



## WORDLY WISE

FEDERALISM ISN'T ABOUT STATES' RIGHTS. IT'S ABOUT DIVIDING POWER TO BETTER PROTECT INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY. — ELIZABETH PRICE FOLEY

*The Indian***EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## STATES STAND UP

When checks on the Centre are conspicuously feeble, pushback by chief ministers is invaluable

CITIZENSHIP IS A Central subject and, legally speaking, the states may have limited room for manoeuvre when it comes to determining who is a citizen and who is not, or in implementing a law on the matter framed by the Centre. And yet, when duly elected chief ministers stand up and oppose a central law, when they pledge resistance to it in their states, they make a political and symbolic point that the Centre in a federal democracy would be unwise to ignore or attempt to ride roughshod over. This is what is happening on the new citizenship law that the Narendra Modi government has pushed through both Houses of Parliament on the strength of its numbers and the National Register of Citizens that it says it will extend nation-wide. Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik is the latest to join a line-up of non-BJP CMs who have come out in opposition either to the NRC or CAB or both. Patnaik's party, the BJD, voted for the CAB in Parliament but now says no to the NRC, making a distinction between a law that gives citizenship to foreigners on a religious basis and a register that threatens to unsettle India's own minorities and the poor. That distinction may not be a tidy one, the law and the register may be, as Mamata Banerjee puts it, "two sides of the same lollipop" being waved by the BJP to effect and entrench Hindu consolidation. But in Bihar, Nitish Kumar has made the same separation to become the first BJP ally to distance himself from the NDA government in the name of the NRC. And so far, the Modi government is turning a deaf ear to the voices of the chief ministers.

Be it CM Banerjee in Bengal, Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi, Amarinder Singh in Punjab, Pinarayi Vijayan in Kerala, Bhupesh Baghel in Chhattisgarh, or Nitish Kumar and Naveen Patnaik in Bihar and Odisha respectively, the objections to the NRC-CAB seem two-fold. One, these chief ministers are pointing to the lack of consultation, the go-by to norms of negotiation and consensus-building, by a Centre drunk on an electoral majority, on vital issues that affect the country. The principle of "cooperative federalism" the Modi government swore by is being conspicuously flouted over and over again. And two, despite all its slogans of "sabka saath... sabka vishwas", the NRC and the CAB, and the two together, are furthering an unabashedly majoritarian project that rubs in a message of second-class citizenship to India's largest minority. While, singly, the CAB may have the fig leaf of addressing persecuted minorities in other countries, together with the NRC process that demands documents and certificates of belonging or else, it underlines the same signal to Muslims that ill behoves a plural democracy.

The push-back by the chief ministers is important, and the Centre must respond to it. In times when checks on power are conspicuously feeble and countervailing institutions seem unable or unwilling to rise to their mandate, the CMs' voices are also a valuable reminder — that India's largeness and its diverse locales are not its weakness, but its strength, and a reason to hope.

## READING THE SENTENCE

Supreme Court verdict on Musharraf is a significant moment that may not make a dent in civil-military relations

THE DEATH SENTENCE to Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler from 1999 to 2008, marks a significant moment in that country's history. The verdict was pronounced by a special court set up to try him on the charge of treason for suspending the Constitution and declaring an Emergency in 2007 when as many as 60 members of the higher judiciary were detained. The coup within a coup — it was by then nine years since Musharraf had ousted Nawaz Sharif — came at a time when the Supreme Court was deliberating the validity of Musharraf's bid for a second term as president. The Court had already declared his 2007 Emergency unconstitutional and illegal in a verdict in 2009. The decision to put him on trial under Article 6 of the Constitution, which specifies the abrogation of the Constitution as a treasonable offence, and makes it punishable by death, was taken by the government of Nawaz Sharif in 2013.

The death sentence is unlikely to be carried out. For one, Musharraf, lives in self-exile in the UAE. For another, the security establishment will ensure this does not happen. The army has already rejected the conviction of a former army chief and declared he could "never" be a traitor. Being on the "same page" as the army, the Imran Khan government is not about to rush to implement the sentence. The demands from the Opposition, too, are likely to be muted. Even so, the verdict is significant, following as it does the Supreme Court quashing of the three-year extension to General Qamar Javed Bajwa. But the real question is: Will it change existing equations? The Pakistan Army is capable of ditching individuals to safeguard its institutional interests. Since 2008, when Musharraf was forced out of office, the army has preferred to maintain ties with him only to ensure that its own power is not eroded by civilian governments. Otherwise, it has made every effort to turn the page on the notoriety the Musharraf era earned it. It now projects itself as an "apolitical force", even as it continues to wield political power without accountability.

As far as India is concerned, the improved bilateral atmosphere in Musharraf's time had more to do with the post 9/11 environment than any sincerity on the part of the architect of Kargil to make peace. The ceasefire on the LoC is the lasting legacy from the time, but all that has happened in India-Pak relations since November 2008, including the ceasefire violations, has proved that peace requires statesmanship of a higher order than the leadership on either side has shown at any time.

## NATA SAMRAT

Shriram Lagoo was an actor par excellence. He was also more than that

SHRIRAM LAGOO, WHO passed away in Pune aged 92, was primarily an artist of the Marathi stage. But his reputation, partly gained from the character roles and cameos he essayed in Hindi cinema, extended beyond the world of theatre. Iconic performances in plays like *Natasamrat*, where he played a retired stage actor, had turned him into a legend in his life time. For a host of peers, younger actors and directors, Lagoo had become a text book in acting and stagecraft.

