



For a full bench

Progress in judicial appointment is welcome, but it is time for systemic change

The government and the Supreme Court collegium seem to disagree on recommendations for judicial appointments quite frequently these days. It has become routine to hear that some recommendations for High Court appointments, as well as elevation to the Supreme Court, have met with disapproval from the government. In such instances, it requires reiteration by the collegium for the names to be cleared. This need not always be a cause for concern if it is a sign of some serious consultation on the suitability of those recommended. However, it acquires the character of a controversy if the government's objections suggest an oblique motive to thwart or delay the appointment of particular nominees. The latest development concerns Jharkhand High Court Chief Justice Aniruddha Bose and Gauhati High Court Chief Justice A.S. Bopanna, who were on April 12 recommended for elevation to the Supreme Court. The government had sought a reconsideration of the two names. The collegium has now repeated its recommendations, emphasising that there is nothing adverse against the two judges in terms of their "conduct, competence and integrity" and that there is no reason to agree with the government. Under the present procedure, the government is now bound to accept the recommendation. The Supreme Court is keen to fill up the current vacancies. It has also recommended two more judges, Justice B.R. Gavai of the Bombay High Court and Chief Justice Surya Kant of the Himachal Pradesh High Court, for appointment to the apex court. If all these four recommendations go through, the court will have its full complement of 31 judges.

While this will be welcome, some issues persist. In systemic terms, the advisability of retaining the collegium system of appointments is a major concern; and in terms of process, the huge number of vacancies in the various High Courts and lower courts is another. The process of filling up vacancies depends on the relative speed with which the collegium initiates proposals for appointments and makes its recommendations after internal deliberations, and the time the government takes to process the names. As on May 1, the total number of vacancies in all the High Courts is 396. It is true that the filling up of vacancies is a continuous and collaborative process involving the executive and the judiciary, and there cannot be a time frame for it. However, it is time to think of a permanent, independent body to institutionalise the process. The known inadequacies of the collegium system and the mystery over whether a new memorandum of procedure is in the offing are reasons why the proposal for a constitutionally empowered council to make judicial appointments ought to be revived – of course, with adequate safeguards to preserve the judiciary's independence. The time may have come for a systemic and processual overhaul.

A fraught moment

The U.S. and China need to take sustained steps to de-escalate tensions over tariffs

The U.S.-China trade war has flared up again after a deceptive lull over the last few months, when both sides were trying to negotiate a deal. Out of nowhere, President Donald Trump tweeted that he would raise the 10% tariff imposed on \$200-billion worth of Chinese goods to 25%, starting Friday. That the Trump administration pressed ahead with the increase even as China's Vice Premier Liu He was still in Washington for a second day of talks with U.S. trade officials only underscores the businessman-turned-President's 'take no prisoners' approach to negotiations. China promptly promised retaliatory action, but was yet to spell out the measures. With Mr. Trump tweeting that "the process has begun to place additional tariffs at 25% on the remaining" Chinese goods worth \$325 billion, the U.S. administration unambiguously signalled it was not going to be the first to blink. The latest revival in tensions between the world's two largest economies elevates the risk of a global trade war to its highest level since the first signs emerged in 2018. The increase in tariffs imposed on goods crossing international borders essentially represents a new tax on a global economy already facing a slowdown. Last month, the International Monetary Fund trimmed its projection for global growth in 2019 to 3.3%, from a 3.5% forecast made in January, citing slowing momentum in "70% of the world economy". IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath had at the time projected a pick-up in global growth momentum in the second half, predicated substantially on the "improved" outlook for U.S.-China trade tensions.

IMF chief Christine Lagarde and Ms. Gopinath, however, presciently warned that the world economy was poised at "a delicate moment". Were tensions in trade policy to flare up again, it could result in large disruptions to global supply chains and pose downside risks to global growth, the IMF warned. Barely a month later, the world economy faces the very real risk of an escalation in this trade war where other countries, including India, can largely only wait and watch as the U.S. and China raise the pitch. While the U.S. may have genuine concerns about Chinese protectionism, the overall economic logic behind Mr. Trump's trade policy still remains weak. The cost of these tariffs will, after all, eventually be borne by American consumers and could result in U.S. job losses too as the import of Chinese parts become uneconomical for smaller businesses. Indian policymakers would do well to closely monitor how the latest escalation in trade tensions pans out for global demand and international energy prices, given that the RBI has flagged oil price volatility as a factor that would have a bearing on India's inflation outlook.

