





# No light at the end of this tunnel

The Char Dham tunnel disaster is only the most recent in a long line of mishaps, and it has ‘man-made’ written all over it

Rashme Sehgal

On Diwali morning, 40 workers found themselves trapped in a 4.5-km-long under-construction tunnel connecting Silkyara to Polgaon in Uttarkashi district. This is only the most recent in a long line of mishaps that have plagued the construction of what is being touted as one of the longest tunnels being built under the Char Dham Yojana.

While keeping the benefits of motorists at heart—the tunnel will reduce the distance from Uttarkashi to Yamunotri by 26 kilometres—it is completely insensitive to both human and natural resources in this vulnerable zone.

Bhim Singh Rawat, a scientist working with SANDRP (South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People) points out, “No safety protocols were in place when the accident occurred. When the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) arrived at the tunnel site on this black Sunday, they found there was only one JCB (mechanical excavator) available at the site. The Augur drilling machine needed to dig a hole through the tunnel reached the disaster site only on 14 November, a full 48 hours after the accident had occurred.”

The most regrettable aspect of this tragedy is that part of this very same tunnel had collapsed in 2019. (Fortunately, at that time no workers were trapped.) Rawat is horrified to note that “no safety ducts had been put in place despite the fact that they were working along a fault line, which the supervising engineers know to be extremely risky. The government had also sent for a 900-metre-long pipeline in order to reach the workers, but since that operation failed, they sent for Hume pipes (precast concrete pipes) which will be used to try and rescue the trapped workers.”

The trial-and-error method make one’s blood run cold. Government officials maintain they have established contact with the trapped workers but have not parted with simple voice recordings of messages that might reassure the stricken families of the poor workers.

Local politicians, when informed that most of these workers are from outside the state (only two are from Uttarakhand), point out that when the Char Dham yatra was started, the central government had claimed it would provide large scale employment to the local youth. Clearly, this has not been the case.

Varun Adhikari, an engineering geologist says, “The collapse at Silkyara is a classic case of unprofessional tunnelling practices and negligence toward essential tunnelling principles. It also highlights the importance of maintaining diligence in

adhering to proper procedures especially in reprofiling and utilising hydraulic breakers or minor blasting with due consideration of the tunnel’s specific conditions and potential consequences on the surrounding rock mass.”

Dr C.P. Rajendran, a scientist who specialises in earthquake geology and tectonics, is equally aghast. “No SOPs (standard operating procedures) were being followed here, with serious consequences. Previously, such excavations in the mountains were carried out under the supervision of competent geologists, followed by continuous tunnel logging, among other precautionary measures. Why were no safety norms or reviews ordered by the authorities even after the tunnel collapse in 2019?”

The answer is not hard to find. The tunnel construction was being supervised by the National Highways Authority of India along with DSCL (DCM Shriram Consolidated Limited) which, in turn, contracted it to the Navyug Construction Company which, in turn, sub-let it to another company that obviously lacks the expertise to undertake such a project.

Inadequate geological understanding of the natural composition of the rocks in the region and non-compliance with regulations are a lethal combination. Cost constraints (such as they are) compromise regulations (such as they are), while the extensive use of explosive triggers landslides. Environment Impact Assessment had been done away with for the entire Char Dham project and people on the ground are paying for this with their lives.

Consider the toll taken by the road and rail construction activity in Uttarakhand under the Char Dham Yojana and the Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd respectively.

*‘How do you explain people working early morning on a holiday (Diwali)? The contractor must be under tremendous pressure to meet a deadline. Easy to guess what the hurry is in an election year’*



The under-construction Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand’s Uttarkashi district where the mishap occurred

In October, nearly 40 workers had a narrow escape after a fire broke out (due to an inflammatory chemical) inside a tunnel being constructed for the Rishikesh-Karnaprayag railway project in Rudrapur district.

On 13 August, 114 workers and engineers trapped in shoulder-deep water about 300 metres inside the under-construction Edit-2 tunnel were rescued in the nick of time. This too is part of the same Rishikesh-Karnaprayag project. They were lucky. The water was first pumped out using heavy equipment after which a police contingent was employed to bring them out.

In July, a landslide triggered by heavy rainfall led to enormous pile-ups on both ends of the Daat Kali tunnel that connects Saharanpur to Dehradun, with commuters held up inside.

The Chamba-Tehri tunnel which is part of the Rishikesh-Gangotri road link has developed huge cracks. People living in this region are terrified because the tunnelling has resulted in major land subsidence in

this entire area with their houses developing cracks as well.

It is no consolation that tunnel collapses are not unique to Uttarakhand. On 19 May, the tunnel under construction at Khooni Nallah in Ramban district on the Jammu-Srinagar highway collapsed, resulting in the death of four workers and injuries to many more.

With multiple fatalities resulting from the 1,100 landslides in Uttarakhand alone this year, widespread human, material, economic and environmental loss has exceeded the community’s ability to cope, as we have seen in Himachal and Sikkim as well.

Rajendran warns that the intensity of disasters in the Himalayas will only go from bad to worse: “It has become clear that the exponential increase in the occurrence of landslide-related disasters in the Uttarakhand Himalayas cannot be categorised any longer as ‘natural disaster’, as much of it is man-made or human accelerated disaster, triggered by unscientific cliff cutting to widen the roads under the Char

Dham project. The tunnel construction failure on the Brahmkhal-Yamunotri road in Uttarkashi district is only the most recent in the trail of disasters we have witnessed in the Himalayas.”

Despite objections raised by expert panels, and caveats issued by courts, the government is steamrolling ahead. “How else do you explain people working early morning on a holiday (Diwali)?” asked Rajendran. “The work is going on 24x7, the contractor must be under tremendous pressure to meet a deadline given by the authorities. Easy to speculate what the hurry is in an election year.”

Every time such disasters occur, government representatives label them ‘geological surprises’. If massive infrastructural projects are implemented under incompetent supervision in a dynamic and environmentally fragile landscape like that of the Himalayas, anything would be a ‘surprise’. What is shocking is the cavalier disregard of environmental concerns and scientific advice. And the heartless, heedless risk to human life. ■

# The ‘masterstroke’ that cut deep

Aakar Patel reminds us of the damage that ‘notebandi’ unleashed on the nation

Demonetisation’s anniversary (8 November) came and went, without any defence of that masterstroke from the Indian government.

‘Notebandi’ was the idea of a man with a diploma in mechanical engineering from Latur, a town in Maharashtra. Anil Bokil runs an institution called ArthaKranti (literal: economic revolution), and describes himself as an economic theorist. His thinking was: in a country like India where 70 per cent of the population survives on just Rs 150 per day, why do we need currency notes of more than Rs 100?

Days after Modi abolished 86 per cent of India’s currency, Bokil revealed in an interview how the prime minister had got the idea. In July 2013, soon after Modi was declared the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate, Bokil went to Ahmedabad with his colleagues and sought to present an ArthaKranti proposal.

Modi gave Bokil 10 minutes. “By the time I was done, I realised that he had listened to me for 90 minutes. He said nothing after I had made my presentation,” Bokil said. This is not surprising. The idea that a simple, magical and transformational action could be executed by him would have transfixed Modi.

On the ArthaKranti website, the benefits of demonetisation which were conveyed to Modi at that meeting are listed, including: “Terrorist and anti-national activities would be controlled”, “the motive for tax avoidance would be reduced”, “corruption would be minimised” and there would be a ‘significant growth in employment’. What’s not to like?

Conspicuous by their absence, however, are details of how demonetisation would be executed and its benefits achieved. There is no reference to or analysis of what the fallout could be.

ArthaKranti also proposed withdrawing the entire taxation system in favour of a transaction tax, accompanied by a Rs 2,000 limit on cash transactions. The ideas were reductive, simplistic and, apparently, easy

to implement. It was perfect for Modi, who picked the single most dramatic element from this—demonetisation—and pushed it through.

In his speech announcing demonetisation on 8 November 2016, Modi said India’s problems were corruption, black money and terrorism. Strong steps would need to be taken against these and he would be the one to take them. Indians were honest and yet India was corrupt, and so a powerful and decisive step was needed against corruption, black money and terrorism.

