more hazardous, ugly buildings filled with more disgruntled people. The move is likely to worsen the region's ground water situation and add to its urban chaos.



Only 3.59 per cent of Haryana is under forest cover

Politicians and real estate developers will profit and watch in glee.

As I delved deeper, I learnt that Haryana is a state that has one of the lowest forest covers as it is. Only 3.59 per cent of Haryana is under forest cover, which partially explains why it looks so depressing (take a long drive on any of its highways and you'll know what I mean). All its neighbours — Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and even Rajasthan — score better on green cover. Punjab in fact recently expanded the area that falls under the purview of the Act. The sceptic in me makes me feel it must have its reasons that are less than ethical, but hey, I will let it go. Cannot be cynical about everyone all the time!

This is of course not the first time

shoulder and the bill was passed expeditiously and rather surreptitiously.

At the citizen's meet with the state's forest minister Rao Narbir Singh predictably claimed to be "helpless" at his colleague's intransigence over the matter (I have always found it charming how helpless our ministers are as a cohesive group). The gentleman offered no cogent explanations as to why the Act had to be amended in line with the interests of the real estate industry and much against the protests of the residents, barring the fact that it was rather outdated. He actually said that amendment was desirable since the Act dated as far back as 1900!

For some reason, Haryana's politicians in general appear to dislike greenery and forests. A few months ago, I remember they were hell bent on building a road through Gurugram's bio-diversity park — one of the few havens offering respite to the citizenry from its grotesque malls and a place where some culture is inserted in a floating and lost population with dance and musical performances at its amphitheater. It's also one of the few places for the residents to go on a morning walk or run without being run over by SUVs and *Mad Max* inspired bus drivers. The proposal was eventually dropped but I'd be surprised if we have heard the last of it.

In a lighter vein, let me end here by saying that the Haryana politician is a pretty strange animal who doesn't fully comprehend the value of forest cover since he already roams free. He's a gold-guzzling predator and we the hapless prey.

IMO



INDIA-PAKISTAN TENSIONS
Minhaz Merchant@MinhazMerchant
Italian journalist in #Balakot reports that local eyewitnesses confirm dozens of #Jaishemohammad terrorists were killed in pre-dawn #IAF air strike on Feb 26. Debunks laughable Pak media reports (supported by Indian proxies) that only trees were destroyed

Nitin A. Gokhale@nitingokhale
Okay, so all those who despair that India is on the backfoot for not presenting 'proof' about the impact or casualties in the air strike at Balakot, patience is the key. It will come sooner than later. Hold the horses.

Sadanand Dhume@dhome
This clarification by "top government sources" in India may inadvertently deepen doubts about the efficacy of the Balakot strike. We're now supposed to believe that no JeM buildings were destroyed because Indian smart bombs are too smart to blow up things

Saikat Datta@saikatd
*BJP President invoking air strikes in election rally
*Yeddyurappa says air strikes will help BJP win in elections
*International media questioning casualty claims #Balakot strike.
*Gol is busy with launching apps.

Terrible optics for India's legitimate case against terror
Arun Jaitley@arunjaitley
The Cross Border terror attack in Pulwama was a reality. The Balakot Operation was India's Anti-Terror preemptive strike to defend its Sovereignty.

TRUMP'S FAILED NORTH KOREA TALKS
Kyle Griffin@kylegriffin1
Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is in Vietnam at the same time that Trump and Kim Jong Un are in Vietnam for their summit. Coincidentally, Lavrov says the U.S. asked for Moscow's advice in dealing with North Korea before the summit.

Aaron Rupal@atrupal
Trump talks about his summit with Kim like it was a date: "There's a warmth that we have & I hope that stays. I think it will... the relationship was very warm & when we walked away, it was a very friendly walk... we like each other. Good relationship."

Will Ripley@willripleyCNN
Not only did Trump walk out of talks, he also snubbed the final meal he was supposed to share w/ Kim. The table was set for what should've been a friendly working lunch. Instead, the snow fish & pie turned cold & the table sat empty — a symbol of the wasted opportunity in Hanoi.

IMRAN KHAN RECOMMENDED FOR NOBEL PEACE PRIZE
Vasudha Venugopal@vasudha_ET
Pak I&B minister Chaudhry Fawad Hussain submits a resolution in Pak assembly demanding Imran Khan be given Nobel Peace Prize for his "contribution towards peace in the region."

Jeremy McLellan@JeremyMcLellan
Can we take Obama's Nobel Peace Prize away and give it to Imran Khan?

Opinion

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 2019

AS A NATION, we tend to draw a distinction between external security and internal security. For some reason, the former is permitted to wear the 'national' cloak but the latter is denied that privilege.

A close analysis will reveal that external security and internal security cannot be placed in two watertight compartments. The condition of one has an impact on the other. I shall, however, just flag the issue for the present.

As I write this essay on the Friday before you read it, India finds itself in a war-like situation, although no one believes that there will be a full-scale war with Pakistan. We were told that Pakistan lost an F-16 aircraft and perhaps the pilot too. The government also claimed that over 300 jihadis had been killed. I am prepared to believe my government, but the world will not suspend its disbelief. India lost a MIG-21, the pilot was taken prisoner by Pakistan and later released. From the official statements, it seems that both sides are posturing and neither really wants a war.

No need for war

India does not need to get embroiled in a war. Unlike 1971, there is no pressure on India to go to the help of a restive province of Pakistan. Unlike Kargil, there is no attempt by Pakistan to grab Indian territory. Both countries know that the trigger for the present situation was the terrorist attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama on February 14, 2019.

We therefore come back to the core issue of terror. Terrorism has grave consequences for the internal security of any country. India is no exception.

Let me list the issues that affect India's internal security:

1. Terrorism
2. Infiltration of militants
3. Naxalism or Maoism
4. Communal/religious conflict
5. Secession or separatism
6. Reservation agitations
7. Farmers' agitations
8. Inter-state water or boundary disputes
9. Language conflict

Terrorism top threat

I wrote down the issues as they came to my mind without intending any order of importance, but the order in which they appear above reflects, more or less, the gravity of the issues. The order is also an evaluation of the government's relative success or failure in containing/resolving the issues. For instance, in 1965, the status of Hindi became an explosive issue in Tamil Nadu and the embers have not died down till this date, but, today, there is no serious language conflict anywhere in the country.

Terrorism (in Jammu and Kashmir) tops the list of issues that threaten India's internal security. Only a few years ago it was Naxalism or Maoism; that has been taxed to a large extent, if not eliminated. In the 1980s, it was separatism in Punjab but that scourge has been practically wiped out in that state.

There are valuable lessons to be learnt from the success in eliminating separatism (in Punjab) and containing Maoism (in the Naxal-affected states, including West Bengal). The lessons are (1) firmness and maximum force in dealing with the adversary and (2) fairness and a conciliatory approach in dealing with the

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



Muffled sounds of war drums



People in Jammu celebrate India's strike on Jaish-e-Mohammed's camps in Pakistan

rest of the people.

Lessons now learnt

It has always been a puzzle to me why the Central government refuses to apply the lessons learned elsewhere to J&K. I suspect it is because of a deep-rooted animosity toward Pakistan. As A B Vajpayee recognised and as Dr Manmohan Singh once said, 'we can change our friends but we cannot change our neighbours'.

The BJP government has shifted the focus from terrorism to Pakistan and asks the people for unquestioning support. That will not pass muster after a few days and pertinent questions will be asked. By way of contrast, not a day passes without the Prime Minister making an unabashed political speech relentlessly attacking the Congress and the Opposition!

As far as J&K is concerned, unless the

young men into the arms of militant groups (126 in 2017 and 164 up to October 2018). The policy is a colossal flop, it has resulted in more infiltration and more casualties.