A late entrant to professional theatre, Lagoo studied medicine in Pune, specialised as an ENT surgeon in the UK and practised as a doctor in Africa, before turning a full-time actor at the age of 42. In the 1970s, he established himself as a powerful presence on stage, working with directors such as Jabbar Patel, who also cast him in films such as *Sinhasan*. Theatre remained his first love, which he also used as a platform for dissent and dialogue. Both Lagoo and Marathi theatre benefited from their mutual attraction. Marathi theatre in the 1970s was an exciting space with a great talent pool of writers, directors and actors and many of the productions closely scrutinised the society and politics of those times. Lagoo, who identified with progressive causes, easily fitted in this cultural milieu.

Lagoo's public life extended beyond the world of theatre and cinema. He engaged with social movements such as the anti-superstition movement of Narendra Dabholkar, who was murdered for his beliefs. Art was an extension of Lagoo's political commitment and vice versa. The love and affection he received from his audience owes a lot to the lack of apparent contradictions between his life and work.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

INDIA IS IN the midst of, arguably, the largest student protest since the Emergency. The ground of protest is clear: India cannot be a Republic founded on discrimination and a pervasive sense of fear. It cannot exclude or target anyone simply on the basis of their identity. It is hard to predict the shape of any movement. We left the current generation of students a tattered constitutional legacy, weak institutions, an uncertain economic future, a poisonous public discourse and a corrosive politics. We left them insecure and weak leaders or those whose divisive passions are their only policy. So this movement will have to find its own vocabulary, leadership and strategy for moral and institutional regeneration. But here are some possible challenges to ponder, based on past experience, especially of the Emergency.

In some ways, the fight during the Emergency was simple. It was a fight for the restoration of democracy against authoritarianism, joined by all kinds of forces. At this fraught moment there are two battles. There is a battle against state authoritarianism, its attempts to exercise pervasive control. But there is also the battle against communalism, the attempt to divide society and unleash passions that relegate minorities to second class citizens. They are two sides of the same coin — the government is fomenting both processes. But in society, the two can work at cross purposes. The BJP has a slew of proposed bills, from anti-conversion laws, to a common civil code to population control. Each one of them will, like the CAA, wear the garb of secularism; each one will, in its content, likely smuggle in majoritarianism by disguise. These will pose both tactical and moral challenges.

The tactical challenge will be that they will once again consolidate majoritarian identities, produce that fog of silence in which the CAA will be excused. The moral challenge will be to find a vocabulary and positions that nudge secularism towards freedom and equality for all individuals rather than one that pits minority and majority identities in competition with each other, as our politics often did. The communal axis will be used to divide society so that it cannot unite against the authoritarian state. So, the fight over CAA

The communal and institutional fissures that we are dealing with run within our families, often even within us. The streets would not have become necessary if the normal institutional channels of upholding principles had not failed so miserably. Our institutions failed not just because of political forces, but because, few exceptions apart, so many of teachers, university leaders, Supreme Court judges, policemen, bureaucrats, journalists, corporate leaders, etc. often let us down on basic institutional principles.



OSAMA MANZAR

DEAR MEMBERS OF the board, Internet Society (ISOC), and Public Interest Registry (PIR), who manage the dot org domain: This is in the context of your decision to sell all the assets of PIR to a private company. Have you ever met or interacted with homeless people? Those who may not have a home or a physical address? Similarly, on the World Wide Web, having an address is a must for our existence. All human beings, with any activity they do, need a domain on the internet to belong or to identify with — a digital address.

Dot Org, besides dot ngo, was one such domain that offered entities that do not work for profit, a digital identity. When I have a web address or email ID with dot org as a suffix, people immediately identify me as someone involved in not-for-profit activities.

In other words, dot org is a space that shelters communities involved in charitable activities, be it human rights, poverty alleviation or disaster mitigation: Initiatives which make the world a just place for all humans. In fact, the entire United Nations and all its bodies have a digital home with an extension of dot org.

I would like to give you a glimpse of my personal association with ISOC and PIR that has empowered millions of people and



## DECEMBER 19, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

**INDIRA'S ESCAPE STORY** THE POPULAR SUSPICION that Indira Gandhi planned to flee the country after her defeat in the 1977 poll has been confirmed by Mohammed Yunus, her close confidant, in his book, *Persons, Passions and Politics*. This was pointed out by Janata Party General Secretary Surendra Mohan. The plan misfired due to alleged "treachery" by R N Kao, then chief of the Research and Analysis Wing. Yunus says: "Kao was the first to alert the Janata leaders about Mrs Gandhi's plan to escape and thus got her passport impounded."

**JANATA POLL PROSPECT** THE JANATA PARTY general secretary, Nanaji

Deshmukh, said he was confident that his party would come back to the Lok Sabha with an absolute majority. The Janata Party would form a government at the Centre without depending on any one and there was no question of coalition government, he told reporters. His optimism was based on the on-the-spot assessment of his party's poll prospects in the southern states, Maharashtra and Bengal.

**MOFATEH KILLED** GUNMEN ON MOTORCYCLES assassinated Mohammad Mofateh, a close associate of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and two of his bodyguards. Officials immediately blamed

the US. Mofateh, head of Teheran University's theology department, was believed to be the fourth religious leader assassinated since Khomeini's revolution in February. The ruling Revolutionary Council declared in a statement: "This is the work of the CIA and Savak (the deposed Shah's secret police)."