Had people ever thought about where the money for terrorism came from, Modi asked. It came from Pakistan’s counterfeiting operations in India, which was proved by the frequency of arrests. He said the circulation of cash was linked to corruption and this was why Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes comprised

80 and 90 per cent of the total currency, respectively. He was cancelling them as legal tender in four hours, at the stroke of midnight. That would mean “such notes, currently in the hands of anti-national people, would become worthless”.

Modi acknowledged that there would be some discomfort through this move, but that would not be a problem. This was because, he said, ordinary citizens were enthusiastic about sacrifice and willing to endure hardships for the country.

No preparation had been made by various departments. We know this because the Cabinet was summoned on 8 November and ministers were told to leave their mobile phones behind so the act could remain secret till it was announced at the meeting. Since ministers didn’t know, their departments didn’t know and so nobody was pre-

pared, just as was the case with the national lockdown of 2020.

Modi had been specifically warned by the RBI—the body that actually had to demonetise the notes of currency that its governor had guaranteed with his signature—that demonetisation was a mistake.

Raghuram Rajan resigned as governor after having discussed and disapproved of this move. The new governor, Urjit Patel, was arm-twisted by Modi into accepting it within weeks of taking office. He then refused to release the minutes of the meeting the RBI urgently held at 5.30 p.m. on 8 November (just before Modi’s speech) to approve the unhinged move, citing national security and a ‘threat to life’.

When the minutes were finally leaked to the press two years later in November 2018, Patel quit (he left the following month). The

RBI minutes said it had been told by the government that:

- The economy had grown by 30 per cent between 2011 and 2016 but the currency notes of higher denomination had grown at a much higher rate.
- Cash was the facilitator for black money.
- Counterfeit money of an estimated Rs 400 crore was present in the system.
- Therefore, Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes should be made invalid.

The RBI’s response to the government was as follows:

- The economic growth referred to by the government was real, while the rise in currency was nominal and not adjusted for inflation; ‘hence this argument does not adequately support the recommendation’ for demonetisation.
- Most black money was held as land or gold and not cash, and abolishing currency would have no effect on curbing black money.
- Demonetisation would have a negative impact on GDP.
- Rs 400 crore in counterfeit currency was insignificant (only 0.02 per cent) compared to the total cash in circulation, which was Rs 18 lakh crore.

Having said all this, the RBI board nonetheless put its rubber stamp on Modi’s idea. The reason why it fought to keep this capitulation secret is clear: It had done its job in pushing back and pointing out the flaws; it was now protecting Modi.

That is why Urjit Patel shamefully claimed there was a national security reason why he could not reveal the minutes, when RTI activists sought to access them.

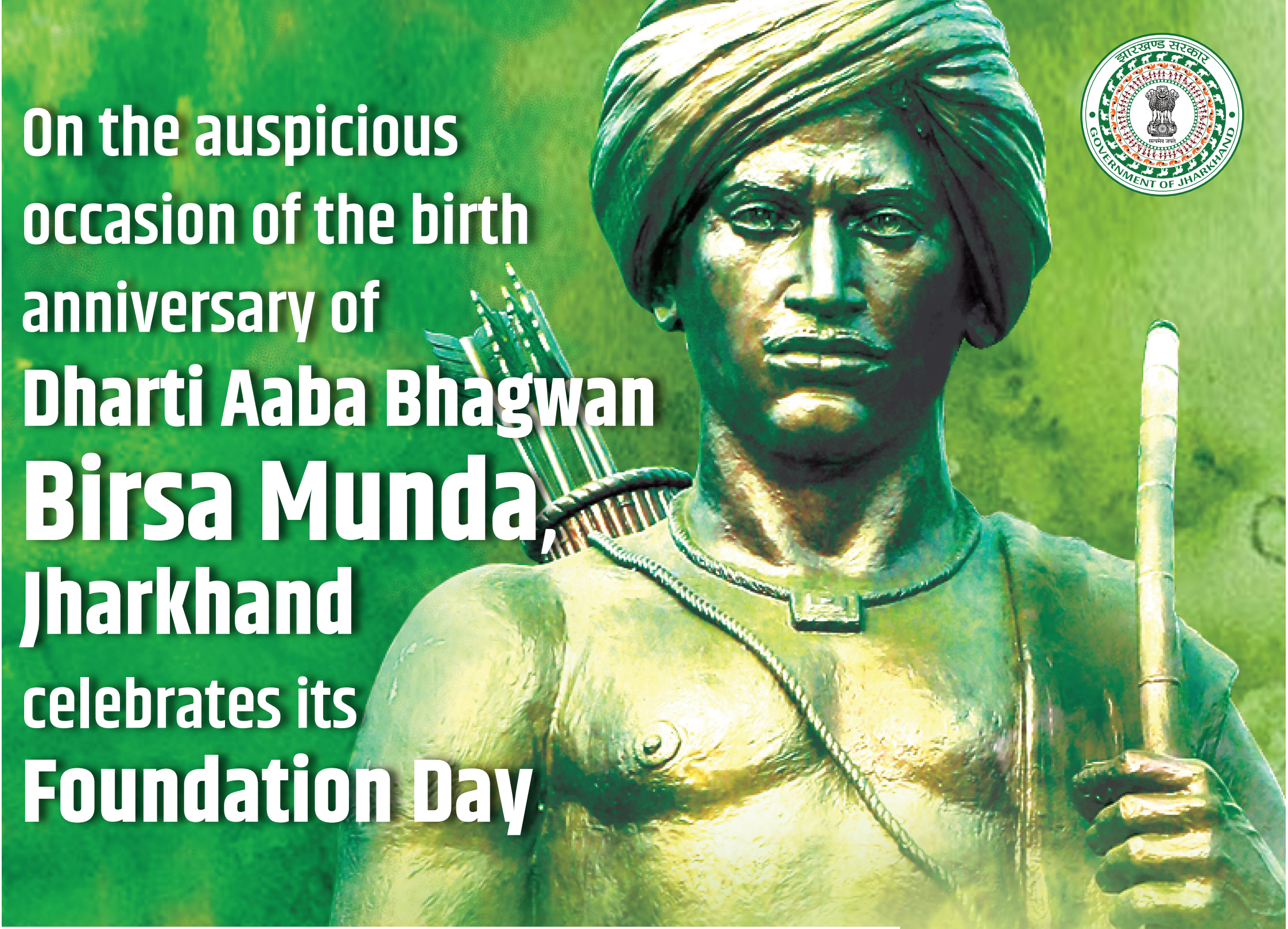
Of course, events proved that the RBI had accurately predicted both the damages and the lack of benefits on every count. What the RBI was hiding was the fact that Modi had ignored its concerns—all of which turned out to be true—and gone ahead anyway. ■



NCP workers stage a protest in Mumbai on the 6th anniversary of demonetisation, 8 Nov. 2022