Pakistan is a misguided, often malevolent, neighbour. Nevertheless it is a neighbouring country. As A B Vajpayee recognised and as Dr Manmohan Singh once said, 'we can change our friends but we cannot change our neighbours'.

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government addressed the fundamental question of alienation in the Kashmir Valley, the threat of terrorist acts in J&K will not be overcome. It will eventually acquire a larger dimension and become a national security issue.

That may be the way the BJP wants the situation to develop so that it can claim that Pakistan was 'defeated'. That's how the script is being written, but even carefully written scripts can throw up nasty endings. There was Kargil, there was Operation Parakram, there was the India Shining campaign, and there was A B Vajpayee. In the end the wisdom of the people handed the charge of the new government to another party and its allies.



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INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

The Pulwama edge

India's response at Balakot to the Pulwama attack may have given Prime Minister Narendra Modi an edge in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls. On social media, some known Modi baiters suddenly changed their tune. A Gujarati newspaper critical of Modi for over a decade did a U-turn. After Pulwama, there was a front-page cartoon of Modi with the headline '56-inch Cowardice'; after Balakot, the headline was '56-inch Valour'. A senior columnist with a Sangh background, who has frequently accused the PM and BJP president Amit Shah of sinking the country, wrote that heads of the Opposition will roll in the 'Third battle of Panipat' and that Modi could emerge with 300 seats. The Opposition fears that Modi has stolen the narrative and issued a statement urging the PM not to politicise the action against Pakistan. The timing of events certainly is disadvantageous for the Congress. Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was to have addressed her first press conference on the same day as the suicide attack. She discreetly shelved the conference after observing a minute's silence for the dead men. The Congress postponed its Working Committee meeting in Gujarat following India's strike against Pakistan, and Jairam Ramesh was asked to redraft some of the party's resolutions, keeping in mind the stress on national security. The PM's decision to make Sushma Swaraj brief opposition leaders was seen as Modi putting himself on a pedestal above everyone else. But in politics the situation can change overnight, and elections are yet to be declared.

BJP's Malik problem

J&K Governor Satya Pal Malik does not conduct himself on the lines of a traditional head of state. The office is ceremonial and he is not expected to express himself beyond platitudes and prepared texts. But Malik is not a seasoned bureaucrat, nor does he belong to the Sangh tradition of not speaking out of turn. Malik, who was once Chaudhary Charan Singh's Man Friday, is from the Lok Dal/socialist school of politics, with an opinion on most topics and always ready to express himself freely. He may be a newsman's delight, but the BJP's Kashmir think-tank is furious with him for frequently giving interviews which embarrass the government. After the attack on the CRPF convoy, Malik was quick to comment that there should be serious introspection on security lapses. He questioned the need for such a long CRPF convoy and asked why there were not adequate

security checks on the highway. Actually, Malik has little role in the administration of the state unlike predecessor N N Vohra. Chief secretary BVR Subrahmanyam is in regular touch with the PMO and runs the show, while the governor's security adviser, K Vijay Kumar, liaises directly with NSA Ajit Doval.

No questions, please

That reports in the international press generally downplayed India's claims of major destruction at a Jaish training camp in Balakot, reflects the Indian government's poor media management. At the Indian press conferences on the first two days after the strike, a junior MEA officer simply read out a statement, no questions were permitted. The Pakistan army, on the other hand, responded to all queries put by scribes at briefings and facilitated important foreign news agencies such as the BBC and Al Jazeera to visit Balakot and get a first-hand look, perhaps after damage control had already been done. In contrast, foreign correspondents in India can no longer visit J&K without prior permission and such sanction is rarely given.

Low-key festivities

A K Sharma was one of the officers transferred from the CBI after the war between former CBI director Alok Verma and his deputy Rakesh Asthana blew up. Sharma, who was close to Verma and had the powerful position of joint director, CBI, and was coordinating with the Centre, is now in a backwater posting as Additional DG, CRPF. The low-key reception for his son's wedding in Ahmedabad recently, in a modest hotel, brought back memories of the grand wedding ceremony of Asthana's daughter at the Laxmi Vilas Palace in Vadodara, attended by the who's who of Gujarat, three years ago. Among the few recognisable guests at Sharma's function were Amit Shah's son Jay Shah and Rajya Sabha MP Parimal Nathwani.

Setting an example?

At an interaction with young heads from Delhi's business community last month, President Ram Nath Kovind deplored that businesspersons did not strive to ensure ethics and transparency in business dealings. He singled out one company for praise for spanning the trust deficit between consumer and producer, Patanjali. Kovind felt this was why Baba Ramdev's company was doing so well. Several delegates were taken aback at the controversial yoga teacher receiving special praise.

Elongated filler

Thanks to the World Cup which is scheduled for later this year, the build-up to IPL 2019 has been a little low-key

RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty



THE BUILD-UP TO IPL 2019 has been a little low-key. The auction was relatively low-profile and with the tournament only about three weeks away, all we have so far are a couple of promos from the official broadcaster—the Rishabh Pant-MS Dhoni challenge and the Jasprit Bumrah-Virat Kohli challenge.

This is understandable in a World Cup year. The quadrennial 50-over showpiece is the 'holy grail' for cricketers and fans with regards to limited-overs cricket. So IPL this time is basically an elongated filler between the ongoing limited-overs home series against Australia and the big event that commences on May 30. Kohli has already made it clear that IPL performances will have "no influence" on the World Cup team selection. The Indian cricket hierarchy is more concerned about managing the workload of

the World Cup probables during the IPL and the cricket board might even issue a directive to the franchises in this regard. Of course, the IPL will account for a lot of column inches, media-wise, once it starts, but even T20 diehards will probably watch this edition of the T20 league through the World Cup prism.

It's heartening that the Indian team has set its priorities right and the credit goes to the captain. On the eve of the first T20 international against Australia at Vizag, Kohli, in fact, had advised his teammates not to get into the "bad habits" that the IPL can create.

"All the people who are going to be part of the World Cup squad, they have to make sure that their games don't go too much away from the one-day mould of things. That means we will have to be very wary of the bad habits that might creep in during IPL. We need 15 people who are confident and mentally happy about where their game is at that particular moment," the skipper had said.

He added: "That will take a consistent effort from all the players during the IPL to keep a check on



Indian cricket team's captain Virat Kohli

that. The moment we enter the nets and create bad habits, and you lose momentum, you lose batting form, it's very difficult to get it back in a tournament like the World Cup. So from that point of view, everyone will have to protect that mindset and be aligned towards what the team requires of them."

Cricketers at times fall prey to the demands of the shortest form, the innovations required, at the expense of their natural game. KL Rahul has started to get back into the groove. A serious contender for the World Cup side, he shouldn't allow T20s to affect his game. A

getter—659 runs from 14 matches at a strike-rate of 158.41. He thrived on a high percentage of aerial shots. But in the 11 Tests since, he has scored 447 runs at an average of 24.83, which is well below his career average of 35.27. Rahul played only three ODIs after last year's IPL. There also, he struggled to get going, scoring just 69 runs. His defensive game apparently has become a little loose. Rahul has started to get back into the groove. A serious contender for the World Cup side, he shouldn't allow T20s to affect his game. A

World Cup in the UK will test the technique of top-order batsmen.

Kohli is refreshingly candid when he speaks about issues related to Indian cricket. His love for Test cricket, the purest format of the game, has trickled down to his teammates. Everybody in the Indian team, even kids like Shubman Gill, puts the longest form on a pedestal. As former South Africa captain Graeme Smith had said a few months back, "Kohli's love for Test cricket will keep the format relevant."