**OPEC PRICES** THE ORGANISATION OF Petroleum Exporting Countries' year-end conference entered its second day with a dispute over oil prices. Saudi Arabia was holding out for no increase in its current base price of \$24 dollars a barrel. Libya has suggested that the price should go as high as \$34.

## HOMELESS ON THE INTERNET

The dot org domain offered non-profit entities a crucial digital identity

thousands of organisations. We have been working with the Internet Society for more than a decade, even though we have known each other for longer — a couple of decades, especially since 2003, when WSIS (World Summit on Information Society) was announced by the UN in Geneva.

While working directly with ISOC, my organisation, Digital Empowerment Foundation, worked on community networks to enable last mile connectivity.

And, in partnership with PIR when it was applying to get dot ngo, we conducted a massive campaign in India to bring communities, non-profits and social organisations online. DEF has a deep network of grassroots organisations in India and South Asia and, together with PIR, we influenced more than 5,000 grassroots organisations to come online with dot org domain in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and many more countries.

Almost all those organisations were homeless on the world wide web prior to that. Now, they have a home, an identity, a face to be recognised as a brand. They enjoy a trust quotient which helps when it comes to issues such as funding and other support that is necessary for them to continue their work of empowerment and impact.

We also worked to get thousands of signatures from community organisations to support PIR in order to get the dot ngo domain. PIR finally got the dot ngo to offer that domain to NGOs per se.

I am particularly aghast and fail to understand why you took the decision to sell dot org. Because PIR was created by ISOC to manage dot org as a not-for-profit company and yet function as a sustainable business. It is very much designed to price each domain in a way that people can easily buy the dot org as extension. And it always earned enough from domain sales to be able to fund itself, and also ISOC. In that sense it has worked like a cash cow without violating any ethics or business practice.

Selling a not-for-profit company to a profit making company itself is a violation of promise, ethics, trust, and breach of ownership of digital property.

Kindly note that each entity that resides on dot org is in the "business" of ensuring the greater good — where the core objective is community and human rights. By not selling dot org, you would not only have saved an organisation, you would have saved those who are making this world a better place.

The writer is founder & director of Digital Empowerment Foundation



# The true citizens of India

Students who protest against discriminatory laws and authoritarian ways of government are the real patriots. They offer hope for the future



ALANKRITA SHRIVASTAVA

GROWING UP, I was in an environment where it was normal to engage with what is happening around us — politically and socially. I come from a family of freedom fighters, administrators and public servants. I attended an all girls' boarding school, where we were taught to recognise gender discrimination and protest against it. While at Lady Shri Ram College, we often walked the streets holding candles and placards. Peaceful protest was considered part of everyday life.

When I joined the Mass Communication Research Centre (MCRC) at Jamia Millia Islamia, it was diverse in its range of students. In our batch of 20-odd students, there were people from the Northeast, Delhi, Bhopal, Chennai and Kolkata; people who spoke English, Hindi or Urdu and people whose first languages were neither. There were students of different faiths — Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs.

It was a cacophony of people. We sang songs together, we did street plays together, we worked together on film projects, we went for film festivals together, we partied together, we ate biriyani together, we fought, we had love affairs. We went to the Nizamuddin Dargah often to listen to qawwalis. We roamed every corner of Delhi taking photographs and developing them in our college darkrooms. And every Ramzan was super special because an iftar was hosted every evening by somebody or the other. We discussed our ideological differences. We laughed often, we cried sometimes. It was a time like no other.

Jamia was a breath of fresh air. This was the most liberal corner in Delhi where we interacted with pioneering practitioners of theatre, puppetry, and art. And we were encouraged to think for ourselves. Protest was encouraged. In the first year of college, we went on strike, protesting against some faculty decisions, supporting our seniors in their fight. We sang songs of rebellion and refused to attend class. And it was considered normal.

India has a history of non-violent protest pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi. That's how we understood protest. As rightful, and non-violent. But in today's India, dissent is unacceptable. To protest means risking the wrath of authorities, risking bodily harm and even risking your life.

The idea of India as we knew it is changing so fast. Suddenly, there are people who are spewing venom towards minority communities, letting out their innate bigotry. Many of us are angry and bewildered at the monolithic Hindu-Hindi identity suddenly being thrust upon us.

My maternal grandparents migrated from Pakistan. I learned to read and write Urdu when I was young (it's quite rusty now). I grew up listening to Punjabi, Maithili, English and Hindi. I grew up celebrating Eid and Christmas as well as going to gurudwaras. This is apart from visiting temples, of course. And I, personally, follow a school of Buddhist teachings.

When I see the identity of India being eroded by a manipulative, polarising realpolitik, I want to do something. But I am not re-



CR Sasikumar

ally able to. For those of us on the other side of 35, our idealism long dead, protesting feels too difficult. We are too busy with our jobs and living our lives. At the most we engage in drawing room politics. Plus, we are plagued by fear. Is a protest worth it? What if we incur the wrath of the establishment? No point, we think to ourselves. So we sit quietly on the fence, putting our own comfort first. We lack courage.

But students have hope and passion and integrity. They are not jaded by life, their idealism burns bright. And so we have the bravehearts of Jamia and a thousand other students speaking a truth we find too inconvenient to speak. The students are brave enough to speak out, knowing they are risking their lives by doing so. That's why the authorities are so scared of the voices of students.