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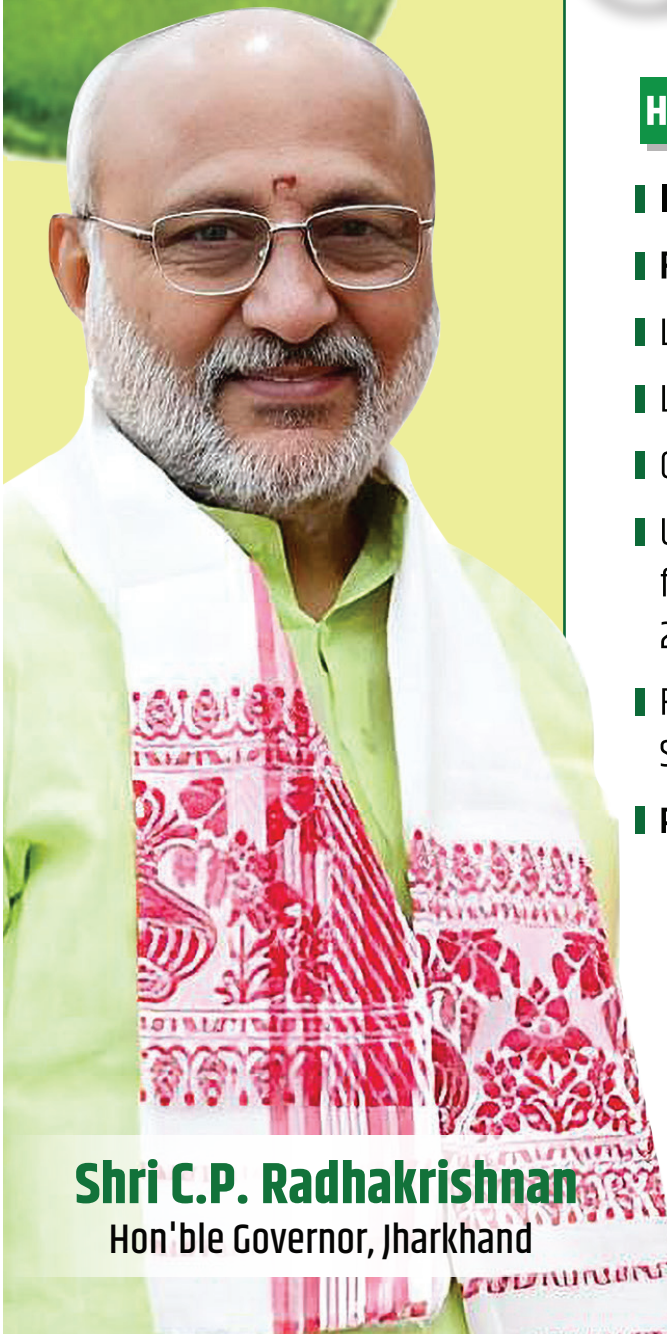
On the auspicious occasion of the birth anniversary of **Dharti Aaba Bhagwan Birsa Munda**, Jharkhand celebrates its **Foundation Day**

Our heartfelt gratitude and homage to the valiant martyrs of Jharkhand for their struggle and sacrifice

# Johar

Highlights of the event

- **Inauguration** of 229 projects worth ₹1,714 crores
- **Foundation stone** being laid of 677 projects worth ₹5,328 crores
- Launch of **Apki Yojana, Apki Sarkar, Apke Dwar** campaign
- Launch of **Abua Awas Yojana** and **Mukhyamantri Gram Gaadi Yojana**
- Offer Letter distribution to **18,034 youths** under the **Rojgar Mela**
- Under the **Savitribai Phule Kishori Samriddhi Yojana**, distribution of financial assistance worth ₹261 crores to **5.5 lakh girls** for the year 2023-2024
- Felicitation of 70 players with **cash rewards** worth ₹2 crores as per Sports Policy
- **Policies to be launched**
  - Jharkhand Startup policy 2023
  - Jharkhand M.S.M.E Promotion Policy 2023
  - Jharkhand Export Policy 2023
  - Jharkhand IT, Data Centre and BPO Investment Promotion Policy 2023



**Shri C.P. Radhakrishnan**  
Hon'ble Governor, Jharkhand



**Shri Hemant Soren**  
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Jharkhand

Date - 15 November, 2023 | Time - 02:00 pm Onwards  
Place - Morhabadi Ground, Ranchi





HERALD VIEW

Survival of the Richest: The India Story

Even at the risk of offending some people, let's replay that sharp-witted, often repeated Aaron Levenstein line on statistics. The American academic once famously said: 'Statistics are like a bikini—what they reveal is interesting, but what they conceal is vital'.

You wouldn't have missed the 'India Shining' headlines that unerringly pop up in election season, headlines quoting macroeconomic statistics that have you think the Indian economy is on a roll. Take for instance the World Bank's latest India Development Update (IDU), its flagship half-yearly report on the Indian economy. It says: 'Despite significant global challenges, India was one of the fastest-growing major economies in FY22-23 at 7.2 per cent. India's growth rate was the second highest among G20 countries and almost twice the average for emerging market economies. This resilience was underpinned by robust domestic demand, strong public infrastructure investment and a strengthening financial sector. Bank credit growth increased to 15.8 per cent in the first quarter of FY23-24 compared with 13.3 per cent in the first quarter of FY22-23.'

Other reports point out that the government's GST (Goods and Services Tax) collections are rising. Corporate profits are higher. The capital expenditure budget has gone up from 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2019 to 2.7 per cent in 2023, indicating higher expenditure on infrastructure development. There's more: the number of dollar millionaires in the country is projected to double by 2026 and the number of dollar billionaires in the country has risen to 169, higher than all other countries save the US and China. The waiting list for luxury cars is apparently getting longer and the demand for luxury apartments that cost upwards of Rs 15 crore is growing. You may even have heard of the stampede in malls for Apple iPhones made in India. Sounds good, right?

Now consider what these statistics conceal.

Unemployment in India is at an all-time high while concentration of wealth at the top is back to pre-1947 levels. Savings and investment rates are at a 20-year low. Household savings are down and household borrowings are up, with indications that people are World Hunger Index rankings—it placed India at an ignominious #111 among 125 countries—but a free-ration scheme for 800 million Indians tells another story. While the luxury segments of the economy are growing, rural demand is markedly depressed, as seen in, say, the decline in sales of two-wheelers and tractors. While 10 per cent of Indians have steady and even rising incomes and continue to aspire to a better life, for the rest, survival is still a struggle.

Published in January this year, an Oxfam report, rather perceptively titled 'Survival of the Richest: the India Story', noted that the combined wealth of the 100 richest Indians had touched Rs 54.12 lakh crore—an amount that could fund the entire Union Budget for more than 18 months. These findings corroborate the World Inequality Report 2022, which had flagged India as one of the most unequal countries with yawning income and wealth disparities. Said income gap between India's rich and poor has been increasing over time. As per the report, the income of the top 10 per cent of India's wage earners is 20 times more than what the bottom 50 per cent earn. It is this creamy layer of the top 10 per cent of wage earners, holding about 57 per cent of the country's income, who seem to be driving demand, consumption and India's so-called growth story.

The concentration of wealth is even more stark: while the top 1 per cent of Indians hold 22 per cent of the total net wealth, only 13 per cent rests with the bottom 50 per cent. The Oxfam report has yet another startling figure: between 2012 and 2021, 40 per cent of the wealth created in India has gone to just 1 per cent of the population and a meagre 3 per cent has reached the bottom 50 per cent. A UNDP report this year spoke of poverty concentration in states that are home to 45 per cent of India's population but house 62 per cent of its poor.

India's economic growth story is not for these poor sods. For them, we have election-time doles.

Letters to the Editor

Rupee hits a record low

The Indian rupee dropped to an all-time low of \$83.30 to the US dollar last week. Did it register? One did not see screaming headlines in the 'mainstream' media. There were no debates and panel discussions on the causes and impact of the tumbling rupee on the country's economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who in his unlimited ignorance used to loudly say—before he became the PM—that the rupee's fall was in fact the fall of the government of India's reputation, is silent as a dummy. As if nothing has happened! Hasn't the Modi government's reputation hit a new low along with the falling rupee? We urge the prime minister to speak up and admit his guilt or tell the nation that he was wrong when he made such irresponsible statements.

Subhajit Dasgupta, Ghaziabad

In a recent 'pakodas' employment

In a recent report, learned economists at the State Bank of India (SBI)—India's largest bank and largest lender—have claimed that the unemployment level in the country is at a 'record low'! Well, that qualifies for Ripley's Believe It or Not, doesn't it? They have argued that the jump in the self-employed populace within employment estimates (57.3 per cent in FY23 against 52.2 per cent in FY18) has been 'wrongfully interpreted by labour economists and others' as a signal of shrinking employment opportunities. They didn't stop there. They further stressed that 'earnings have increased across all categories'. While we can leave it to the experts to argue it out, we can certainly put forth what we see happening around us and to us—our

incomes have remained stagnant over the years, jobs are harder to come by, and inflation across sectors has actually made us poorer. The self-employment the SBI economists are talking about is nothing but a regurgitation of what Prime Minister Modi said on a TV channel a few years ago—selling pakodas and earning Rs 200–250 a day is employment. If that is the kind of employment the Modi government and its sarkari economists brag about, they should be ashamed.