Resolving India's banking crisis

Acceleration in economic growth is not possible without addressing the problem of non-performing assets



C. RANGARAJAN & T.T. RAM MOHAN

The government that assumes office after the general election will have to crack a serious and unresolved problem: India's banking sector. To do so, it needs clarity on how the problem arose in the first place. Only then can it discard simplistic and ideologically-driven solutions in favour of those that can be effective.

Non-performing assets (NPAs) at commercial banks amounted to ₹10.3 trillion, or 11.2% of advances, in March 2018. Public sector banks (PSBs) accounted for ₹8.9 trillion, or 86%, of the total NPAs. The ratio of gross NPA to advances in PSBs was 14.6%. These are levels typically associated with a banking crisis. In 2007-08, NPAs totalled ₹566 billion (a little over half a trillion), or 2.26% of gross advances. The increase in NPAs since then has been staggering. How did this come about?

Origin of the crisis

The answer lies partly in the credit boom of the years 2004-05 to 2008-09. In that period, commercial credit (or what is called 'non-food credit') doubled. It was a period in which the world economy as well as the Indian economy were booming. Indian firms borrowed furiously in order to avail of the growth opportunities they saw coming. Most of the investment went into infrastructure and related areas – telecom, power, roads, aviation, steel. Businessmen were overcome with exuberance, partly rational and partly irrational. They believed, as many others did, that India had entered an era of 9% growth.

Thereafter, as the Economic Survey of 2016-17 notes, many things began to go wrong. Thanks to problems in acquiring land and getting environmental clearances, several projects got stalled. Their costs soared. At the same time, with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007-08 and the slowdown in growth after 2011-12, revenues fell well short of forecasts. Financing costs rose as policy rates were tightened in India in response to the crisis. The depreciation of the rupee meant higher outflows for companies that had borrowed in foreign currency. This combination of adverse factors made it difficult for companies to service their loans to Indian banks.

Tightening norms

The year 2014-15 marked a watershed. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), acting in the belief that NPAs were being under-stated, introduced tougher norms for NPA recognition under an Asset Quality Review. NPAs in 2015-16 almost doubled over the previous year as a result. It is not as if bad decisions had suddenly happened. It's just that the cumulative bad decisions of the past were now coming to be more accurately captured.

Higher NPAs mean higher provisions on the part of banks. Provisions rose to a level where banks, especially PSBs, started making losses. Their capital got eroded as a result. Capital from the government was slow in coming and it was barely adequate to meet regulatory norms for minimum capital. Without adequate capital, bank credit cannot grow. Even as the numerator in the ratio of gross NPAs/advances rose sharply, growth in the denominator fell. Both these movements caused the ratio to shoot up to a crisis level. Once NPAs happen, it is important to effect to resolve them quickly. Otherwise, the interest on dues causes NPAs to rise relentlessly.



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

This, in brief, is the story of the NPA problem. Since the problem is more concentrated in PSBs, some have argued that public ownership must be the problem. Public ownership of banks, according to them, is beset with corruption and incompetence (reflected in poor appraisal of credit risk). The solution, therefore, is to privatise the PSBs, at least the weaker ones.

There are problems with this formulation. There are wide variations within each ownership category. In 2018, the State Bank of India's (SBI's) gross NPA/gross advances ratio was 10.9%. This was not much higher than that of the second largest private bank, ICICI Bank, 9.9%. The ratio at a foreign bank, Standard Chartered Bank, 11.7%, was higher than that of SBI. Moreover, private and foreign banks were part of consortia that are now exposed to some of the largest NPAs.

The explanation lies elsewhere. PSBs had a higher exposure to the five most affected sectors – mining, iron and steel, textiles, infrastructure and aviation. These sectors accounted for 29% of advances and 53% of stressed advances at PSBs in December 2014. (The RBI's Financial Stability Report does not provide similar data for the period thereafter.) For private sector banks, the comparable figures were 13.9% and 34.1%. Our rough calculations show that PSBs accounted for 86% of advances in these five sectors. By an interesting coincidence, this number is exactly the same as the PSBs' share

in total NPAs.

As mentioned earlier, infrastructure projects were impacted by the global financial crisis and environmental and land acquisition issues. In addition, mining and telecom were impacted by adverse court judgments. Steel was impacted by dumping from China. Thus, the sectors to which PSBs were heavily exposed were impacted by factors beyond the control of bank management.