We forget that the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi ended because of the massive student protests across the country. They fought to protect the values enshrined in the Constitution of India. And many of our current political leaders emerged through the student movements at that time.

It is clear that we are a nation being ruled by an authoritarian government. In a truly free and democratic country, can the police

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force actually storm into a public university and attack the students who are just going about their lives? The darkness, tear gas, the assaults, the broken bones, the lost eye. Who breaks into a girls hostel? Who breaks into a library? Attacking the student community is to attack the future of the country, it is to attack the conscience of the country.

If there is any hope that the polarisation of India on grounds of religion will come to an end, that there will be a step forward in reducing caste-based discrimination, that hope lies only with the students of India. They are the conscience keepers of our society.

In that sense, students who have the courage to protest against discriminatory laws and the authoritarian tactics of the government are the real patriots. They are the true citizens. They will always be the ones who give voice to the voiceless, who embrace diversity and thus protect the values enshrined in the Constitution. They are the hope for the future. Perhaps, the only hope.

Shrivastava is a screenwriter and director who made the award-winning film, *Lipstick Under my Burkha*. She completed her post-graduation from Jamia Millia Islamia in 2003

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It's hoped the outside world would view the first China-built aircraft carrier from a positive perspective. China, the second-largest economy in the world, has also become strong militarily."

—GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

# Not about Hindu and Muslim

BJP under-estimated the CAA effect in the Northeast. It has opened up multiple battle fronts in the region



KHAM KHAN SUAN HAUSING

THE CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) Act, 2019 (CAA) has done for the BJP what 68 years of attempts by various incarnations of the NRC — especially 1951 and 2019 — failed to achieve: To prepare a blueprint for a national register of Indian citizens to suit its cultural and political projects. By conspicuously excluding Muslims from the list of six "persecuted minorities" of the three neighbouring states of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India on or before December 31, 2014, the BJP has aggressively pushed its longstanding commitment to correct a perceived historical wrong committed by Partition and to establish India as a homogenous Hindu homeland.

Using the CAA as a legislative sleight of hand, the BJP is set to legitimise one of its pet political projects in Assam: Overnight ghettoisation of over four million Muslims reportedly excluded in the final NRC list.

In selectively excluding Muslims, the BJP naively assumes that it will draw support from the Assamese people who bore the brunt of "illegal migrants" (read Bangladeshi Muslim migrants). However, by pushing the baseline of acquiring citizenship to December 31, 2014, the BJP has opened up multiple battlefronts in the Northeast.

The anxiety and insecurity unleashed by this is not surprising given the longstanding regional movements to resist the entry of migrant "outsiders" — the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, Brus in Mizoram, and Bengalis in Tripura. The BJP's political managers apparently failed to take seriously this historical complexity when they exacted support from its otherwise reluctant allies like the AGP in Assam, NPP in Meghalaya, and NDPP in Nagaland by inserting an exemption clause for areas covered either under the Sixth Schedule or Inner Line Permit (ILP). The violent protests in Meghalaya and Tripura notwithstanding, their exemption from the purview of the CAA caught the BJP unawares. While Manipur, which was once the locus of protest, maintained a conspicuous silence thanks to its new-found cover under ILP, protests began to emerge in the ILP states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.

The well-informed segments in these states are conscious about the facile protective mechanism provided by the Sixth Schedule and ILP. Back in the 1990s, sociologist MN Karna has shown how ineffectual the Sixth Schedule is in regulating actual ownership and transfer of tribal lands. It is the fear of tribal land alienation and insecurity about their identity, culture and resources at the hands of migrant "outsiders" and the complicity of tribal elites, a possibility reinforced and made more imminent by the CAA, which propelled violent protests, especially in Meghalaya and Tripura.

Given that states do not have the power to control inter-state migration, a state like

Mizoram which has unsettled problem with the Bru and Chakma migrants, is beginning to realise the mistake made by their MP who timidly underscored the need to frame an anti-minority protection law while the supporting the CAA. Not only has the CAA reinforced the Meitei demand for being listed as a Scheduled Tribe, it has also given momentum to the call for pan-Manipur legislation like the Manipur People's Protection Bill, 2018 which is yet to receive the presidential assent. This and intermittent attempts to extend land reforms laws to the hill areas are seen as clear majoritarian signals to obliterate historical protective discrimination enjoyed by the hill people.

In what is largely seen as a replay of the Assam Agitation of 1979-85, widespread popular and violent protests led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and various tribe/ethnic organisations have broken out, leading to an extended imposition of curfews and internet shutdown in 10 districts from December 11 until the Gauhati High Court asked the state to restore internet service on December 17. As the famous *Jai Ai Axom* slogan resonates the air, protesters wearing *gamocha* (the cultural symbol of Assamese subnationalism) targetted Sarbananda Sonowal and Himanta Biswa Sarma. Protesters believe that Sonowal, once hailed as a *Jatiyo Nayok* (national hero), and the AGP sacrificed Assamese *jati* (national) interest at the altar of their ambition for power and pelf. Extending the baseline of acquiring citizenship to December 2014 is also seen as a direct assault on clause 5 of the Assam Accord, 1985, which had fixed the cut-off as March 25, 1971.