Alok Sharma, Delhi

Shameful silence on Gaza

Israel has crossed all civilised limits in bombing and killing civilians in Gaza, including a large number of children. Demonstrations against the Israeli government are being organised across the world, including those where Jews are prominently present, at times even leading such protests. Our country, however, has made it a crime to protest peacefully against Israel's excesses, because it embarrasses our prime minister, who apparently has a deep personal friendship with his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu. Our more-loyal-than-the-king despot has banned peaceful protests in India. Those speaking up for the poor Palestinians on their social media pages/ handles are being booked by the police as criminals. And these same elected autocrats and their minions howl and throw fits when a global report points out that India has slipped several notches on the democracy and freedom index in the past 10 years.

Anurag Dey, Kolkata

India's Growing Unemployment Crisis

The assumption that unemployment can be overcome only if the growth rate is accelerated is false

In an economy like ours where the workforce is not neatly divided between the employed and the unemployed, and where there is massive and mounting casualisation of work, measuring unemployment is a tricky business. Since it necessarily entails asking a person how much work he/ she got over a certain period in the past, the unemployment measure varies, depending on the period taken into account, and how much work over this period is taken to constitute employment.

The National Sample Survey (NSS) has therefore three different concepts in place: usual status, weekly status and daily status. And while it carried out its large sample survey every five years, its annual survey was based on a much smaller sample, because of which its figures were, at best, tentative.

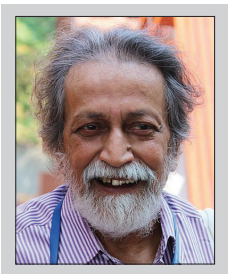
Researchers therefore have increasingly been relying on the figures provided by the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), a non-official organisation that carries out a sample survey every month. An urban survey is conducted every week that asks people whether they were employed on the date of the survey.

The unemployment rate is defined as the ratio of the unemployed (who are willing to and seeking work) to the total labour force, comprising both the employed (i.e., the work force) and the unemployed. One may have reservations about its measure, but the CMIE provides a consistent set of figures over time that can be useful for analysing trends.

The latest CMIE figures for October 2023 showed that the unemployment rate in the country stood at 10.05 per cent; the rural unemployment rate was 10.82 per cent while the urban unemployment rate was 8.44 per cent. The overall unemployment rate was not only higher than in the previous month (7.09 per cent), but the highest since May 2021 when there had been a sharp spike. The previous sharp spike occurred in 2020 because of the lockdown.

This has naturally given rise to much discussion about the growing unemployment crisis in the economy. However, I wish to explore another aspect altogether. Since the CMIE-estimated unemployment rate appears to change noticeably from one month to the next, I have a specific rationale for focusing on a different aspect of the CMIE figures to establish the growing unemployment crisis.

According to the CMIE chief, India's workforce (which is synonymous with the number of employed persons) has remained virtually stagnant at a little over 400 million over the last five years, which means that employment has not



Prabhat Patnaik

increased at all. In October 2023, when the unemployment rate went up so sharply, the total labour force also showed a sudden increase. This rise in the labour force is the outcome of the working age population increasing without any offsetting fall in the labour participation rate. A simple calculation reveals that the absolute number of employed persons remained unchanged.

All of this explains the rise in the unemployment rate since 2019. According to the CMIE, the unemployment rate which was 5.27 per cent in 2019 rose to 8 per cent in 2020, remained at 5.98 per cent and 7.33 per cent respectively in the next two years, and went up even further in 2023.

Many commentators have attributed the stagnation in employment and the rise in the unemployment rate to the incomplete recovery of the economy from the Covid-induced fall. While GDP recovery post-pandemic has undoubtedly been slow, belying the government's boast about 'India being the fastest growing country in the world', this fact alone cannot explain the stagnation in employment numbers.

Compared to 2019, for instance, real GDP has increased by about 16 per cent in 2023 (assuming a 6 per cent growth rate for 2023). If employment has not increased despite the GDP increase, this says something about the nature of the growth process itself, rather than just its pace.

What the Indian experience confirms is the invalidity of the proposition that unemployment can be overcome only if the growth rate is accelerated. In fact, it all depends on how growth is brought about. The absolute stagnation of employment is because the nature of growth has changed in the last few years, thereby generating less employment.

The small-scale and petty production sector was adversely affected by the neoliberal withdrawal of State support and exposure to unre-

stricted foreign competition. Its woes were further compounded by two moves by the Modi government: demonetisation, and the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The draconian lockdown ordered by the government in response to Covid-19 had a further devastating impact on this sector. The most employment-intensive sector of the economy is still reeling from all these factors, and it is the uneven revival of GDP growth that is responsible for employment lagging behind, to a point where its growth has actually been almost zero.

It follows, therefore, that the gamut of economic measures that the BJP government has in its kitty is incapable of generating further employment. These measures, centring around providing incentives that induce capitalists to invest more so that the GDP growth rate is accelerated, are infructuous for two very distinct reasons. First, in an oligopolistic market, investment depends upon the expected growth in demand. Unless steps are taken to increase demand, handouts to capitalists do not raise investment—the money is simply pocketed. What is more, in so far as the transfers to capitalists are financed by cutting government expenditure elsewhere—in order to keep the fiscal deficit within stipulated limits—there is a net shrinkage of demand which is contractionary for the economy and hence counterproductive, since the capitalists do not spend the entire amount of transfers handed out to them.

Second, even if such transfers could increase investment and hence GDP growth, the sectors where such an increase would occur are not particularly employment-intensive; government measures are not oriented towards promoting the small-scale and petty production sector where employment is concentrated.

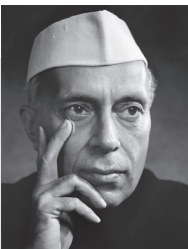
Ironically, while doling out tax concessions to capitalists in the name of promoting employment, the government does not undertake the necessary expenditure involved in filling the large number of vacancies that exist within the government sector. The ostensible reason for this is fiscal constraint; but the fiscal constraint itself is caused, among other things, by the tax concessions given to the capitalists.

Also ironical is the fact that the government is cutting down on MGNREGS at a time when the rural unemployment rate is on the rise.

The CMIE data, while highlighting the growing unemployment crisis, also exposes the utter absurdity of the BJP government's thinking on unemployment. ■

IPA Service

NEHRU'S WORD



The Suez Crisis and Hungary 1956

India's confused foreign policy towards the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict prompts us to look for other examples of how India handled similar situations. Sixty-seven years ago, on 29 October 1956, Israel attacked Egypt, and was soon joined by Britain and France. The ostensible reason was the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by General Nasser of Egypt in July 1956. In a letter he wrote to the Chief Ministers of the provinces on 8 December 1956, Nehru, while condemning the aggression against Egypt and supporting Hungary's right to choose its own path, also emphasises the need to keep ways open for peace.

What happened in Egypt and Hungary is of importance for a variety of reasons, and the world has been rather near a major war. I should, however, like to lay stress on two aspects particularly. The first relates to Anglo–French action in Egypt. It is patent that this action has failed completely. It was aimed principally at bringing down the Nasser government and establishing a more pliable tool. This transformation was supposed to lead to a re-establishment of British influence over Western Asia and of French influence in Northern Africa and especially Algeria.

It is President Nasser who has come out of it with greater strength and far greater prestige, while both the UK and France have suffered tremendously in their prestige, apart from the great losses that they sustained.

This has demonstrated that it is very difficult now for an open reversion to colonialism. Even a strong power cannot do so at the expense of a weak country, because of world opinion, including of course Asian opinion, and the many other consequences that flow from this... England and France, two great colonial powers, have not only suffered very greatly in prestige, but have also been shown up as really not strong enough to hold empires. In effect, this has changed the balance of power in the world.

The events in Hungary have demonstrated that militant communism, however powerful its backing, cannot be forcibly imposed for long. Communism might possibly grow in a country if it is allied to nationalism and the country relies on its own strength. Hungary was, for ten years, under a Communist regime dominated by the Soviet Union. During these ten years there was, no doubt, a great deal of propaganda and indoctrination but, as events have proved, it could not stand up against the strong nationalist urge of the Hungarian people. Thus, Russia has not only suffered greatly in prestige by what it did in Hungary, but so-called international communism has also been shown to be much weaker than people imagined.

These two events are significant for the future and will, no doubt, gradually influence the policies of various countries.

Both in Egypt and Hungary, the situation is still critical, though it would appear that the immediate danger of a major war has been avoided. At the same time, the cold war

has come back and is likely to create a new crisis from time to time....