Coming back to the IPL, there's a school of thought that the league has worked wonders in terms of throwing up new talent. Wrong. Of course, the IPL provides valuable experience to young players, as they rub shoulders with top international players and get accustomed to pressure situations. But the fact remains that the majority of Indian team players, including the likes of Jasprit Bumrah, are basically products of domestic first-class cricket.

From that perspective, Kohli's comment was very important. The India captain actually spoke about accumulating the positives that the IPL offers without changing one's game to make it IPL-specific. When a player develops a particular habit, it becomes very difficult to get rid of it. Shots that wow in T20 cricket usually look stupid in the longer formats.

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12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

It is believed that when nation feels under siege, party in power benefits.

But, at best, the BJP's voteshare will go up to maybe 35-36 per cent. The BJP recognises this. They are giving up seats to accommodate allies"



WHY RUCHIR SHARMA

Ruchir Sharma has been travelling across India with a group of journalists and politicians for over two decades, documenting electoral politics, through interviews with top leaders such as Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, and conversations with voters. His new book, *Democracy on the Road*, is an outcome of these

travels and offers insights into how — since Indira Gandhi's time — issues of caste, economics, development, and corruption have influenced politics on the ground. A global investor and columnist, Sharma has previously authored *The Rise and Fall of Nations: Forces of Change in a Post-Crisis World* in 2016 and *Breakout Nations* in 2012



"In 2007, I met Rahul Gandhi in Moradabad. In the two-hour meet, we got a 1 hour-59 minute speech on caste politics in UP. I found it very disorienting... There has possibly been a change in him in the last few years"

VANDITA MISHRA: In the last chapter of your book, you say that anti-incumbency is a heartening phenomenon because it doesn't allow anybody in power to get too comfortable. Secondly, throughout the book one gets the sense that you are looking for that grand reformer, but in the end you say that there are no grand reformers, and that hope lies in smaller changes in states, rather than at the Centre. Could you place these two conclusions in the context of the situation we are in now, in what could be India's first national security election?

Will this be the first national security election? I am not sure because even the 1999 election was fought in the backdrop of the Kargil war, and you can argue how much that influenced it.

It is generally believed that whichever party or government is in power tends to benefit when the nation feels it is under siege. But even assuming that the BJP benefits a lot from it, assuming that their voteshare goes up a bit... No national party in India has ever got more than 50 per cent of the votes, going back to the first election, including the Congress, given that there was one national party in all those decades. Even in this election, at best, the BJP's voteshare will go up to maybe 35-36 per cent from 31 per cent — assuming that there is a surge in its favour because of this nationalist kind of movement. The BJP recognises that even during the entire movement, as we have seen in the past few weeks, the headlines are the same, the small changes... They have given up seats in Bihar, they have given up seats in Maharashtra, to accommodate alliance partners. So, for me, that's the journey as far as India is concerned. This is still a continent like the European Union, it is not a country. There is no one narrative. So even though to us it appears that national security is the narrative, I don't know how much of that storyline carries into the hinterland.

VANDITA MISHRA: For the bulk of the book you talk about anti-incumbency as a symptom of the 'broken State', but towards the end you actually hold it up as the most heartening feature of Indian democracy.

A year ago, there was so much talk in India that we were heading towards a one-party hegemony. That the BJP had the entire organisational strength, the muscle power, the money power, and so it seemed as if there was nothing that could beat the party. That's what the conventional wisdom was a year ago. Since then, the election results (in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh), and the fact that so many coalitions have come together in the states, are things that have happened despite the odds.

In this country, whosoever is in power, the entire business community favours over that party, the entire money power seems to be with that party. Despite these very obvious advantages, the underdog, with much less money, and a weaker organisation, is able to win. The conversation in Delhi is as if the business people are able to buy out whichever politician is in power, they are able to manipulate stuff. Despite that, the fact that the voter at the end of the day is able to toss out the incumbent... that is heartening.

VANDITA MISHRA: The other conclusion, which is less heartening, is your giving up on the search for the grand reformer. You talk in this context about Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Chandrababu Naidu and others. You speak about the time when you were travelling with Naidu in his hi-tech van. In his van, he is a reformer. When he goes up to the roof to address the people, he is a populist. By the end of the book, you give up on the idea.

I grew up in India in the 1980s and '90s, with a sort of naive feeling as a kid that we have got political freedom so early, then why don't we get economic freedom? That is the basic question that would haunt me. I grew up in the era where everyone celebrated Margaret Thatcher (former UK PM), Ronald Reagan (former US president) and others. I remember having my first extensive meeting with Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi in 2002. I was 28 then. I had the hope that I could go and speak to Sonia Gandhi and tell her what the world is doing, the reforms that are taking place. I thought she was relatively new in Indian politics and that she would understand. After an hour, I walked out crestfallen. I felt I was on a completely different wavelength.

In 2004, Naidu lost. I quote in the book what he told us after he won the election in 1999 — "This is a message to the world. People are sceptical that reforms don't take place anywhere. But, in India, free market economy can actually work." There was a moment of hope. But then onwards, the re-

'Biggest sign of statist control is that no businessman will speak out against govt. It's different in the US'

Global investor and author Ruchir Sharma says national security may not be the only narrative in Lok Sabha polls, believes hope for real reform lies in states, notes that development is only one of the factors that impacts polls, and says Oppn has understood alliance game



Ruchir Sharma with National Opinion Editor Vandita Mishra in *The Indian Express* newsroom. Gajendra Yadav

alisation kept on sinking in that in India maybe this is just not going to work.

When Narendra Modi got elected in 2014, I remember writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, which I look back with some embarrassment, that this is India's Reagan moment. They loved it in the West. My idea was that because he was talking of 'minimum government, maximum governance', he would go down that path. At the time, many were fed up with the UPA government's welfare schemes, which were being rolled out one after the other, with no focus on economic reforms. I was hopeful that Modi would actually do it (reform).

The biggest reform was demonetisation, which for me is the sort of policy that only a Communist nation makes. I was very upset with what happened. Now, at the end of Modi's term, it's back to one scheme after another.

VANDITA MISHRA: So what do you think went wrong? You were very impressed with the economic reforms Modi had undertaken in Gujarat.

I misunderstood it. It is very different to run a state and a country. At the state level, you can still talk to people and fix things. It's a project management kind of approach. You can put the right people in the right enterprises. At the national level, it is very difficult to do that. At the national level you have to devolve power; give as much power as possible to the states.

VANDITA MISHRA: Why do you not like Rahul Gandhi? In the book, you write about a two-hour meeting with him, where he speaks for 1 hour 59 minutes.

Saying 'I don't like him' is a strong statement. I talk about a 2007 meeting in Moradabad. We were a contingent of 20 people. We got a 1 hour-59 minute speech on caste politics in UP. I found it very disorienting. In 2010, when we met him in Bihar... after keeping the crowd waiting for four hours, he didn't even acknowledge us properly. Back then, I think, he felt that the 2009 victory was all about him. When we had subsequent interactions with him in 2012, he was still talking to us, rather than engaging with us. One of my favourite anecdotes is from 2012. We had a senior journalist from *The Financial Times* who asked him a question. He snapped back at her, saying how long have you been in India, how much do you understand India? She replied in Hindi that she had been here long enough, and even met his grandmother (Indira Gandhi) in Allahabad. She knew India very well. I did begin to see some easing up just before the 2014 general elec-

tions — he himself said that the 2014 election was the biggest learning for him. So there has possibly been a change in him in the last few years. I haven't had any extensive interaction with him since then.

VANDITA MISHRA: Priyanka Gandhi, on the other hand, seems to have made a wonderful first impression on you.