A perceptive reading of Assamese subnationalism and Assam's changing historical and political geography show that the CAA entails complex and multilayered issues. For one thing, the globalisation of the tea and oil trade in Assam and the expansion of the British bureaucracy since the latter half of the 19th century drew migrants to the state from across the Subcontinent. As these migrant "outsiders" occupy prime economic, administrative and political positions, they unleash a deep sense of insecurity and anxiety in the minds of local *khilonjias* (loosely translated as indigenous Assamese). Also, Assamese subnationalism is defined by certain distinctive regional markers which refuse to be subsumed within an overarching Hindu nationalist project. This explains why the Assam Agitation (1979-85) and subsequent subnationalist mobilisations are centered around opposition to illegal immigrants and migrant "outsiders" — cutting across religious lines — who allegedly have circumscribed *khilonjias'* access to jobs, identity, culture, land and resources.

In as much as Assam and other parts of the Northeast oppose the CAA and the larger danger of a homogenising Hindu nationalist project, the onus is on regional political elites and the societies at large to accommodate their internal social and cultural diversities. Recent episodes of violent protests in various parts of northeast India and beyond are a stark reminder of the risk of allowing states to be laboratories of a deeply assimilationist, divisive and homogenous project under the garb of the CAA.

The writer is professor of political science, University of Hyderabad

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CHECKING INFLATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The cost of food' (IE, December 18). In its recently-released monetary policy, the Reserve Bank of India revised the CPI inflation figures for December 2019 upwards to 4.7-5.1 per cent from the 3.5-3.7 per cent range predicted in the previous policy. The RBI sees inflation picking up in the near term but expects it to be moderately below target by second quarter of next fiscal. However, given the evolving growth-inflation dynamic, the MPC decided to keep the policy repo rate unchanged.

Vandana Chopra, Chandigarh

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The cost of food' (IE, December 18). When the nation's attention has been drawn to the Citizens Amendment Act, it's heartening that your editorial has taken up issues that require much needed attention. Prior to the introduction of CAB, there were news and memes about onion, GDP growth, unemployment but they seem to have disappeared.

Kanishka Vishal, Bettiah

### SELECTIVE RELIEF

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Addressing a Partition leftover' (IE, December 18). The CAA is a relief for the minorities who have been persecuted in our

### LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to [editpage@expressindia.com](mailto:editpage@expressindia.com) or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301.

neighbouring countries. But excluding the Shias and Ahmadis in Pakistan goes against India's secular ethos.

Sidharth Sharma, Mohali

### IGNORE THEM

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Unfree speech' (IE, December 18). Some people from the film industry have adopted cheap routes to hog the limelight. Interestingly every political party issues homilies on free speech but does not want to practice the same.

Deepak Singhal, Chennai



R S SHARMA AND VARAD PANDE

# Aadhaar, 10 years on

To achieve its full potential, it should be made easier and safer to use

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2010, Ranjana Sonawane, a resident of Tembhli in the tribal district of Nandurbar in Maharashtra received the first Aadhaar number. In less than 10 years, 95 per cent of the adult residents in India have gotten theirs. For a large number of these people, Aadhaar was the first usable ID, in the absence of which they found it difficult to access services.

Do they use it? Yes, about once a month. Equally important, they are satisfied with Aadhaar (92 per cent), trust that the data is safe (90 per cent) and feel that it has made PDS rations, MGNREGS and other social programmes more reliable (80 per cent). These are the findings of the latest State of Aadhaar Report (SoAR) — a study that attempts to capture the impact of Aadhaar in the real world by bringing out voice of the user.

Away from the drawing rooms and seminar halls of experts are people who do not always get enough to eat. For them, exclusion isn't a concept, but a lived reality from which there doesn't seem any escape. Even their rightful dues often fail to reach them. The report finds that nearly 50 per cent of the people have used Aadhaar to access rations, MGNREGS, social pensions, SIM cards or bank accounts for the first time, and that 81 per cent of Aadhaar holders say that they will

provide it if they have a choice of which ID to provide. Sixty one per cent of beneficiaries trust that Aadhaar prevents others from accessing their benefits.

Everyone has compassion for the disadvantaged: The government, political leaders, NGOs, academics, op-ed writers, philanthropists and taxpayers. How do we ensure that we work towards empowering the most vulnerable in a truly objective manner?

This is where carefully designed, large scale studies become important. The State of Aadhaar Report released this year covers 167,000 Indian residents in probably the largest study of its kind. And, it has been prepared under the guidance of balanced technical and advisory panels that include some prominent supporters and critics of Aadhaar.

However, it would be a mistake to read the report for a validation of one's own viewpoint. Instead, it should be studied for the insights that the data provides. These insights can become the basis for the improvement in systems, not only by UIDAI or the government but by everyone who has a stake in improving the economic and societal benefits that depend upon a robust ID system.

For instance, there are some cases where authentication fails because the biometrics are defaced due to age. During the launch of

the report, retired Supreme Court judge, Justice Srikrishna, recounted how he too had trouble in getting authenticated due to the difficulty of scanning his fingerprints. But Justice Srikrishna, in the same breath, also suggested a solution. He pointed out that despite the failure to read his fingerprint, he was not denied entry at passport controls in many countries to which he has travelled. That was possible because someone had the authority to make an exception after proper scrutiny.

The UIDAI has always maintained that there would be individuals for whom biometric authentication does not work. However, failure to authenticate cannot be a reason to deny any services to them and the organisation requesting the authentication must mandatorily provide an exception handling mechanism in such cases. The Supreme Court too has recognised this need in its judgement that upheld Aadhaar's legality.