It is important that we should have a clear idea of these happenings because the burden of shaping our own country's policy rests on us... The stakes are very heavy indeed and, by some fate or circumstance, India's responsibilities have grown. Reports come to us from many of the West Asian countries that wherever an Indian flag is seen on the car of one of our representatives, crowds gather round it to express their high appreciation of India and her policy, and expect India to do something to help them.

So also, in Budapest. That is a terrible burden for us to carry. Our capacity to do anything is limited, and our good name has gone far beyond that capacity. This prospect rather frightens me. It is easy enough to give expression to our views in brave language, condemning this country or that, but it is not

desperation and even war. Therefore, it would seem that we should always try to have an honourable way of escape from a difficult position. I remember that Gandhi always left a door open in this way, without ever sacrificing his principles. Gandhiji's wisdom and practical good sense justify itself again and again.

England and France, losing the active help of the United States and having to face an angered public opinion, became too weak to carry on their rash adventure in Egypt and are trying to end it with such grace as they can. The Soviet Union is not weak and relies on its own strength. Even so, it has bowed to world opinion to some extent. The danger is that it may be pushed too much in an attempt to humiliate it and then it may react wrongly.

The Soviet Union was alarmed at what might well develop into a collapse of its authority in the East European countries and bring a hostile frontier right up to its own borders. There is nothing that Russia fears so much as a re-armed Germany. Twice in our lifetime, German armies have invaded and brought havoc to Russia...

How, then, are we to deal with this situation? I can offer no simple recipe. We may, however, lay down some broad considerations. The first one is that we should stand on our basic principles. That means that foreign forces should be withdrawn from Hungary, and Hungary should enjoy real independence with a political or economic suzerainty of her people's choice. For this purpose, Soviet troops will have to withdraw. We should make it easy for the Soviet Union to do so. If we make it difficult, then the process of withdrawal will be delayed and the crisis will continue.

It becomes ever more clearly evident to me that the system of pacts and alliances—whether it is NATO or the Warsaw Treaty or SEATO or the Baghdad Pact—weakens peace and maintains a constant dread of each other.

If we ask the Russians to withdraw from East European countries, as we logically should, foreign bases in other foreign countries should also be liquidated. I am quite sure that if all these pacts and alliances are put an end to, there would be great relief all over the world. ■

Selected and edited by MRIDULA MUKHERJEE, former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library



# Genocide Knows No Nuance

When neutrality is complicity. **Avay Shukla** on the perfidy and posture of our foreign policy on the Palestine question

In my previous column (‘War Crimes Redefined’) I had opined that what Israel and the USA were doing in tandem in Gaza was a war crime. Since then, the criminality has only intensified—11,261 innocent Palestinians have already been murdered (per *AlJazeera’s* Live Tracker), with the whole world—Global North, South and Middle—either remaining mum or muttering inanities of the Blinken type that are specious and intended to give Netanyahu more time to achieve his objective of depopulating the strip. A non-binding UN resolution moved by Jordan for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds has been passed by the General Assembly, but to our eternal shame, India has not voted in favour of a ceasefire. A reliable estimate states that Israel has already killed 1 per cent of Gaza’s population; in Indian terms that would amount to about 14 million deaths. Surely, both the irony of our posture and its perfidy cannot be lost on any serious observer of our foreign policy. The self-proclaimed leader of the Global South—the Vishwaguru no less—having just blown up Rs 4,000 crore on the G20 conclave to burnish his delusive credentials, has now become a mere camp follower of the Global North! The irony lies in being a ‘leader’ without any leadership. The perfidy lies in an external affairs minister who has spent his entire career in the IFS supporting the Palestinian cause (our time-tested and age-old policy), but now has no stirrings of conscience in joining pro-Israeli ranks. Either he has changed his mind or he has sold his soul for the proverbial loaves and fishes of office. I am inclined to plump for the latter explanation, given his strident expressions of loyalty to right-wing ideology for quite some time now. This diminishes him as a human being: he has abandoned his principles and values and has now become a full-fledged member of a callous, opportunistic, amoral and transactional universe. I wonder if he can sleep at night; he probably can, benefiting from the experience acquired in the Ukraine war, where we did precisely the same.

India now languishes in *terra nullius* or no man’s land. We have abdicated any moral right to lead the Global South; and in the Global North we are now just another parvenu seeking only to stay in the good books of the US, putting all our eggs in one geo-political basket. Our moment of reckoning will eventually come, but it will not save the Palestinians from further slaughter. No one with an IQ above 50 (which excludes most of the bhakts, naturally) will buy the canard that we are

maintaining ‘neutrality’ in the Gaza conflict. Neutrality in a dispute between the world’s fourth most powerful army (a nuclear power to boot) and a putative ‘nation’ that comprises millions of displaced people with no government, economy or army, where 80 per cent survive on humanitarian aid is no neutrality—it is complicity with the former. As Martin Luther King had said: there can be no neutrality between right and wrong, or between good and evil. Neutrality in such a context means supporting what is wrong and evil. Which brings me to my next point. My earlier piece elicited quite a few responses. I won’t bother with the bhakts and trolls since radical Hindutva, Nazism and Zionism are all poisonous fruits of the same genealogical tree and, by definition, can only ooze venom. But there are a lot of otherwise well-read and reasonable people who appear to have succumbed to the ‘theory of nuance’ on the ongoing pogrom and slaughter of Palestinians. This fake theory, and their argument, goes something like this: Israel’s disproportionate assault on Gaza is not a simple black-and-white issue, it has *nuances* which must be understood. It is defending itself from a terrorist organisation that has beheaded babies and raped grandmothers, which launches rockets against Israel, and has taken 250 hostages. The Gazans fully support Hamas and must now pay the price for it. Most importantly, Jews have a right to the lands of the Palestinians since they were the original settlers. 900,000 Jews were evicted from Palestine in the early 20th century by the Arabs; some apologists even go as far back as the Old Testament and the Canaanite period to justify Israel’s claim to Palestinian lands. Most of this is misleading hogwash, an attempt to deflect the debate and to redirect it to a path that leads away from the war crimes being committed in Gaza. Today’s global outrage should not be about who has the more justifiable claim to the land, the Jews or the Palestinians. The

*Looking for nuances in this conflict, or claiming neutrality, is sheer Islamophobia and complicity in the neo-colonial game playing out before our eyes*



An Iranian singer performs amidst shroud-wrapped packages, part of an anti-war art installation symbolising dead Palestinian children, at Palestine Square in downtown Tehran, 13 November 2023

anger should be about the slaughter of thousands of innocent non-combatants, women and children in Gaza. There are no nuances here—not in the killing of over 4,500 children and more than 3,000 women; not in the further 2,000 buried under the blasted rubble; not in the bombing of hospitals, schools, refugee camps; not in the forced eviction of 800,000 Gazans from their homes in the north; not in the use of starvation as a weapon of war; not in the prevention of food, fuel and medicine from reaching a people already horrendously deprived by 17 years of blockade. There are no nuances in killing tens of thousands of innocents in order to assert a legal right to land which was never yours in the first place. (At the onset of the modern era, which in the case of the Middle East can be said to begin with the conquest of Arab lands by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century, there were barely 5,000 Jews left in Palestine. Jews started arriving in large numbers only after 1947, from which point on the dispossession of the Palestinians only grew more relentless—a claim borne out by the United Nations, and by the Oslo Accord.)