Yes, when we saw her in 2004 in Amethi and Rae Bareilly, the view then was that she is the one. That time there was still speculation about whether she would join politics. She made a real impression on the group in terms of her campaigning skills. Today, it is a different India. I don't know what difference she can make. Back then, it felt very different, and we were contrasting her with Rahul all the time. At the time, she could speak much better Hindi (than him), could connect with the people better. Now, we have to see it in terms of how Rahul does. He has changed his campaigning style. He has adopted the same Modi kind of shout-and-call, which is basically to say something and then wait for the crowd to respond.

SANDEEP SINGH: You spoke about the government's statist control. Can you elaborate?

The Central government today actually does not know how many schemes there are. I am told that at last count there were more than a 1,000 schemes — Central and Central government-assisted schemes. Even when it comes to schemes that the BJP and Modi criticised when they were in Opposition, like the MNREGA... Today, the allocation for those are up substantially.

Also, about privatisation. Even in the Vajpayee government we saw some privatisation. Today, I think privatisation in this country is a dead issue.

To me the biggest sign of statist control

in India is the fact that no businessperson will speak out against the government. In the US, if the business people do not like Donald Trump, they make it very apparent. Every CEO will tell you whether he or she is a Democrat or a Republican. In India, the fear of politicians is incredible. When you ask industrialists off the record why don't you tell the Prime Minister that this should be done, the response often is 'Mama hai kya (Do I want to die)?'. To me these are signs of very statist stuff... If you say anything against it (the government), the amount of opposition to that, the fear that they can come down on you like a ton of bricks, is very dominant today.

(When Modi was in Gujarat) I would hear that business people could actually approach him and get stuff done. I am not sure if that is happening today. I don't know if it is that one comment of 'suit-boot ki sarkar' (that has led to this), but I don't think the businessperson today feels that heard, as compared to what it was in Gujarat.

HARISH DAMODARAN: Vajpayee headed a coalition government and introduced big bang reforms. But you are saying that Modi hasn't done that, despite heading a majority government. Why is that?

As I document in the book, there are two things. One, there is no relationship in this country between coalition governments and reforms, and between coalition governments and growth. Indira Gandhi probably ran the most strong and stable government and was arguably the most statist in India's history.

Two, I think, context matters a lot. In 2011-12, when we got big bang reforms, India's growth rate had really slipped a lot. In India, I find, the best reforms only take place when the government has its back to the wall, for instance in 1991-92. I think one

of the biggest mistakes that this government made, and I think it happened more out of the incompetence of the Stats Department, was to accept the GDP data revisions in February 2015. It was early in their term and the GDP data revisions to me then looked totally ridiculous. By accepting it they began to think that the economy is doing a lot better than it was. Since then the narrative has been about how things are fine, without quite accepting what the reality is. To me it was one of the biggest mistakes. I think they are paying the price for it even today.

PRANAV MUKUL: During the 2014 election campaign, corruption was a big issue. Do you think this government has succeeded in living up to its promises? And, will it be an issue in the coming polls as well?

I think in India corruption is always an election issue. What I have documented is that we have seen a rise of some 'billionaires' in India. The ratio of good and bad billionaires has changed a bit — in favour of good billionaires. A lot of this has happened because the commodity boom went bust, the real estate sector went bust. Those are the sectors where a lot of the bad billionaires come from, compared to sectors such as technology. This has happened independently of the government.

At the top level, there is still a perception that corruption may have come down, but on the ground people will tell you that they don't feel the difference. So that is a reason that will continue to stoke some resentment and anti-incumbency.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: In your private conversations with industrialists, what are they saying about the present government?

There is generally a frustration that they wanted more. And, there is a fear factor which they don't like. So even if they are forced to say something in public, in private things have an effect on them in some way. There is certainly a dissonance that they have to live with.

MANOJ CG: Do you think the Congress and Rahul Gandhi are moving more and more towards the left of centre?

I always discount what people say when they are out of power. Left of centre, right of centre, I don't know, but in India everyone seems to be an incremental reformer when they come to power. In India, if you have to look at reforms, look at it state by state. That is where the real India story of reform is coming through. In the US, the number of (Indian) chief ministers who

land up, trying to sell their states as an investment destination... That is a big change.

VANDITA MISHRA: Has the gap between the city and the village shrunk in the past 25 years because of technology and migration?

Undoubtedly. As far as voting is concerned, caste tends to dominate. Yes, things have shrunk at some level. But caste is a reality and that reality hasn't changed in all these years of me covering elections.

VANDITA MISHRA: There is an interesting statistic that you mention in the book. You say that in 1988 there was no chief minister who was single, but by 2016 there were seven of them.

Everybody then was a family-based leader, and that was very much in sync with the Indian culture... By last year, we found that eight chief ministers were single or unattached, and the pioneer of this trend was possibly Jayalalithaa. Then there was Mayawati. There are different reasons for why this trend has come into play.

VANDITA MISHRA: Is this the Indian voter making a statement against dynasty?

It is. But I still feel that dynasty dominates in this country. There are three reasons for it. One is that there are leaders like Modi, (Yogi) Adityanath (UP CM), the RSS background people... These people are trying to make a point that we are single and so we cannot be corrupt. Then, there are leaders such as Mayawati who haven't made a statement about it. For them it was about the circumstances that they lived through, which had to do with a very patriarchal society, where they felt that they were fighting against a cabal of people. Also, politics is a 24/7 business. The distinction between personal and private is not there. It is unthinkable in America for you to have a meeting with a leader in their bedroom.

VANDITA MISHRA: The one strand you suggest that will play a major role in 2019, is alliance. PM Modi has referred to the Opposition's alliance as 'Mahamilavat'.

In 2014, when Modi won the election, at the peak of his wave, he got 31 per cent of the national vote. But the ratio between the number of seats he won and the number of votes he got was the highest in India's history — a 9 to 1 ratio. This was because the Opposition was so fragmented. Had the Opposition been a bit more united then, even at the peak of the Modi wave, he would not have got a majority. I think this time they have understood the game. The BJP is, therefore, sacrificing seats in many states to get its coalition politics correct.

SANDEEP SINGH: How has the BJP government performed on the economic front? Will it impact polls?

Development is, at best, one of the six factors that may matter. There's one telling statistic I quote in the book — there have been 27 instances in India's economic history when a state government has recorded a growth rate of 8 per cent or more over its five-year term. In 50 per cent of the instances, the state government has lost the elections. So development is, at best, a marginal issue in elections, and to win an election in India based solely on development is extremely difficult.

RAVISH TIWARI: In your journey, what changes did you observe among those at the bottom of the pyramid?

We noticed small changes. The most transformed state, which I document as well, has been Bihar. In February 2005, we went for our first poll trip to Bihar. We noticed small things. At election rallies hardly anybody wore any footwear. By the time we went for election rallies in Bihar in 2010, people were wearing slippers. In the 2014 rallies, people were wearing shoes with open soles, and now they are wearing shoes with closed soles. Also, the clothing. Even now in Bihar you see people not wearing woollen clothes because they are expensive. They wear multiple layers of clothing.

The other change that one sees is that there are many more women in voting queues now.



"The govt's biggest mistake was to accept GDP data revisions in 2015. By accepting it they began to think that the economy is doing a lot better than it was... They are paying the price for it even today"

WITH AMOL PALEKAR

‘What is new is the fear factor’

Fifty years in the industry, and the veteran actor has gone back to his first love, painting

HARI NARAYAN

When actor-filmmaker Amol Palekar tried to praise the Ministry of Culture for organising a retrospective last month, it was interpreted as a ‘backhanded compliment’ by one of the hosts. “Their apprehension of criticism triggers the gagging and pre-empts what would follow... Good, bad, ugly,” says Palekar, whose speech at the National Gallery of Modern Arts (NGMA) was rudely interrupted when he expressed concern that some advisory committees were being unilaterally disbanded and that two retrospectives had been cancelled. The actor thinks that what happened to him was just “one dot in the extended arrow aimed at suppressing the subversive text”.