For those who want to delve deeper into the data to derive insights for their specific needs, there is a useful companion site (<http://stateofaadhaar.in>) where they can access an interactive dashboard. Researchers can also download the entire data and their own analysis. We hope that all stakeholders in the government, non-profit and private

sectors make full use of this opportunity, tease out every lesson and every new question, and share them publicly and widely.

The report indicates a need for the state to double down on the unfinished agenda of ensuring that Aadhaar works for everyone, that is, marginalised groups are enrolled, the process to update records is made simpler, the grievance redress systems are strengthened, and exclusions due to Aadhaar are eliminated.

Aadhaar has touched the life of almost every Indian resident. If there is one learning from the study, it is that the best way to deliver on the promise of Aadhaar is to focus on improving the user experience, making it easier for everyone to use Aadhaar safely every day.

It is only then that the bold bet which began with Ranjana Sonawane in a remote corner of Nandurbar a decade ago, will achieve its full potential.

Sharma was the founding Director-General, UIDAI, and now Chairman, TRAI. Pande was involved in the early implementation of Aadhaar and now works for Omidyar Network India, an investment firm focused on social impact that supports the State of Aadhaar initiative







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## THIS WORD MEANS

## HOUBARA BUSTARD

Pakistan gives Qatar royals permits to hunt it. What is this bird?



Asian houbara bustard, which is distinct from the African species. Wikipedia

THE GOVERNMENT of Pakistan has issued special permits to the Emir of Qatar and nine other members of the royal family to hunt the houbara bustard, an internationally protected bird species.

Bustards are large, terrestrial birds that belong to several species, including some of the largest flying birds. The houbara bustard, which lives in arid climates, comes in two distinct species as recognised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, one residing in North Africa (*Chlamydotis undulata*) and the other in Asia (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*). The population of the Asian houbara bustards extends from northeast Asia, across central Asia, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula to reach the Sinai desert. According to the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC), roughly 33,000 Asian houbara bustards and over 22,000 of the North African houbara bustards remain today. After breeding in the spring,

the Asian bustards migrate south to spend the winter in Pakistan, the Arabian Peninsula and nearby Southwest Asia. Some Asian houbara bustards live and breed in the southern part of their ranges including parts of Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan. According to IFHC, the main reasons for the houbara's decline are poaching, unregulated hunting, along with degradation of its natural habitat.

While Pakistanis are not allowed to hunt the bird, the government invites Arab royals to hunt it every year. This is not the first time the Qatari Prince has got such a permit. According to a report in *Dawn*, he was granted permission to hunt in late 2018 for a sum of \$100,000. The latest person-specific permits will allow the individuals to hunt over 100 houbara bustards over a 10-day safari during the three month hunting season between November 1, 2019 - January 31, 2020. The hunting area is spread over the provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab.

## TIP FOR READING LIST

## MEMOIRS OF A WWII SECRET GUERRILLA

IN 1940, Britain formed a secret fighting organisation called the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Formed by then Prime Minister Winston Churchill after the defeat of the French Army by the German forces during World War II, and in the wake of Britain's retreat from continental Europe in 1940, the SOE was tasked in Nazi-occupied France to infiltrate and forcefully recruit and train local French résistants to attack the German war machine. Though one of the most important Allied units, it was highly secret during the War.

Now, one of its agents has come out with a book on his experiences in SOE. *They Fought Alone* is written by Charles Glass who, along with John Starr, both Anglo-American recruits and together known as the "Starr brothers", led a group of guerillas, assassins and saboteurs. SOE's mission in Nazi-occupied France was to infiltrate, recruit and train local French résistants to attack the German war machine. In fact,



every country under the Axis rule from the Far East to France came under a section of SOE that recruited locals and equipped them with the training required to challenge their occupation.

SoE went on to become the rival of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or MI6, which did not appreciate this intrusion.

The book mentions, "MI6's method was 'hush-hush', while SOE went for 'boom-boom'."

Glass tells the story about the clandestine organisation and about the ordeals faced by the Starr brothers during and after the war. The author is a journalist who began his career in 1973 with ABC News Beirut bureau and covered among others the Arab-Israeli war and the civil war in Lebanon. For *They Fought Alone*, Glass interviewed surviving wartime Resistance fighters and referenced recently declassified documents from Britain's SOE files, the French archives, family letters and diaries.

SHYAMLAL YADAV

NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 18

ON MONDAY, Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde called for a "filter" to check "abuse" of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. "There is paralysis and fear about this Act. People are not taking decisions... We want to find a way to stop the abuse of RTI Act," he said.

Bobde's remarks came a month after the Supreme Court declared the office of the CJI a public authority under the ambit of the RTI. Over the years, the Supreme Court has stressed the importance of transparency under RTI at times, and also remarked on its overuse at other times.

## For a stronger RTI

**DENIAL OF INFORMATION:** On December 16, 2015, in *Jayantilal N Mistry vs Reserve Bank of India*, Justice M Y Eqbal and Justice C Nagappan observed: "It had long since come to our attention that the Public Information Officers under the guise of one of the exceptions given under Section 8 of RTI Act, have evaded the general public from getting their hands on the rightful information that they are entitled to... The ideal of 'Government by the people' makes it necessary that people have access to information on matters of public concern. The free flow of information about affairs of Government paves way for debate in public policy and fosters accountability in Government. It creates a condition for 'open governance' which is a foundation of democracy."