Plans to prevent such crises

Wholesale privatisation of PSBs is thus not the answer to a complex problem. We need a broad set of actions, some immediate and others over the medium-term and aimed at preventing the recurrence of such crises.

One immediate action that is required is resolving the NPAs. Banks have to accept losses on loans (or 'haircuts'). They should be able to do so without any fear of harassment by the investigative agencies. The Indian Banks' Association has set up a six-member panel to oversee resolution plans of lead lenders. To expedite resolution, more such panels may be required. An alternative is to set up a Loan Resolution Authority, if necessary through an Act of Parliament. Second, the government must infuse at one go whatever additional capital is needed to recapitalise banks – providing such capital in multiple instalments is not helpful.

Over the medium term, the RBI needs to develop better mechanisms for monitoring macro-prudential indicators. It especially needs to look out for credit bubbles. True, it's not easy to tell a bubble when one is building up. Perhaps, a simple indicator would be a rate of credit growth that is way out of line with the trend rate of growth of credit or with the broad growth rate of the economy.

Actions need to be taken to strengthen the functioning of

banks in general and, more particularly, PSBs. Governance at PSBs boards, can certainly improve. One important lesson from the past decade's experience with NPAs is that management of concentration risk – that is, excessive exposure to any business group, sector, geography, etc. – is too important to be left entirely to bank boards. The RBI has drawn this lesson to some extent. Effective April 1, 2019, the limit for exposure to any business group has been reduced from 40% of total capital to 25% of tier I capital (which consists of equity and quasi-equity instruments). The limit for a single borrower will be 20% of tier I capital (instead of 20% of total capital).

Risk management

Other aspects of concentration risk remain to be addressed. Overall risk management at PSBs needs to be taken to a higher level. This certainly requires strengthening of PSB boards. We need to induct more high-quality professionals on PSB boards and compensate them better.

Succession planning at PSBs also needs to improve. Despite the constitution of the Banks Board Bureau to advise on selection of top management, the appointment of Managing Directors and Executive Directors continues to be plagued by long delays. This must end.

The task of accelerating economic growth is urgent. This is not possible without finding a solution to the problems that confront the banking system. There is ample scope for improving performance within the framework of public ownership. It can be done. What is needed is a steely focus on the part of the government.

C. Rangarajan is a former Governor, RBI. T.T. Ram Mohan is a professor at IIM, Ahmedabad. The authors are grateful to Siddharth Purohit for data support

New clouds over the Persian Gulf

Iran's decision to withdraw partially from the nuclear deal is risky, and could play into U.S. plans



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced on Wednesday that Iran will withdraw partially from the landmark nuclear deal of 2015. Iran's decision to reduce its commitments to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the P5+1 agreement, comes as a reaction to the U.S.'s attempts in recent weeks to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero. As a response to U.S. sanctions, Iran is demanding that the remaining signatories of the deal – the U.K., China, France, Germany and Russia – ease the restrictions on its banking and oil sectors in the next 60 days. In case the five endorers of the deal decide not to act in favour of Iran, the authorities of Tehran will remove the caps on uranium enrichment levels and resume work on the Arak nuclear facility.

Loss of patience

Iran's plans are very clear, and they put an end to long and laborious multilateral negotiations which put strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities in return for lifting

most international sanctions. Undoubtedly, Iran's decision comes as an expression of loss of patience with a deal that is providing very few of the promised economic benefits. But by resuming its uranium enrichment operations, Iran could be taking a huge risk, putting at danger its diplomatic relations with Europe and playing the game of the Trump administration that has been taking a hard line against Tehran.

Consequently, Iran might be economically isolated, but the message coming out from Russia is that Iran is not alone. The Kremlin has joined Tehran to accuse the U.S. of retreating from the nuclear deal, while approving Iran's rolling back of some of the terms of the deal due to pressure from the U.S. Of course, the Russian gesture is not without some long-term interests for the Kremlin. U.S. sanctions against Iran will certainly result in the development of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, but also with countries like Turkey which are important to American foreign policy.

This said, the goal of the Trump administration in applying the new series of sanctions is likely to hit the earnings of Iran's major metals companies, such as Mobarakeh Steel and the National Iranian Copper Industries Company. This will have an immediate im-



HASAN ROUHANI - AP

pact on the Iranian government's revenues, but it will also deteriorate the balance sheets of Iran's heavily indebted metals and mining companies. No doubt, this situation will be followed by mass unemployment, especially among blue-collar workers employed by state-owned enterprises who form the backbone of Iran's economy.