There are no nuances in determining the culpability of Israel in the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing. Even if Hamas is said to be a terrorist organisation, this does not entitle Israel to behave like a terrorist itself, as it has been doing since 1947. A sovereign, democratic State has to abide by international rules and covenants, both during peace and war; in fact, it has to be held to a higher standard than a terrorist outfit. If it conducts itself like a terrorist entity, subtlety has no role in determining its guilt. In any case, independent evidence is now emerging that Netanyahu himself covertly supported and funded Hamas as a counter-balance to the Palestinian Authority: it is his creation. Even more damning evidence is beginning to indicate that most of the Jewish settlers killed on the 7 and 8 October were casualties of retaliatory fire by the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) which, under its ‘Hannibal Directive’, is authorised to wipe out the enemy at all costs, even the death of its own citizens. Some reports reveal that these Israelis were killed by tank shells and 5.7mm bullets which the Hamas does not possess. Nor does Hamas possess lethal

missiles like the one which killed 500 people in a Gaza hospital in a single midnight strike. The news about the beheading of babies has been debunked by independent journalists. Netanyahu is using Hamas as a pretext to stay on in power, with subsequent savagery. His buddy in India seems to be doing the same, with bankrupt ‘neutrality’. Looking for nuances in this conflict, or claiming neutrality, is sheer Islamophobia and complicity in the neo-colonial game playing out before our eyes. The Western colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries is back with a vengeance; riding this time around on Biblical justification, oil, the Ben Gurion canal and racial hatred. Its messiahs are a self-proclaimed Zionist in the White House who cannot climb three stairs without stumbling and a psychopath whose mind is ‘a black hole’ that cannot be penetrated, according to his psychiatrist who has just committed suicide. Truly has it been said: *Homo homini lupus est*. Man is wolf to man. ■

**AVAY SHUKLA** is a retired IAS officer and author of *The Deputy Commissioner’s Dog and Other Colleagues*. He blogs at [avayshukla.blogspot.com](http://avayshukla.blogspot.com)



## When Art Meets Prejudice

Mumbai, 12 November 2023

**Dear Prof. Dr. Andreas Hoffmann**  
Managing Director, Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH)

These last few days have been among the most deeply distressing days of my life. The monstrous charge of anti-Semitism has been brought against my name in Germany, a country I have regarded with love and admiration, and to whose cultural institutions and intellectual life I have contributed for several decades, as a writer, curator, and cultural theorist. Members of the German commentariat who have no acquaintance with my life and work have judged, denounced, and stigmatised me on the basis of a single signature on a petition\*, taken out of its context and not approached in the spirit of reason. I have been written about with harshness and condescension, and none of my detractors has thought it important to ask me for my point of view. I have been subjected to the proceedings of a kangaroo court. It is clear to me that there is no room, in this toxic atmosphere, for a nuanced discussion of the issues at stake. And now—in what strikes me as a doomed attempt to save a situation that is beyond saving—I am being asked to accept a sweeping and untenable definition of anti-Semitism that conflates the Jewish people with the Israeli state; and that, correspondingly, misrepresents any expression of sympathy with the Palestinian people as support for Hamas. My conscience does not permit me to accept this sweeping definition and these strictures on human empathy. Such a definition and such strictures have been opposed by prominent Jewish thinkers such as the philosopher Omri Boehm, the historian Moshe Zimmermann, the columnist Gideon Levy, the philosopher Michael Marder, and many, many others, who reject the equation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. A system that insists on such a definition and such strictures—and which chooses to ignore both criticality and compassion—is a system that has lost its moral compass. I say this with the greatest sadness. It pains me to say that such circumstances negate Documenta’s historic openness to a diversity of positions and its capacity for sustaining the life of the imagination in a supportive environment. I greatly fear that these circumstances will compromise the generosity of spirit and the willingness to engage in dialogue that have long been sterling features of Germany’s contribution to global cultural politics. As such, I find myself unable to perform my

duties towards Documenta, an institution for which I have had great affection and which I have known well for more than twenty years, ever since Okwui Enwezor invited me to chair a panel at the Delhi platform of Documenta 11 in May 2001. It has been an honour to serve on the Finding Committee for Documenta 16, and it has been a pleasure to get to know you and work with you. With much regret, I must offer you my resignation and step down from the Finding Committee. You will agree that it is fair that I should be permitted to state my side of this case, for the record: 1. I have the highest regard for the Jewish people, and have always had the deepest empathy with their historic sufferings and admiration for their glorious cultural achievements. This is evident in my essays, my lectures, and my books. I am appalled by the accusation that I am anti-Semitic, and the suggestion that I am in need of instruction on this sensitive subject. Simple biographical factors render this accusation absurd. I was brought up in a pluralist family, which took pride in the diversity of India, including the presence, among us, of three distinct Jewish communities—the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews—for centuries. My first mentor and dear friend, the great Indian poet and art critic Nissim Ezekiel, was a member of the Bene Israel community. Indeed, one of my great-aunts, Kitty Shiva Rao, was born Kitty Verstandig in a Viennese Jewish family; she made her home in a newly independent India, applying her knowledge of the Holocaust to healing a young country that had been born amidst the horrors of the Partition. The Shoah is not external to me; it is one of the strands in my own family history. 2. Putting aside biographical factors, I wish to place on record also that I have publicly opposed the intellectual and cultural boycott of Israel—on the grounds that this will further weaken and isolate our liberal, progressive, critical, and inclusive colleagues within Israel. I do not share the BDS position, and disagree with it. My heart goes out both to the Jewish people and the Palestinian people, who have suffered an unrelenting condition of strife for more than seven decades in West Asia. I condemn unequivocally the terror unleashed by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the horrendous massacre by Hamas militants of Israeli men, women, and children as well as Palestinian, Thai, Filipino, Nepali, and other individuals. I mourn the deaths of these innocent people. At the same time, I cannot ignore the brutal program of annihilation that the government of Israel has launched against the Palestinian civilian

population, in retaliation. I cannot look away from this humanitarian catastrophe, its cost exacted in the lives of innocent men, women, and children. Now, more than ever, there is a compelling need to bring the communities of Israel and Palestine together, to renounce the exceptionalism of suffering on both sides, and to craft a solidarity of grief, a communion of shared vulnerability, and a process of healing and renewal. 3. Let us now consider the so-called evidence that has been presented against me: my signature on a petition circulated by the Indian Cultural Forum and dated August 26, 2019, protesting a discussion hosted by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai, on ‘Leaders’ Idea of Nations: Zionism and Hindutva’. The invitation for this event presented a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the founding figure of Zionism, alongside a portrait of V.D. Savarkar, a founding figure of Hindutva. My reason for signing this petition was because the event clearly posited an equivalence between Herzl and Savarkar, and was intended to develop intellectual respectability for an alliance between Zionism and Hindutva. I found this highly ironic, since Savarkar was known to be an admirer of Hitler and openly expressed his admiration for Nazi ideology and methods, which he proposed as a model for a Hindu-majoritarian India to follow, especially with regard to the treatment of the religious minorities. No member of the German commentariat who denounced me has asked herself or himself why the Israeli Consulate General thought it appropriate to equate Zionism with Hindutva in the first place. I have dedicated my life to opposing authoritarian forces and discriminatory ideologies, and my signature carried with it the weight of my commitment to dialogue, inclusiveness, mutuality, and the ceaseless quest for common ground. This commitment remains with me, as the cornerstone of my life. With warm good wishes,

**Ranjit**

\* I did not author the petition, nor do I agree with every detail of its wording. But, as anyone who has ever signed a petition knows, even sharp differences of stance are temporarily set aside to establish a coalition to address an urgency. In this case, as the list of signatories shows, the coalition consisted of some of India’s best-known artists, intellectuals, curators and academics. As it happens, the artist who sent me the petition, asking if I would sign it, was Vivan Sundaram, whose grandmother, Marie Antoinette Gottesmann-Baktay, belonged to a Hungarian Jewish family.



EAT.WANDER.REPEAT

On picky eaters and playdates

Denise D’Silva on how there’s no accounting for children’s taste in food

People have nightmares about maths exams well into their 60s. Some people aren’t that lucky. Me, for instance. My nightmares jolt me awake with a racing heartbeats and a cold sweat, simply because I have seen my little daughter eat her chicken curry and, hold your breath, ask for seconds. It’s just the opposite conundrum for most mums, since the more typical nightmare is getting your kids to eat veggies.

Not in my home. Born into a family of voracious, carnivorous, food-crazy people, my daughter turns out to love *bhindi*! Would I feel a little better if she loved Enoki mushrooms or even aubergines? Who knows! But lady’s fingers? I thought that’s exactly the kind of slimy vegetable most kids would run away from. Legions of 5-to-8-year-olds crave crunchy fried bhindi, while mothers, fathers and cooks turn out stellar bakes, elaborate curries and exotic stir-fries, all thanks to the MasterChef we have awakened in us, and what are we met with? Absolute sulks and disapproval at the dining table. That’s the thing I’ve noticed about children and food—there’s literally no accounting for their taste.