**NGOs UNDER RTI:** In *DAV College Trust and Managing... vs Director of Public Instructions* on September 17, 2019, a Bench of Justice Deepak Gupta and Justice Aniruddha Bose declared that NGOs are not beyond the RTI Act. This was based on an examination of the question whether NGOs are substantially financed by the government. The Bench observed, "In our view, substantial means a large portion. It does not necessarily have to mean a major portion or more than 50%. No hard and fast rule can be laid down in this regard. Substantial financing can be both direct or indirect. To give an example, if a land in a city is given free of cost or on heavy discount to hospitals, educational institutions or such other body, this in itself could also be substantial financing. The very estab-



From left: Former Information Commissioners Yashovardhan Azad, Deepak Sandhu (former CIC), MM Ansari and Shailesh Gandhi with others. Renuka Puri/File Photo

lishment of such an institution, if it is dependent on the largesse of the State in getting the land at a cheap price, would mean that it is substantially financed. Merely because financial contribution of the State comes down during the actual funding, will not by itself mean that the indirect finance given is not to be taken into consideration. The value of the land will have to be evaluated not only on the date of allotment but even on the date when the question arises as to whether the said body or NGO is substantially financed. Whether an NGO or body is substantially financed by the government is a question of fact which has to be determined on the facts of each case."

Because of this observation, the spotlight falls of several NGOs that have been getting public money and were not covered under the RTI. There are societies directly controlled by politicians, but fighting cases that they are not covered under the transparency law.

## Critical of overuse

**TIME CONSUMED IN REPLYING:** In *Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) & Anr vs Aditya Bandhopadhyay and Others* in 2011, the Supreme Court said: "The nation does not want a scenario where 75% of the staff of public authorities spends 75% of their time in collecting and furnishing information to applicants instead of discharging their regular duties."

According to estimates, nearly 60-70 lakh RTI applications are filed in India every year,

and activists have questioned whether addressing these would require 75% of the time of government staff. Several public authorities have used this observation while denying information, ignoring the fact in the same case, the Supreme Court had ordered disclosure of the requisite information.

**PERSONAL AND PUBLIC:** In *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Central Information Commission & Ors* in October 2012, a Bench of Justices K S Radhakrishnan and Dipak Misra observed, "The performance of an employee/officer in an organisation is primarily a matter between the employee and the employer and normally those aspects are governed by the service rules which fall under the expression 'personal information', the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or public interest. On the other hand, the disclosure of which would cause unwarranted invasion of privacy of that individual. Of course, in a given case, if the Central Public Information Officer or the State Public Information Officer of the Appellate Authority is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information, appropriate orders could be passed but the petitioner cannot claim those details as a matter of right."

Various public authorities have used this order to deny information on cases/inquiries going on against government officials.

## Genesis of the law

It was the Supreme Court that had sown

VISHNU VARMA

KOCHI, DECEMBER 18

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Experts have been demanding faster transportation options including railways and waterways. However, the current railway network is congested with a large number of trains, level crossings and sharp curves. The fastest train, plying between Thiruvananthapuram and Kasaragod, takes nearly 12 hours to cover 532 km.

The Silver Line project, conceived at least a decade ago, aims to connect major districts and towns with semi high-speed trains that will run on their own tracks.

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verse through 11 of the state's 14 districts, Alappuzha, Wayanad and Idukki being the exceptions. There are also plans to connect the corridor with the international airports at Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. The project is scheduled to be commissioned by 2024.

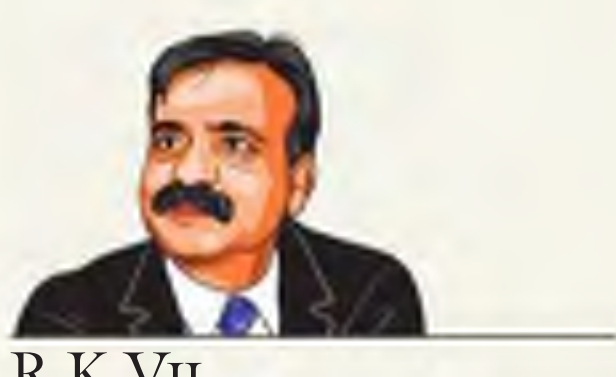
## Who will implement the project?

The Kerala Rail Development Corporation (K-Rail), a joint venture between the Ministry of Railways and the Kerala government to execute projects on a cost-sharing basis, will be the nodal agency. The government is believed to be looking at external funding agencies. An initial investment is likely to be made by K-Rail for acquiring land. A Detailed Project Report (DPR) will be commissioned soon.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the construction will result in direct and indirect employment opportunities for 50,000 people, and the project once completed would create direct employment for at least 11,000 people.

## AN EXPERT EXPLAINS

## How Ramanna ran his empire of terror, what now for Maoists in Chhattisgarh



R K Vij

RAMANNA, ALSO known as Narendra and Ravulla Srinivas, the central committee (CC) member of the CPI (Maoist) and secretary of Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee (DKSZC), died recently of acute diabetes and high blood pressure.