“In the last four years, a definite, consistent pattern of interference with a specific agenda does emerge,” says Palekar. “Any art needs the patronage of the system that ought to nurture, preserve and cherish it. The system ought to include the artist community as insiders and refrain from controlling them and their art. In our country, no matter which political party is in power, this abstinence is axed.”

Face-saving effort

NGMA Director General Adwaita Gadanayak later clarified that the two advisory committees had not been scrapped; their term had ended, he said, and new panels are in the process of being constituted. Palekar calls it a “good face-saving effort”. “Artistes have complained to me about the ministry’s arbitrariness... even when they convene the committee, they will appoint a stooge who will parrot their songs.”

Palekar, who has called these acts of gagging a “war against humanities”, has been part of the industry for almost 50 years. He regards most of the film fraternity as “conformists”. “When you expect a quid pro quo from the system or some patronage in the form of awards or assignments or appointments, you cannot afford to say anything against those who will sanction what you are seeking... So it is a choice an artist has to make: whether to succumb to the dictates of the system or to speak up.”

So what’s new? “What is new is the



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

fear factor! The deterrent is that someone is watching your moves all the time and any adverse move will attract action from the tax department, or police, or you will be labelled an urban naxal or you may be lynched – that is new. The silence now is overwhelmingly loud.”

Back to the canvas

The veteran of over 50 films was last seen in a TV series in 2015, and says he has found consolation in the “blank canvas”. “Very few know that I am a professional painter from J.J. School of Arts. Over the years, with the change in the filmmaking scenario, I have moved away. I stopped acting as I lost interest in it. Recently, I did accept an interesting role in a Hindi web series.”

Palekar, through his roles, made the mundanity of middle-class life likeable in the 1970s and 1980s. His ascent, which began in 1971, coincided with the reign of Amitabh Bachchan. Among the best ‘meta’ moments of Hindi cinema is in *Gol Maal*, when Ram

Prasad, his character, is shown stealing the attention of the autograph-hunting schoolgirls as Amitabh Bachchan stares with a despondent look. (Incidentally, Palekar won the Filmfare Award for his role, outmanoeuvring Bachchan.)

However, apart from these affable roles, Palekar also essayed negative characters, like that of the obsessed lover in *Agni Pareeksha*. “After starting my career as hero in three silver jubilee hits – *Rajnigandha*, *Chhoti Si Baat* and *Chitchor* – I played a negative role in Shyam Benegal’s *Bhumika* and a murderer in *Khamosh*. And, if I may point out, my loveable portrayal in *Gharonda* (and in a much less seen film *Spandan*) had quite a few negative shades. I tried to swim against the mainstream.”

Among Palekar’s most frequent collaborators were filmmakers like Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherjee, who made ‘middle-of-the-road’ cinema. So, has the space for such cinema expanded with the arrival of streaming portals? “I think middle-

of-the-road or parallel cinema of the 70s offered a different viable financial model that gave filmmakers the necessary breathing space to deal with the little problems of the common man. Their films chose not to be larger than life, not to be melodramatic, not to dazzle people, and yet were entertaining enough to get the audiences hooked. Digital cinema and online streaming portals have opened platforms that offer similar or even bigger freedom to young filmmakers.”

Poetic language

Palekar, who filmed *Thoda Sa Roomani Ho Jaayen* entirely in verse – in a throwback to the Kaifi Azmi-scripted *Heer Ranjha* – has spoken the language of poetry rather than prose through most of his directorials. “I have always been fascinated by Hollywood’s musical genre, which offers seamless narration from prose to free lyrics to music. *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, *Carmen*, all these old classics. The age-old Bollywood situations break into songs when in love, when in despair, while celebrating. However, the Hollywood musical offers mundane situations like arguments, discussions and debates in a lyrical manner. I explored this exciting form first in the TV serial *Kachchi Dhoop* in 1987. It was

When you expect a quid pro quo from the system or some patronage in the form of awards or appointments, you cannot afford to say anything against those who will sanction what you are seeking...

immensely appreciated by audiences. So I created the musical *Thoda Sa Roomani*. Both these creations were supported wholeheartedly by Doordarshan, which at that time was free from the clutches of market-driven commercial forces.”

Breaking barriers

Challenging gender hierarchies and a unidimensional and heteronormative notion of sexuality has been a theme Palekar has stressed in his films. *Daayraa* had as its central character a transvestite; *Anahat* was a period drama where a woman seeks sexual fulfilment outside marriage while *Quest* was about homosexuality. Could we see Palekar make more such films, now that there is a more informed audience? “In most of my films, I explored the theme of a man-woman relationship and its various dimensions through a subversion of cumulative silence and prototypes of exploitation. My protagonists march towards love and empathy. I also chose to depict unconventional female characters who seek to challenge providence. Lachchi, a rural girl in *Paheli*, accepts a lover knowing he is not her husband. Binni in *Thoda Sa Roomani* proclaims that marriage is not the ultimate aim for a girl. My female characters strive to break their alienation and assert themselves against the mainstream dominance. Maybe a retrospective of my directorial journey will reach the more informed audience of today!”

■ Palekar studied fine arts at Sir J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai, and began his career as a painter

■ Worked at Bank of India before switching to a career in acting

■ Made his movie debut in 1971 with the Marathi film *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*

■ In 2006, he won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in English for *Quest*

■ WHO

Rami Malek, playing Freddie Mercury to Oscar glory

A first generation American of Egyptian descent playing another immigrant walked away with the Best Actor prize at the 91st Academy Awards last Sunday.

Rami Malek, 37, won his first Oscar for his depiction of flamboyant singer Freddie Mercury, born Farrokh Bulsara, who fronted British rock band

Queen, in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. It is also the first time an actor of Arab heritage has bagged the award.

Was it a surprise win?

The film has done well at the box-office, taking in \$854 million, but wasn't acclaimed critically unanimously. Critics, however, showered praise on the actor, with *Rolling Stone* magazine saying that despite the flaws Malek's take on the legendary singer "saves the day." In the run-up to the Oscars, Malek had won the Golden Globe, the Screen Actors Guild and the British BAFTA awards.

Why did he relate to the role?

In his acceptance speech and later

talking to the media, Malek drew comparisons between his and Mercury's life in coming to terms with their identities. Mercury was born to Parsi parents with Indian roots, who moved to the United Kingdom from Zanzibar when he was a teenager. Reflecting on his own life, Malek said, "That kid was struggling with his identity... I think to anyone struggling, we made a film about a gay man, an immigrant, who lived his life just unapologetically himself. The fact that I'm celebrating him and this story...is proof that we're longing for stories like this."

When Malek got a call during the third season of TV series *Mr. Robot* for the role, he wondered how that young

character, a hacker who felt profoundly alienated with such social anxiety, could ever play Mercury. But then as he began his deep research, Malek discovered that in Mercury's "audacious, communicative powerful human being there was a sense of loneliness and anxiety. I could relate the two together."

How did he prepare for it?

In 1991, Mercury was one of the first British celebrities to die of AIDS. He was 45 years old. The film is about the origins of Queen and Mercury's personal battles and public persona, the struggles with his sexuality and drug abuse.