Stoking unrest

It is no secret that last year the 2.5-million-strong government workforce did not get a raise while prices accelerated. To this end, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy on Iran aims directly to stoke social unrest in Iranian cities by creating labour strikes (in the Polish style of Solidarity back in the 1980s) within the metals industry. For Donald Trump and his aides, the outcome of their confrontation with Iran is clearly to deprive the Iranian regime of the funds it can use to impose its hegemony around West

Asia, but also to put pressure on the everyday life of Iranian citizens. From the Trump administration's perspective, the economic malaise in Iran should stoke protests sooner or later. But does this mean the beginning of the end of the regime of the Ayatollahs?

Things are more complex than they might appear. If we take a close look at the geostrategic situation of West Asia, Iran's threat to violate the JCPOA is a very worrisome decision. Let us not forget that from Iran's perspective, Mr. Trump's America is considered a rogue state. As for the Trump administration, it considers the Islamic regime in Tehran as its Enemy Number One in West Asia. The recent announcement by John Bolton, Mr. Trump's National Security Adviser, that the U.S. was dispatching an aircraft-carrier strike group and bombers to West Asia to protect American allies and their interests is an unmistakable attempt to intimidate the Iranian regime. Over the past few weeks, the White House has intensified its campaign of pressure and threats against the authorities in Tehran and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In Washington's eyes, Iran is a rogue state because of its support of militant groups, its violations of human rights, and its pursuit of nuclear-related technologies.

But despite the sanctions, Iran continues to fund its proxies in the region, prepare missile tests and support the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. Thus, at the point where things stand, it is very hard to imagine a turn towards negotiations, although some European countries might continue encouraging a return to diplomatic management of the Iranian crisis. There is little likelihood of any flexibility towards the Iranian regime from the American side till the November 2020 U.S. presidential election. Iran will certainly look for ways to inflict a cost on the U.S. directly or through militia proxies in the region. In that case, the scene will be set for military confrontation between Iran and the U.S.

Last but not the least, if Iran's leadership is to successfully resist U.S. "maximum pressure", it must do more than choose the military path. Those who oppose any unilateral U.S. military action against Iran can only hope that the Ayatollahs and the IRGC will not react violently to U.S. forces in the region and to its allies. In case that happens, troubled times are ahead for Iran, West Asia and the global market.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is Director, Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Peace, Jindal Global University, Sonapat

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Low public discourse

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has referred to former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi as "Bhrashtachari No.1" ("Abusing a martyred PM is ultimate cowardice: Congress", May 10). Earlier, Congress president Rahul Gandhi called Mr. Modi a "chor". Interestingly, the courts have found no evidence against either Rajiv Gandhi or Mr. Modi in the Bofors and Rafale cases, respectively. This only shows how low our public discourse is today – accusations and name-calling are rampant with no basis in facts. I have a couple of questions for Mr. Modi, though. Why talk about Rajiv Gandhi at the end of this election?

Why is this important for this election? Why did he keep quiet all this time? Why is his party talking about Pakistan, Balakot and Rajiv Gandhi instead of its five years in power?

MOHAN ARIMBOOR, Thiruvir

Mr. Modi's strategy is to divert our attention from the crucial problems we face today. He seems to be maintaining a stoic silence on the fallout of demonetisation, unemployment, and the problems of GST, while harping on the anti-Sikh riots and Rajiv Gandhi.

N.C. SREEDHARAN, Kannur

The shameful remarks

made against the Aam Aadmi Party's Atishi show yet again how low we have descended as a society ("AAP candidate accuses Gambhir of slander", May 10). Why should anyone talk of Ms. Atishi's past relationships instead of her work? Why should the Prime Minister drag an assassinated Prime Minister into an unsavoury controversy? Rajiv Gandhi isn't alive to defend himself. How can politicians ask for votes in the name of the defence forces? This is a dangerous trend that will affect the apolitical character of the forces. Where are the statesmen of this country? Elections come and go but we can't afford to lose the

soul of the nation. R.D. SINGH, Ambala

Ground realities

BJP president Amit Shah, in his assertion that the NDA will better its 2014 performance, seems to ignore the ground realities ("We will increase seats, improve our margins of victory and expand", May 10). Opposition alliances in U.P., Karnataka and Maharashtra are new in this election. Even if anti-incumbency is marginal, it could affect the NDA's vote share and seat share. The BJP's uneasy alliance with the Shiv Sena is not going to improve its tally in Maharashtra. Mr. Modi is not able to create the awe

that he could in the last general election. That is why he is busy talking about Rajiv Gandhi.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