When Ramanna took over the reins of the DKSZC from CC member Kosa alias Kadari Satyanarayan in 2011, the "people's liberation guerrilla army" (PLGA) was already a strong force. This wasn't due to the capabilities of Kosa or Ramanna *per se* — rather, the ground was prepared by the Salwa Judum movement that had risen against the Maoists in the Kutru area of Bijapur in June 2005. The Maoists succeeded in brainwashing a section of local people who were opposed to the Salwa Judum, into joining them.

From 2005-10, Maoist recruitments peaked, and they strengthened themselves militarily, politically and organisationally. New Maoist divisions emerged, and military formations were created to step up attacks on security forces and special police officers (SPOs). Realising the challenge from the Salwa Judum, the CPI (Maoist) at its 9th (Unity) Congress in 2007 decided to crush it ruthlessly.

## Ruthless, indiscriminate

Unleashing terror through indiscriminate killings was Ramanna's signature style. He was extraordinarily brutal — wrists and ankles were cut to strip local security personnel of watches and shoes. He had an improvised explosive device (IED) embedded in a jawan's body, intending it to go off during the autopsy. Thirty-five civilians were killed and more than 200 hutments were burnt in his attack on the Errabore relief camp in Sukma in July 2006 — not even children or cattle were spared. Petrol bombs were used in the March 2007 attack in Ranibodli, Bijapur, which left 55 policemen dead and many bodies charred beyond recognition. Ramanna never hesitated to kill sick, off-duty, or defenceless jawans.

In February 2006, Ramanna led the NMDC magazine attack in Kirandul, Dantewada, in which eight CISF personnel were killed and 19 tonnes of explosives were looted. The April 2010 attack engineered by Ramanna, which killed 76 CRPF troopers and one local policeman near Tadmetla in Sukma shook the nation. During the attack on the Congress's "Parivartan Yatra" in Jheeram Ghati in May 2013, senior leader Mahendra Karma was stabbed over 70 times after he had surrendered himself before the Maoists.

Ramanna did not confine his violence to the security forces; during the 2013 elections, an ambulance and a civilian bus were blown up to spread terror.

He used IEDs extensively — in such attacks, victims' bodies are often torn apart so violently that it becomes difficult to ascertain identities. After an electricity department vehicle was blown up in Narayanpur in June 2007, the body parts of the private mechanics had to be collected in bags to be sent to their families for last rites. Faced with a shortage of ammunition, Ramanna, in the DKSZC's 15th meeting in August 2019, asked cadres to use "S-B-R", i.e., sniper attacks, booty traps, and remote IEDs.

## Operation and extortion

Although he himself had a child from his wife Savitri, Ramanna forced junior cadres to have vasectomies and abortions. He claimed to fight for the landless and tribals, but there is no evidence he ever did anything for them.

Development efforts in Bastar received serious setbacks. While destruction of roads and culverts are routine, all of Bastar was plunged into darkness after three high tension wire towers were blown up near Jhara Ghati in Narayanpur in May 2007. Essential services were disrupted for about 11 days, and hospitals all but shut down. After a similar blast in Barsur the following year, the Maoists faced the public's wrath.

Ramanna's operations dealt blows to Bastar's rich tribal culture. Maoists had stopped the custom of the *ghotul* as early as in the 1980s; weekly *haats* too, were later disrupted and businessmen who defied the Maoists were killed.

Under Ramanna, the Maoists extorted a fixed levy per bag of *tendupatta* from contractors, and forced tribals to give them at least a day's income. Road and building contractors, industrialists, transporters, were victims of extortion. The Maoists' annual expenditure in Dandakaranya is estimated to

be about Rs 12 crore; the extortion revenue from *tendupatta* alone is at least Rs 50 crore.

Ramanna enforced election boycotts, and Independence Day and Republic Day were observed as "black days". The 2013 attack on Congress leaders and the murder of a BJP MLA and his securitymen in Dantewada in April 2019 demonstrated their outlook towards democratic institutions.

## The present and future

As the security forces expanded their operations, the Maoists started to move into newer areas. "In order to reduce repression by the security forces in DK and preserve the guerrilla base, we must plan expansion of the party beyond DK," exhorted Ramanna in one of the SZC meetings. In 2014, the Maoists' Central Regional Bureau decided to establish a separate Maharashtra-Pradesh-Chhattisgarh (MMC) zone, and Ramanna sent more than 50 armed cadres there to undertake expansion activities.

The top Maoist leadership has always remained with cadres from Andhra Pradesh. Only three DKSZC members are from Dandakaranya currently; all have a limited profile. Madkam Hidma, who belongs to Sukma and has significant hold

over the local population, is not considered to have the organisational and political ability to take the party forward. Ganesh Uikely alias Paka Hanumantlu, the secretary of the South Sub-Zonal Bureau (earlier called south regional committee), who had been superseded by Ramanna in 2011, might be appointed to the vacant position. The secretary of the North Sub-Zonal Bureau, Raju, who is also known by his aliases Vijaya Juru and K Ram Chandra Reddy, is also in the running. If both these men are overlooked, someone from the CC — like Devji — could be the next DKSZC secretary.

Except for the MMC zone, Maoist activities are in decline everywhere. Fresh recruitment in DK has almost dried up, surrenders have increased, and military formations are smaller. Ganapathy's retirement as CPI (Maoist) general secretary, and now Ramanna's death are significant blows — and provide an opportunity for the security forces to advance vigorously. The two-pronged strategy of development and direct action has worked well, and the 'surrender and rehabilitation' policy has been successful.

(The author is a senior IPS officer in Chhattisgarh. Views are his own.)