So, what makes kids so peculiarly picky when it comes to eating? Seems have been written about young taste buds adjusting to new flavours, parental control and even maternal eating preferences. I personally don’t think the last one applies to my daughter, because if it did, she’d be eating everything in sight.

The good thing that has come about because of my daughter’s fussiness, though, is an inventiveness to match. I hide chicken mince in potato tikkis, I plant spinach and carrots in idlis and serve them to my unsuspecting angel as pieces of the rainbow. Then there are my ‘really-evil-mum-muffins’—savoury muffins that look deliciously unhealthy topped as they are with cream cheese but are, in truth, a

*It is true that the more they see their friends trying new flavours, the more they are inclined to do the same. It is also true that they do this only when the parent is nowhere in sight*

healthy treat packed with millet flour and vegetables. What they cannot see really cannot hurt them at all, this is what I’ve learnt. Because once they see a plate with different types of food on it—oh heavens! A picky eater with peculiarly personal tastes is one hurdle. A picky eater who doesn’t like food groups touching each other is quite another level of trauma. I mean, how do you serve an Indian meal of rice, rotis, fish and veg in a plate without a single grain of rice touching the veg, or some curry finding its way to the other side? Katoris or bowls are the answer, right? But get this—they’re also a gaping trap set up by kids to fool you into thinking you’ve sorted the issue. Because once food is categorised into bowls, then entire bowls are returned as is, since there are ‘too’ many bowls and we cannot expect them to eat ‘sooooo’ much food.

I have been subjected to tirades about how blue plates are not good for boiled egg sandwiches or how white plates need to be filled with only white food and nothing else. I’ve even made the mistake of thinking that if chicken sausages are manna from heaven as is pasta in a pesto sauce—then this combination would actually make a great dinner. But of course not! How can sausages and pasta and pesto be touching each other? Perhaps the famous chef Ferran Adria was also tortured by a toddler when he came up with the idea of deconstructed cuisine. I once had a friend call me at an odd hour of the night to ask how to cook French beans with onions which she had wrangled out of a farmer’s market somewhere in Spain, because her son had refused to eat anything else for a whole day and absolutely needed it at breakfast.

Scientists and researchers say that kids being fussy about food is part of their developmental phase and a natural evolutionary response to things. They term it neophobia, which is a fear of the new. Part of me wants to award these scientists with their rightful due for studying this phase so minutely. And the other part of me would like to introduce them to the many bottle caps, buttons and pens that have been frighteningly coaxed out of these tiny mouths, popped in when their mothers had turned away for three seconds. Absolutely no neophobia for small dangerous objects at all.

On mom self-help groups (yes, they’re very popular and most common), you’ll find mothers breaking down by the dozen via posts on how little their child has eaten in two-three days or how he or she refuses to try new things; mothers asking for tips, and which songs to play during feeding time. Apparently, ‘Baby Shark’ and ‘Senorita’ score high when it comes to the number of



times the child opens his/her mouth while distracted by the force, and so, God bless YouTube, can be ‘force-fed’.

And while force-feeding sounds so inappropriate in the woke times we live in, timing morsels to a song hardly qualifies. I distinctly remember our mothers (from the 80s and the 90s) listing the dire consequences of not finishing what was on the plate, ranging from being left out on the dark staircase to being sent off to boarding school. The trauma associated with cauliflower and spinach meals was very real and a cry-fest for both moms and kids alike.

Every child has a routine of fussing at meal-time. Surprisingly, this routine vanishes when it comes to playdates. The number of times I have felt completely stupid giving the other mother a list of things my child won’t eat, only to be told later that she loved the food and took thirds, has got me convinced that my daughter will indeed make an excellent politico. I have been accused at 6 a.m. on a school day for not making dhoklas like XYZ’s mom, when I had no idea that my

*I hide chicken mince in potato tikkis, I plant spinach and carrots in idlis and serve them to my unsuspecting angel as pieces of the rainbow*

daughter had embarked on a Gujarati culinary adventure with her current bestie. It is true that the more they see their friends trying new flavours, the more they are inclined to do the same. It is also true that they do this only when the parent is nowhere in sight.

I’d also like to tell some of Mumbai’s sea-food restaurants to rethink their décor. It’s a great idea to have a floor-to-

ceiling aquarium, but how can we get our opinionated children to appreciate a wonderful coastal meal in such surroundings? First show them those beautiful fish swimming in the display and then have Nemo for dinner? Not on! When a 5-year-old tells you incessantly about how uncool it is to eat food with a face, it cuts deep.

My advice to myself, and hopefully this works for those in the same boat, is this—take a deep breath, lie to your lovelies about the aeroplane in the sky for their mouths to open, and once a week, every week: serve them some fries for your sanity. It’s a phase, it will pass. Oh yes, and don’t ever take them to a café which asks you: latte, single-shot, with milk, without sugar et cetera. Because then you’re setting yourself up for this lethal shot: “Mumma, you ask me why I’m so fussy, and the lady has to ask you so many questions just to get your coffee right?” ■

DENISE D’SILVA is the author of Beyond Curry Indian Cookbook, and co-founder and creative head of Hyphen Brands



Diwali festivities in Trafalgar Square

Diwali on the Square

Diwali came to London early this year courtesy London’s Mayor Sadiq Khan. Amidst all the doom and gloom induced by the Israel–Hamas war and the economic crisis at home, the mayor’s office tried to lift the mood by organising a day-long Diwali festival in Trafalgar Square, almost a fortnight before the actual event.

On 29 October, hundreds of people, including many from outside London, braved the pouring rain to join the festivities. The free public event featured traditional Indian dance, music, fun activities, and food from different parts of India.

Describing the festival as “an amazing day” that brought different communities together, Khan referred to the Bollywood blockbuster, *Amar Akbar Anthony*—a film about camaraderie and integration—and said he wished someone would make a sequel set in Britain.

“As our communities come together to

share hospitality and remember the story of Rama and Sita, I am delighted to welcome the return of Diwali festivities in Trafalgar Square. The spirit of this vibrant festival brings us all together and embodies the diverse and welcoming spirit of our great city,” he said.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was left catching up with his own more exclusive Downing Street Diwali celebrations a few days later.

**Londoners gear up for ‘Chicmas’**

Meanwhile, Christmas festivities are already knocking at the door, and for all the moaning and groaning about the cost-of-living crisis, people are set to splurge more on decorations and presents than last year.

John Lewis, the department store that sets the tone for Christmas sales, has said that despite the economic crisis, the number of homes buying and erecting two Christmas trees is more than usual; there



Photos: Getty Images

has also been a 96 per cent increase in the sale of outdoor decorations.

The first weekend of December has been dubbed as the ‘big weekend’ for a third of London households.

‘One tree is no longer enough. 40 per cent of homes with children and about 30 per cent of those without will put up a second “show tree” to brighten up a hallway or home office,’ The Times reported.

According to trading expert Kathleen Mitchell, a new trend is ‘personalising’ festivities in an effort to look different from others. And the new buzz word is ‘Chicmas’—a chic Christmas. So, a super happy ‘Chicmas’ to all.

Sikhs, kirpans and white racism

Sikhs living in Britain have long enjoyed the right to wear *kirpans* as part of their essential religious practice, but apparently the memo has either not gone out to all government officials or some simply don’t care.

Sikhs continue to be harassed for carrying *kirpans* into government buildings. Last week, court officials in Birmingham were forced to apologise to a Sikh man who was stopped from sitting as a juror by security staff who discovered that he was carrying a *kirpan*.

Jatinder Singh, who has served as president at Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Smethwick and as secretary general of the Sikh Council UK, said he felt “discriminated against” when he was prevented from entering Birmingham crown court where he had been summoned to serve on a jury.

He was originally allowed into the court for the morning session but when he returned after a lunch break, Singh was stopped by security staff and prevented from entering.

He said that he “felt like a child who has gone to school and taken something they shouldn’t and had it confiscated. I felt embarrassed, I felt discriminated against, I didn’t expect it to happen to me”.

A spokesman for the courts service said that it had apologised to Singh “for any distress caused” and promised to take “steps to prevent this sort of incident from happening again”.

Let’s see.