Gogoi case

The most important requirement of any inquiry is that the person conducting the inquiry must be independent, i.e., he or she can have no relationship, including a professional one, with the parties to the inquiry ("By established law and procedure," May 10). That principle was grossly violated in the inquiry against the Chief Justice of India. It is natural for those working together to be constrained by professional

brotherhood. This point has been missed in the analysis.

VASANT NARAYAN DESHMUKH, Bengaluru

It is difficult to agree with the views expressed by the writer. There were several issues apart from sexual harassment that cannot be overlooked in this case, such as frequent transfers of the complainant, actions taken against her family and intimidation, as reported by her. Justice must not just be done, but must be seen as done. This unfortunately has not happened in this case.

V. NARAYNEN, Chennai

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Picking up the pieces after Cyclone Fani

The cyclone battered Bhubaneswar and Puri last week, leaving behind a trail of destruction. **Jacob Koshy** and **Satyasundar Barik** report on the efforts by the government and relief teams to restore normalcy

Shattered windowpanes, sturdy trees lying flat on the roads, and downed power lines are the prominent markers of Cyclone Fani, which pounded Puri and Bhubaneswar in Odisha on May 3. Three days after Fani, categorised as an 'extremely severe cyclonic storm', ploughed through the State killing at least 40 people and injuring 160, the streets of Bhubaneswar are filled with workers of the National Disaster Response Force, dressed in bright orange. Senthil Rao, 28, and five others have spent all morning trying to remove an uprooted banyan tree. "It is an old tree and has blocked an entire stretch of the main road. My work seems interminable," Rao groans during a tea break.

This is Rao's tenth tree since early morning. It's largely due to the efforts of 600 teams of the State and Central disaster response forces that the city roads are navigable now. Tree trunks and branches have been swept into mounds and line the sidewalks and street corners. There are so many of them that the government has permitted anyone, with the means and the men, to cart them away and use them as fit without the usual tendering and bureaucracy.

There is little public and private transport on the streets; only the bulky JCBs can be seen in corners and inner streets. They are clawing out crumbled billboards and the remnants of carts and tyres from the rubble, and lifting logs. Santosh Rout, who manages a fleet of JCBs, says that he has been charging a 30% premium for the use of his machines. "The demand is very high. However, I hear there are nearly 30 teams of JCBs commissioned, so it looks like things will be normal in less than a week," he says.

Fani, which started out in the Bay of Bengal in the last week of April, was quite unlike the typical storms that Odisha is accustomed to. From 1965 to 2017, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea collectively registered 46 'severe cyclonic storms'. More than half of them occurred between October and December. Seven of them occurred in May and only two (in 1966 and 1976) were recorded in April, according to data from the India Meteorological Department's cyclone statistics unit. Before Fani, only one of them (in 1966) had actually made landfall over India.

While modern, meteorological record-keeping dates furious cyclones in Odisha to as far as back to 1831, to the average citizen, in contemporary times 1999 marked the turning point for the State. The cyclone that hit that year was catastrophic: it killed thousands, obliterated homes, and left a trail of destruction. The State was cut off from the rest of the country, and it was weeks before the magnitude of the tragedy hit home. Since then, Odisha has prepared itself in various ways to face such cyclones – by building specially crafted storm shelters and commissioning electric poles that are designed to withstand strong gales.

By May 1, the weather department was confident that Fani would be unforgiving, but not as powerful as BOB 06 (cyclones then didn't have names) that had hit the port town of Paradip in 1999.

Capital without power

Since Bhubaneswar is bald without tree cover after Fani, the heat and humidity are more palpable than before. There is no power, to add to the woes, so the city after dusk is both dark and uncomfortable. While city-specific figures aren't available, the State Disaster Management Authority estimates that at least 45,000 km of power lines and 11,000 distribution transformers have been destroyed by the cyclone.

Sarath Chandra, a hotel manager, says that normally in early May, when the tourist season is just beginning, his hotel is only about 60% full. "This time we're nearly 85% full," he says. "There are no outstation tourists. All of them are locals escaping the heat of their homes." Chandra's hotel is among those equipped with a diesel-generation set, which means that there is a steady supply of water and electricity.