Malek, who could not even play the

■ WHEN

February 28, 2019

On edge: Indian and Pakistani troops traded fire along the Line of Control in Kashmir on Thursday, a day after the neighbours downed each other's jets. Reuters reported that the U.S., China and other world powers have urged restraint as tensions escalate following tit-for-tat air strikes in the wake of a suicide attack that killed at least 40 CRPF personnel in Pulwama on February 14. U.S. President Donald Trump said American mediation was helping to defuse the crisis between two nuclear powers. Picture shows the red-and-white emblem being painted on the roof of SMHS Hospital in Srinagar on Wednesday to avoid it being targeted. REUTERS



■ WHY

Are fires frequent at Bandipur reserve?



What happened?

A five-day fire that raged through the Bandipur Tiger Reserve has reportedly burnt more than 15,400 acres of forests. Between February 21 and 25, the reserve saw 127 fire counts in various ranges of the 912 sq km forest. The largest of the fires was contained only on Monday.

While Karnataka Forest Department

officials scrambled to put out the blaze, an Indian Air Force helicopter sprayed over 19,000 litres of water in seven sorties.

While fires are not uncommon at Bandipur, what has surprised officials is their intensity and frequency. The worry now is the long-term damage to the ecosystem, which is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere that hosts the world's largest tiger population, at more than 575 (2014 census).

How did it start?

The 2018 monsoon was particularly strong, but the year-end northeast monsoon has failed. If the monsoon led to dense growth, the blistering heat since September has turned vegetation brittle and dry, with vast swathes becoming tinderboxes. As with most forest fires, it is assumed that Bandipur's ignition was man-made. Forest Department officials believe miscreants set fire in multiple locations.

The suspicion stems out of a growing animosity between the Department and forest-dwellers who accuse officials of harassment through the wildlife rules. Any investigation into the fires is unlikely to pinpoint a cause or culprits. Strong gusts ensured that the fires spread quickly.

Compounding matters is the ubiquity of *lantana camara*, an invasive weed species native to South America, that has spread through nearly two-thirds of the forest area.

Over 400 fire watchers were placed, but questions have arisen whether the precautions were enough, especially since Bandipur has had frequent fires.

How susceptible is it to fires?

Bandipur is a dry deciduous forest in the rain shadow region of the Western Ghats, and is no stranger to fires. Periods of drought invariably lead to fires. In 2017, a forest guard was killed while attempting to douse a fire in the region.

A study has shown that between 1974 and 2014, 67% of the Nilgiri Biosphere had seen some form of forest fire, with Bandipur having reported the most incidents. However, the number of forest fires had considerably come down over the decades as the Forest Department attempted to pre-empt them through fire control lines and fire watchers, notes the study.

What is the impact?

The country's forest policy encourages a zero forest fire approach for its protected landscapes – whether

it is Bandipur or the rainforests of the upper Western Ghats. Scientific literature have shown this blanket approach may be doing harm to dry, deciduous forests where trees have evolved to co-exist with fire.

Jayashree Ratnam from the National Conservation for Biological Sciences and fellow authors have noted in a recent study that the trees in this landscape were closer to those in a savanna than in rainforests 100 km away. Trees have dramatically thicker barks, implying that they had evolved to be fire-resistant.

"When fires are relatively frequent, adult tree mortality in these systems is very low. Many saplings sprout shortly after the fire from underground reserves, and the system returns to its original state in a few years," she told *The Hindu*.

Conversely, when fires are suppressed – including by curbing the tribal practices of controlled fire burning – a greater biomass builds up that can lead to high intensity fires which affect the ecosystem negatively. Moreover, there might be a correlation between fire suppression and growth of *lantana camara*, which has replaced the grassy undergrowth in many areas.

R. Krishna Kumar, Mohit M. Rao



पाकिस्तान की नापाक हरकतों का मुंहतोड़ जवाब देते हुए भारत ने अपनी कूटनीतिक क्षमता का इस्तेमाल करके वैश्विक चेतना को अपने पक्ष में किया है और हर कदम पर पाकिस्तान को झुकने के लिए मजबूर किया है. इसी दबाव के चलते पाकिस्तान को हमारे जांबाज विंग कमांडर अभिनंदन को छोड़ने के लिए भी मजबूर होना पड़ा है. लगातार अलग-थलग पड़ते पाकिस्तान को आने वाले दिनों में भारत सरकार के प्रयासों के फलस्वरूप संयुक्त राष्ट्र में भी मुंह की खानी है...



पाकिस्तान के खिलाफ एकजुट हुआ वैश्विक समुदाय भारत की बड़ी कूटनीतिक जीत



डॉ. जे जगन्नाथन
दक्षिण एशिया व यूक्रेनियन मामलों के जानकार

सरकार की बंदौलत वैश्विक चेतना हमारे पक्ष में

हमारे कूटनीतिज्ञों और विदेश मंत्री ने केवल 2-3 दिनों के भीतर ही वैश्विक समर्थन जुटाया और पाकिस्तान पर अभिनंदन को छोड़ने का ऐसा दबाव कायम किया, जिससे पाकिस्तान को भारत के सामने झुकना पड़ा. वैश्विक स्तर पर पाकिस्तान ने अपनी छवि बना ली है कि वह दुनियाभर के देशों से मदद मांगता फिरता है, जबकि दूसरी तरफ प्रॉवसी वॉर करता है और आतंकियों को पनाह देता है.

विंग कमांडर अभिनंदन की वापसी भारत की बहुत महत्वपूर्ण डिप्लोमैटिक (कूटनीतिक) जीत है. ऐसे समय में, जब युद्ध जैसी स्थिति के बीच चारों तरफ युद्धोन्माद के बादल के छाये हुए हैं, केंद्र सरकार ने शांति बनाये रखते हुए, देश के नागरिकों को बिना परेशान किये, सभी को युद्ध की मानसिक यंत्रणा से बचाते हुए स्थिति को संभाला है. सरकार इसके लिए बधाई की पात्र है. उदाहरण के लिए, याद कीजिए साल 2001 का समय, संसद पर हमला हुआ था और देश में संकट की स्थिति पैदा हुई थी, युद्ध की आशंका भी थी, देश में एक डर का माहौल था. ऐसे कई मौके अतीत में भारत के सामने आये हैं. लेकिन, पहली बार ऐसा देखने में आया है कि सरकार ने टीम-वर्क के साथ बहुत आराम व शांति से स्थिति को संभाल लिया है और देश पर कोई आंच नहीं आने दी है.



कूटनीतिक दृष्टि से बात करें, तो हमारी ऊर्जाविक्रि विदेश मंत्री सुषमा स्वराज पाकिस्तान पर एयर स्ट्राइक के बाद रूस और चीन के विदेश मंत्रियों के साथ बैठक के लिए वुहान (चीन) गयीं और भारत की एयर स्ट्राइक का विस्तृत पक्ष उनके सामने रखा. विदेश मंत्री ने पुलवामा हमले से लेकर पाकिस्तान के आतंकी व्यवहार और एयर स्ट्राइक की जरूरत का महत्व उन्हें समझाया और रूस व चीन को भारत के पाले में किया. इसके अतिरिक्त, विदेश मंत्री के प्रयासों से वैश्विक स्तर पर पुलवामा हमले और आतंकवाद के मसले पर भारत के पक्ष में देश खड़े हुए हैं. इसी क्रम में भारत के कूटनीतिज्ञों ने चीन पर असर डाला, जिससे चीन भी पाकिस्तान के पक्ष में नहीं दिखा. चीन के वुहान शहर में हुई बैठक

को रद्द करने की मांग पाकिस्तान ने चीन से की थी, लेकिन चीन नहीं माना. इसलिए, पाकिस्तान चीन से खफा भी चल रहा है. इससे, पाकिस्तान और चीन के घरेलू संबंधों/योजनाओं पर भी असर पड़ा है. इस बात से यह भी स्पष्ट हो गया कि ऐसा नहीं चलता रहेगा कि पाकिस्तान कुछ भी करता रहेगा और चीन उसकी मदद करता रहे.