"The air conditioner in the room doesn't cool but being here is better than being at home," says Dolly Patra, who is staying with her family at Chandra's hotel. Her second floor flat, barely 3 km from the hotel, is a cauldron, she explains. Power is expected to return only after a fortnight, and water supply is irregular. When the cyclone howled through her apartment complex, she was scared for herself and her infant. "I was terrified that the asbestos sheets nearby would smash into my bedroom," she says. After the storm she stayed put at home, but mosquitoes entered her home in droves and she was afraid that her child would fall sick. "I hope to get back home soon or move to a relative's place. Staying in a hotel is expensive for us," she says.

At the Secretariat of the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA), Bishnupada Sethi presides over a crew of officers who compile and coor-



Cyclone Fani killed at least 40 people in Odisha and injured 160. Penthakata village in Puri after the storm. (Below) Debris on train tracks at a railway station in Puri. ■ BISWANJAN ROUT/AFP



dinate information with district centres and the IMD. Details of damage, relief dispensed and lacunae are continually wired to Sethi's office. While the unit's coordination has earned plaudits – from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United Nations – Sethi says that in spite of the preparation and the "memories of 1999", citizens were "mentally unprepared" for the impending disaster. "This is a State where cyclones recur. At the State level, there are plans and a standard operating procedure to deal with the eventuality. However, many were unprepared. In fact, many people refused to leave their thatched houses and go to shelters," he notes.

Anger in Puri
Its stature as a capital city and the prevalence of concrete houses may have contributed to zero casualties, according to official figures, in Bhubaneswar, but the temple town of Puri, which is about 60 km away, presents a vastly different picture.

National Highway 316 that connects the two cities is smooth; it was spared Fani's wrath. However, on both sides of the highway lie uprooted coconut trees and houses with holes in their tiled roofs. At least 21 deaths have been reported in Puri district.

Not far from the beach, where the sea is now placid, anger is growing at the government shelter near Talabaniya in Puri town. This pink building is one among the 879 constructed by the Odisha government across Puri, Cuttack and Khordha. The two-storey buildings, designed in 2004 with assistance from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, are low-cost and capable of accommodating about 3,000 people. They are resilient to wind speeds greater than 200 kmph. The Talabaniya shelter is also equipped with an alarm and a horn. In the event of an impending storm, instructions are relayed to those living in thatched houses, or the homeless, to come to the shelter.

"There were warnings on the day before the cyclone struck and many of us came to the shelter," says Pintu Pradhan, who works in a nearby hotel. "A day before the storm, we were given rice and dal. On the day of the storm we were given packed dry fruits, chuda (flattened rice) and gur (jaggery).

There's been no food ever since." Pradhan's house, along with the houses of about 700 others of the Biju Nagar slum, was reduced to rubble. Only those with "food security cards" says Pradhan, were eligible for the Chief Minister's relief package of ₹2,000 and 50 kg of rice per month as well as polythene sheets that could be used as roofs. There were families who lost everything in the storm and now have no food, water or jobs, he says.

While Pradhan and several men, most of them daily wage labourers, rue the absence of primarily benefits, the women of Biju Nagar trek a kilometre to the grounds of the government technical training institute to collect fallen branches and twigs to use as firewood. The trunks are also useful to rebuild houses, one of them points out. Another group of women has congregated at the Puri Collectorate to protest against the unavailability of food and water. Due to the absence of an effective communication system, the promised welfare and supplies are not making their way to the people, says Shanti, one of the protesters. As part of relief measures, residents are eligible for up to ₹95,000 for 'fully damaged' structures and compensation for damage to agricultural and horticultural crop, and fisheries.

Balwant Singh, the Puri District Collector, who assumed charge on May 7, says the lack of power and telecommunication has hampered access to supplies. "There's a standard operating procedure in place. Setting up free kitchens near shelters and restoring road connectivity are our immediate priorities. For all that we need to have

the communication system with Bhubaneswar running smoothly," he adds.