रूस के साथ संबंधों ने हमारी बहुत मदद की है. अमेरिका भी हमारे पक्ष में खड़ा रहा है. डोनाल्ड ट्रंप ने एयर स्ट्राइक के पहले ही कह दिया था कि कुछ गंभीर होनेवाला है. इसका साफ मतलब है कि उन्हें भी पता था कि भारत क्या करनेवाला है और पुलवामा हमले के बाद पाकिस्तान को सबक सिखाने के हमारे जरूरी कदम के व पक्ष में थे. पाकिस्तान केवल इन्हीं देशों के बीच अलग-थलग नहीं पड़ गया है. अबु धाबी में चल रहे 57 मुस्लिम बहुल देशों के संगठन ओआईसी (ऑर्गनाइजेशन ऑफ इस्लामिक को-ऑपरेशन) की बैठक में भारतीय विदेश मंत्री सुषमा स्वराज को आमंत्रित किया गया. पाकिस्तान ने इसका विरोध किया था और भारत के आमंत्रण को रद्द करने की मांग कर रहा था. लेकिन ऐसा नहीं हुआ और भारत इस बैठक में हिस्सा लेने पहुंच गया है तथा ओआईसी के संस्थापक देशों में से एक पाकिस्तान के विदेश मंत्री शाय महमूद कुरैशी ने इस बैठक का बहिष्कार कर दिया है. पाकिस्तान की भारत को न्योता न देने मांग ही बेबुनियाद थी. उसका कहना था कि ओआईसी में केवल मुस्लिम देश शामिल हो सकते हैं. लेकिन पाकिस्तान ने इस तथ्य को नजरअंदाज कर दिया कि भारत दुनिया की दूसरी सबसे बड़ी मुस्लिम आबादी वाला देश है और इस देश के मुस्लिम सबसे अधिक सुरक्षित महसूस करते हैं. वैश्विक इस्लामिक समुदाय को भारत और वर्तमान सरकार पर भरोसा था, इसलिए उन्होंने भारत को आमंत्रित किया. पिछले 70 सालों में पहली बार सऊदी अरब, ईरान, इसक जैसे पश्चिम एशियाई देशों को भारत पर भरोसा हुआ है और उन्होंने अपना समर्थन हमें दिया है. उनको भारत की कार्यवाहियों पर भरोसा है, जबकि आज

जारी है पाकिस्तान को अलग-थलग करने के कूटनीतिक प्रयास

भारतीय सेना द्वारा पाकिस्तान स्थित तीन आतंकी शिविरों पर हवाई हमले के बाद विदेश मंत्री सुषमा स्वराज ने अमेरिका के सेक्रेटरी ऑफ स्टेट माइक पोम्पियो और चीन, बांग्लादेश, अफगानिस्तान व सिंगापुर के विदेश मंत्रियों समेत पी5 देशों (सुरक्षा परिषद के पांच स्थायी सदस्य देश) व अन्य देशों से बात कर अपना पक्ष रखा और उन्हें समझाया कि सीमा पार स्थित आतंकी ठिकानों पर हमला करना भारत के लिए क्यों जरूरी हो गया था. आधिकारिक सूत्रों को मानते, तो पाकिस्तान स्थित आतंकवादी ठिकानों पर भारत के हवाई हमले को बड़े पैमाने पर समर्थन मिला है और ज्यादातर देशों ने यह माना है कि भारत की यह कार्यवाही असेनिक थी जो स्थान विशेष पर की गयी थी और उसका इरादा सैन्य बलों व नागरिकों को नुकसान पहुंचाना नहीं था. हमले के बाद भारत के साथ मजबूती से खड़े ऑस्ट्रेलिया ने पाकिस्तान से जेश-ए-मोहम्मद, लश्करे तेहबा समेत आतंकी समूहों के खिलाफ त्वरित व अर्थपूर्ण कार्यवाही करने को कहा. इतना ही नहीं, 27 फरवरी को वुहान में हुए रूस-भारत-चीन (आरआईसी) समूह के त्रिपक्षीय सम्मेलन में चीनी विदेश मंत्री वेंग यी से मुलाकात के दौरान भी सुषमा स्वराज ने पुलवामा आतंकी हमले और पाकिस्तान प्रायोजित आतंकवाद का मुद्दा उठाया था. इससे पूर्व पुलवामा हमले के अगले ही दिन भारतीय विदेश सचिव नयी दिल्ली स्थित पी-5 देशों, सभी दक्षिण एशियाई देशों, जापान, जर्मनी, कोरिया सहित कई अन्य देशों के हेड ऑफ मिशन से भेंट की थी. वहीं, हमले के दो दिन बाद यानि 16 फरवरी को विदेश सचिव व अन्य सचिवों ने आसियान देशों, गल्फ को-ऑपरेशन कोसिल, मध्य एशिया व अफ्रीकी देशों के राजदूतों से भेंट कर कूटनीतिक तरीके से पाकिस्तान को अलग-थलग करने का प्रयास जारी रखा.

महत्वपूर्ण है ओआईसी में भारत का शामिल होना



पुलवामा में सीआरपीएफ काफिले पर हुए आतंकवादी हमले के बाद भारत और पाकिस्तान के बीच उभरे तनाव के बीच एक मार्च को विदेश मंत्री सुषमा स्वराज ने अबु धाबी में 57 मुस्लिम बहुल देशों के संगठन ओआईसी (ऑर्गनाइजेशन ऑफ इस्लामिक को-ऑपरेशन) को संबोधित किया. ओआईसी के विदेश मंत्रियों की इस बैठक में भारत को 'गैस्ट ऑफ ऑनर' के तौर पर आमंत्रित किया गया था. पांच दशक में ऐसा पहली बार हुआ है जब इस संगठन की बैठक में भारत को बुलाया गया है. मुस्लिम आबादी के लिहाज से दुनिया का तीसरा सबसे बड़ा देश भारत न तो ओआईसी का सदस्य है और न ही उसे इस संगठन में पर्यवेक्षक राष्ट्र का दर्जा प्रदान किया है. जबकि कम मुस्लिम आबादी वाले देश थाईलैंड और रूस को भी इस संगठन के पर्यवेक्षक का दर्जा मिला हुआ है. ऐसा इस्लामिक, धार्मिक शुरुआत से ही पाकिस्तान इस समूह में भारत के शामिल होने की विरोध करता रहा है. इस बार भी पाकिस्तान ने ओआईसी द्वारा भारत को दिये गये तयों को रद्द करने की मांग की थी, लेकिन उसकी बात नहीं सुनी गयी. इससे नाराज पाकिस्तान ने बैठक का बहिष्कार कर दिया. इस तरह से देखा जाये तो यह जहां भारत की एक बड़ी कूटनीतिक जीत है, वहीं पाकिस्तान के लिए गंदा झटका है. पाकिस्तान हमेशा से इस लक्ष्य को पाकिस्तान के खिलाफ भारत के खिलाफ करता आया है. इससे पहले 1969 में इस संगठन के पहले शिखर सम्मेलन में शामिल होने के लिए भारत को न्योता दिया गया था, लेकिन तब पाकिस्तान की आपत्ति पर आखिरी वक्त में भारत को दिया न्योता रद्द कर दिया था और भारतीय प्रतिनिधिमंडल को बीच रास्ते से लौटना पड़ा था. हालांकि भारत के ओआईसी के कई सदस्य देशों से अच्छे संबंध हैं. कतर ने तो वर्ष 2002 में पहली बार भारत को पर्यवेक्षक का दर्जा देने का प्रस्ताव दिया था, वहीं तुर्की और बांग्लादेश भी भारत को इस संगठन का सदस्य बनाये जाने की मांग कर चुके हैं. इस बार न्योता देने वाले यूएई, जिसके साथ पिछले कुछ वर्षों में हमारे संबंध काफी गहरे हुए हैं, की आबादी में एक तिहाई भारतीय है. ओआईसी से भारत को ऐसे समय न्योता आना, जब पुलवामा में सीआरपीएफ काफिले पर हुए आतंकी हमले के बाद वह पाकिस्तान को लेकर आक्रामक है और उसकी कूटनीतिक धरेंबंदी में लगा हुआ है, बेहद महत्व रखता है.