The problem of communication

With mobile phone connection down, the Collectorate, with its compound walls and plantations hit, is relying on a ham radio network. Ramesh Kuthumbaka, a Hyderabad-based advocate and an amateur ham operator, says he was called by OSDMA on May 1. "Two ham radio colleagues and I left Hyderabad and travelled 1,200 km by road in a Qualis to reach OSDMA and set up a ham network. We struggled to come here, there were strong winds. We reached on May 3," he recounts. Another team of ham operators from Kolkata reached the Puri Collectorate and installed a radio station. "Since then we've been helping the State authorities with transmitting and receiving instructions. The Chief Secretary relied on our network. There was nothing else," he claims. Kuthumbaka has skipped many meals. He complains of the lack of support from the district administration. "There doesn't seem to be a well-thought-out plan. For instance, in spite of knowing fairly reliably by April 27 that Odisha would be hit, we were told only on the 1st," he says. However, he will be present in Puri "as long as he is needed".

Sethi points out that the "operational difficulties" and the sheer magnitude of the devastation would mean that returning to normalcy will take weeks. Nearly 100 million kg of rice was reaped beforehand, yet distribution is tardy, he says. "We had to evacuate about 1.4 million people within 12 hours. Nearly 200 lakh SMSes were sent to various levels of administration – right down to

We had to evacuate about 1.4 million people within 12 hours. Nearly 200 lakh SMSes were sent to various levels of administration. Remember, this was after the election exercise, itself an arduous task.

BISHNUPADA SETHI
Odisha State Disaster Management Authority

the village heads of 14 districts," he says. He explains why people were mobilised into action only by May 1: "Remember, this was after the election exercise, itself an arduous task, had just concluded on April 29. Officers and the administration are human too."

Another challenge, adds Sethi, was to convince people to leave their homes and rush to the shelters. "Often they wouldn't listen. We have seen it here every time there has been a cyclone. People say they will weather the storm and then they all suffer."

In Brahmagiri town in Puri, a block-level official says that in the administrative block of Bhagawat Patna, nearly 27,289 people had to be evacuated. "Many of them refused to come, saying Lord Jagannath would keep them safe," he recounts. "There were four deaths, but it's not confirmed if they were specifically due to the cyclone."

The custodians of Jagannath say they are dealing with their own worries. Fani didn't spare the Jagannath temple in Puri, the mainstay of the town. One of the key idols is damaged and losses to some of the temple's property amount to ₹5 crore, reckons S. Chatterjee, a temple administration official. However, the temple itself is not participating in any

relief work or donating any of its corpus to the State to help with rehabilitation. The temple administration receives, on average, ₹2 lakh per day as donation but was expecting help from the government and individuals to prepare for the annual Rath Yatra in July. The long stretch of road, where the idols are carted, is largely clear. "Since the cyclone hit, daily offerings have plummeted. In the first two days, after the storm we barely got ₹700 on an average," Chatterjee says.

In the artisanal village of Raghurajpur, on the outskirts of Puri, the 100-odd families skilled in the art of *pattachitra* (painting on palm leaf) while away their time. In their part of town, Cyclone Fani brought rain and destroyed some of the paintings. Each painting takes about a day to make, says Gauranga Maharana, an artist who is in the midst of painting a wood-carved swan when we meet him. "The winds and the rain were so strong that my paintings got soaked. Paintings worth nearly ₹20,000 have been damaged," he says. Maharana, who traces his artistry to "several generations", estimates that a usual summer day brings in close to a thousand tourists (Raghurajpur is a heritage village), but now with the State battered, the number of tourists, both Indians and foreigners, has dwindled.

The cyclones of May

Housed in a single-storey building, the walls of which are plastered with charts describing El Nino, warming seas and other climate phenomena, the scientists at the State headquarters of the IMD are working in the corridors and verandahs to escape the stifling heat. Habibur Rehman Biswas, the chief scientist of the department, says he hadn't left the office for 72 hours straight after May 1. "Initially, we thought it would be a typical summer cyclone of the Bay of Bengal. We thought it would go either towards Andhra Pradesh or turn towards Bangladesh and Myanmar and miss the Odisha coast. We were wrong."

Meteorologists note with worry that so-called recurring cyclones – ones that sharply turn eastwards – are becoming more frequent around the Indian Ocean. The IMD publicly disseminates information via a WhatsApp group that has senior district administration officials and media representatives. "We're always getting inputs, but with power gone, it's a bit slow. Still, there are other IMD agencies that pick up inputs and relay them. There will always be regular inputs, come what may," he says.

With Cyclone Fani gone, Rehman doesn't rule out the possibility of another strong cyclone. "There's nothing which says that such a strong storm won't lead to another one in a few weeks, though there aren't immediate indications yet. May is usually when there are many more cyclones."