वायुसेना के ये जांबाज भी रह चुके हैं पाकिस्तान की कैद में

- **एयर मार्शल केसी करियप्पा**: 1965 के युद्ध में केसी करियप्पा के विमान को पाक सेना ने मार गिराया था और वे पाकिस्तान में जा गिरे थे. चार महीने तक पाकिस्तान की कैद में रहने के बाद वे वापस अपने देश आ गये थे.
- **फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेंट जे एल भार्गव**: 1971 के भारत-पाक युद्ध के दौरान एयरक्रॉफ्ट क्रेश होने के बाद फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेंट जे एल भार्गव पाकिस्तानी सशस्त्रों पर उतर गये थे और वहां की सेना द्वारा गिरफ्तार कर लिये गये थे. एक साल तक वहां कैद में रहने के बाद वे वापस देश लौटे थे.
- **एयर वाइस मार्शल आदित्य विक्रम पेटिया**: 1971 युद्ध के दौरान एयर वाइस मार्शल आदित्य विक्रम पेटिया पांच महीने तक पाकिस्तान में युद्धबंदी बनकर रहे थे.
- **फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेंट के नचिकेता**: 1999 में हुए कारगिल युद्ध के दौरान फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेंट के नचिकेता का विमान क्रेश होकर पीओके में जा गिरा था. आठ दिनों तक पाकिस्तान की कैद में रहने के बाद उन्हें रिहा कर दिया गया था.
- **विंग कमांडर दिलीप परलकर, विंग कमांडर धीरेंद्र सिंह जाफा, फ्लाइट लेफ्टिनेंट एस एस गुरेवाल व हरिश सिंहजी, कर्नल अनिल ए अथले भी युद्धबंदी के तौर पर पाकिस्तान की जेल में रह चुके हैं. हालांकि कई जांबाज ऐसे भी रहे जिन्हें कैद करने के बाद वहां मार दिया गया, वहीं कई ऐसे भी रहे जो वहां की जेल में ही मर गये. आज भी कई युद्धबंदी पाकिस्तान की जेल में बंद हैं.**



डॉ. भास्कर बालाकृष्णन
पूर्व एंडेसवर

एफ-16 के इस्तेमाल पर मुसीबत में पाक

कश्मीर में भारतीय सैन्य प्रतिष्ठानों पर हवाई हमले के लिए एफ-16 विमान का इस्तेमाल पाकिस्तान के लिए मुसीबत बनता जा रहा है. पेटागन की डिफेंस सिस्टीमिटी एंड कॉरपोरेशन एजेंसी (डीएससीए) के अनुसार, पाकिस्तान को यह विमान आतंक के विरुद्ध अभियानों में अपनी क्षमता बढ़ाने और आतंकियों के खाले के लिए दिया गया था. इसके इस्तेमाल को लेकर अमेरिका को पाकिस्तान पर लगभग 12 पाबंदियां लगायी हैं. हालांकि पाकिस्तान ने इस बात का खंडन किया है कि उसने भारत के खिलाफ एफ-16 का इस्तेमाल किया है. लेकिन भारतीय वायुसेना ने एफ-16 विमान के कुछ टुकड़े साक्ष्य के तौर पर पेश किये हैं, जिससे साबित होता है कश्मीर में भारतीय सैन्य प्रतिष्ठानों पर हवाई हमले के लिए पाकिस्तान ने इस विमान का इस्तेमाल किया था. असल में 26 फरवरी को पाकिस्तान स्थित जेश-ए-मोहम्मद के आतंकी शिविरों पर भारतीय वायुसेना द्वारा हवाई हमला करने के अगले ही दिन एलओसी के नजदीक उड़ रहे 24 पाकिस्तानी विमानों को भारतीय लड़ाकू विमानों ने सीमा से दूर भगा दिया था. इन पाकिस्तानी विमानों में एफ-16 भी शामिल था. भारतीय सैनिकों द्वारा उड़ाये जा रहे 8 विमानों में मिग 21 बायसन विमान विंग कमांडर अभिनंदन वर्धमान उड़ा रहे थे. अभिनंदन ने ही पाकिस्तान के एफ-16 विमान को हवा से हवा में मार करने वाली आर-73 मिसाइल दाग कर मार गिराया था. हालांकि, पाकिस्तान ने इस बात से भी इंकार किया है कि उसके किसी विमान को भारत ने मार गिराया है. वहीं, भारत के खिलाफ एफ-16 के इस्तेमाल को लेकर अमेरिकी विदेश मंत्रालय ने कहा है कि पाकिस्तान द्वारा एफ-16 लड़ाकू विमान के गलत इस्तेमाल संबंधी रिपोर्टों पर अमेरिका और जागतिकीय जुटा रहा है.

पाकिस्तान के पास कोई विकल्प नहीं था

विंग कमांडर अभिनंदन को पाकिस्तान हर हाल में लौटाता, चाहे कुछ दिन बाद ही क्यों न लौटाता. पाकिस्तान के पास कोई और विकल्प नहीं था. हालांकि, यहां कुछ बातें समझनेवाली हो सकती हैं. अभिनंदन को पाकिस्तान ने जितनी जल्दी रिहा किया है, इस संबंध में हम यह समझ सकते हैं कि यह भारत सरकार की कूटनीतिक जीत मानो जा सकती है. लेकिन, इसके भी दो पहलू हैं. एक तरफ हम यह कह सकते हैं कि सरकार ने अपनी कूटनीति दिखायी और दूसरी तरफ अंतरराष्ट्रीय संधि के अंतर्गत पाकिस्तान की मजबूरी भी थी. चाहे युद्धबंदी का मसला हो या फिर एक देश के किसी सैनिक का दूसरे देश में पकड़े जाने का मसला हो, इन सब पर जेनेवा कन्वेंशन के तहत ही फैसले होते हैं. अब लोग तरह-तरह के सवाल उठा रहे हैं कि

कुलभूषण जाधव के मामले में यह सरकार तत्परता क्यों नहीं दिखाती. दरअसल, ये दोनों मामले अलग-अलग हैं, इसलिए इन दोनों को एक ही स्तर पर नहीं देखा जा सकता है. अभिनंदन का मामला एक सैनिक का है, तो कुलभूषण का मामला जासूसी का है. जासूसी पर जेनेवा कन्वेंशन के तहत फैसले नहीं हो सकते. दो देशों के बीच में या तो जब युद्ध होता है तब, या फिर युद्ध की घोषणा भी न हुई हो उस सूरत में भी अगर सैन्य झड़प होती है तब, इन दोनों परिस्थितियों में जब कोई सैनिक लड़ते-लड़ते दूसरे देश की सीमा में पकड़ लिया जाता है, तब जेनेवा कन्वेंशन के तहत ही उसे रिहा किया जाता है. अभिनंदन के मामले में यही हुआ है. यह एक अंतरराष्ट्रीय मामला है, जिस पर अंतरराष्ट्रीय नियमों के आधार पर ही निर्णय लिया जाना था और लिया भी गया.