Traffic lights tortoise wins the race

Anyone who has ever crossed a road (and who hasn’t?) would have felt cheated by traffic lights which take too long to turn into ‘walk’ mode only to turn red too quickly.

This is because the traffic light system is universally based on a rough calculation of how long it takes an average person to cross the road. It doesn’t take into account the pedestrian’s age or disability, both of which might slow down their responses.

Now, the British government is taking a fresh look at the one-size-fits-all traffic light system.

Under the current guidelines, introduced in the early 1950s, pedestrians have 6.1 seconds to cross both lanes of a road of normal width at a walking pace of 1.2 metres per second. A new recommendation will allow 7.3 seconds to cross at a speed of 1 metre per second.

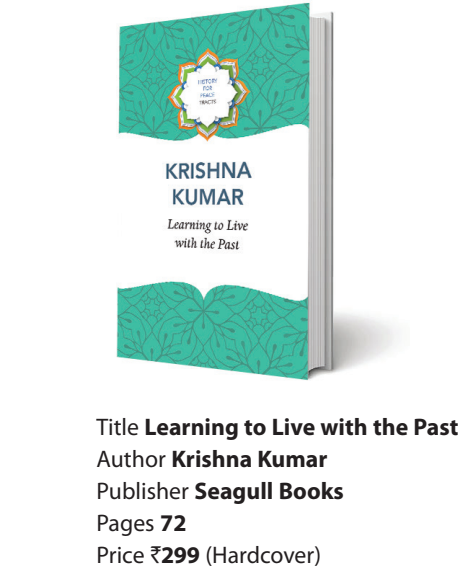
Research shows that 76 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women aged 65 and older were unable to use crossings safely because their walking speed was slower than 1.2 metres per second. Allowing 20 per cent longer crossing time will benefit people who, like this columnist, are getting a bit slow on their feet.

Any takers for this in India?

**And, finally,** Hollywood actress Joan Crawford’s date of birth was such a secret that her obituary in *The Times* recorded that ‘She died on May 10, 1977, aged between 69 and 76’.







# Making Sense of History

Educationist and former NCERT director **Krishna Kumar** on how to live *with* the past rather than *in* it

**T**he functioning of schools as a modern institution involves the essential device of regimentation of the child's body, mind and heart, which is used to reach the educational goals of the State. Studies conducted in India and around the world have shown that compliance is a necessary skill for every child to learn, which starts from the nursery years. The compliance of the body, which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes as 'habitus', is an important aspect of this culture that includes body language, behaviour and thoughts. In order to become a successful student, a child must internalise and take on this enveloping culture. The ability to make a group of 30 or 40 children work together is essential for any school education to function, and if you are a schoolteacher, you understand its importance. Although the word regimentation is commonly associated with the military or police, its use in schools is equally interesting and compelling. Therefore, it is essential to understand how schools function as a process and institution. It is important to note that this regimentation occurs not only in public schools but also in private ones. I understand that in order to ensure effective functioning of schools, certain forms of 'habitus' creation are necessary, particularly when the classroom is diverse. I am presenting these points for analysis purposes and not for criticism. As one goes up the hierarchy of schools, one notices that they distinguish themselves in terms of their effectiveness and quality by using another word that is almost a cousin of regimentation—discipline. The higher the status of the school in the market, the more they depend on their ability to claim that their children are disciplined and can be relied upon to behave in certain ways. By the time students finish school, the school's stamp is so deeply imprinted that they carry it with them for the rest of their lives, and they identify themselves by saying 'I am from such-and-such school!' They can even spot another person from their school in a crowd without having to ask. This is


what Bourdieu referred to as 'habitus'—institutional memories that manifest not just in our language but also in our bodies. In addition to compliance and discipline, another important regimenting device that is often ignored in schools (you might use the term elite for those schools that use it more successfully and purposefully) is the ability to answer questions quickly without thinking. Unthinking quickness is an aspect of regimentation that 'good' schools inculcate, which helps students become increasingly competitive. In ninth-grade classrooms in famous schools in Calcutta or Delhi, for example, the teacher may not even finish the question before students start raising their hands. This unthinking quickness and the desire to answer before anyone else is a consequence of long-standing socialisation values that do not quite match the expectation of critical inquiry, which requires reflection and taking a few seconds or minutes before answering a question. That is something that regimentation cannot create. Answers are given on the assumption that the question does not require thought—it only requires recall. This leads to the fourth source of regimentation: fear of examinations, where so much needs to be recalled under great pressure that preparation, from nursery to the next 13–14 years, may prove inadequate.

*In an environment where regimentation is deeply ingrained, socialising the mind into critical enquiry through the study of history is challenging*


Hence, the use of fear as a tool for regimentation is prevalent in schools, causing students to live in a constant state of anxiety and adopt a rote learning approach for exams. Drill and coaching classes are seen as supplements to school education, especially in higher grades. As a history teacher, one must be cognisant of these factors when using history as a means to foster critical thinking. In an environment where regimentation is deeply ingrained, socialising the mind into critical enquiry through the study of history can be challenging. During my research on Indo-Pak history, I spoke with history teachers in both countries who acknowledged their lack of control over such aspects of school life. In the lower grades, history teachers may not even have a background in history. It is only in higher classes that history becomes an optional subject and a qualified history teacher can be guaranteed. Therefore, the question of whether teaching history alone can promote reflexivity and open-mindedness in a culture of regimentation requires careful consideration of the many difficulties involved. One major aspect that history contributes to nation-building is the creation of a national narrative in the modern world. At the school level, all history narratives are essentially national narratives that describe how events unfolded within the nation's territory. However, it is important to approach the nation-building project without excessive sensitivity, as the nationalist project has been hijacked and vitiated by the current political circumstances in India. The situation was similar in Pakistan 70 years ago. In this context, it is worth considering whether nation-building can be achieved without political nationalism or whether it is possible to engage with political nationalism in creative ways. Can we aspire to be Indians without being nationalists, as Rabindranath Tagore dreamed? This is a challenging question that requires careful consideration. Moving forward, we must consider the present-day concern regarding school text-

books and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). It is noteworthy that the very first word of the acronym NCERT is 'national'. The creation of new textbooks for different subjects, including history, in 2006, 2007 and 2008 has been well received, particularly among those of us who are involved in English-medium schools and who could be considered part of a national elite. As someone who was a part of the NCERT during those fortuitous years, I feel especially gratified. The success story of these textbooks makes us believe that we can make a positive impact through education. [...]

So, how do we create a sense of the past where the possibility of learning about its wider landscape of life remains insatiable and uncertain, yet full of possibilities? There are shared pasts and conflicting histories, and the task of the judicious, capable and interested history teacher is to make the subject a means of creating interest in the past, and learning about the ways in which the past presents itself as a challenge to our intellect, to our abilities to inquire about the past. Then alone can history serve the purposes which we would consider synonymous with peace. History otherwise is a subject that lends itself very easily to political hostility, simply because of the conditions in which it is taught and because of the manner in which it is structured for inclusion in the education system. History lends itself most easily to that structure as a means of creating a sense of a continued battle with the past. Instead of learning that the past is actually past and the best it can do is to help us to become curious about it, to respect it and to create in us the capacities to live with what has already happened, history often ends up creating a sense of nostalgia. The idea that something that happened 400 years ago can now be undone or that it ought to be undone so that justice can be served, is the product of precisely that kind of thinking. ■



19-11-1917 to 31-10-1984



Department of Information and Public Relations


REMEMBERING

# Smt. Indira Gandhi

— THE IRON LADY OF INDIA —

ON HER


## 106<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary



**Sri D. K. Shivakumar**  
Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister

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May her life inspire us for times to come



**Sri Siddaramaiah**  
Hon'ble Chief Minister





# The Bowmaker of Pakyong

In a state whose archers have represented India in three Olympics, 83-year-old Tshering Dorjee Bhutia still makes bows and arrows the old-fashioned way

Jigyasa Mishra

It takes time to realise that Tshering Dorjee Bhutia never earned his living from making bows. For 60 years, his income came from carpentry—mainly repairing furniture. But his inspiration came from archery, deeply embedded in the culture of his native Sikkim. His life is so wrapped up in that art and craft, it's all the 83-year-old wants to talk about, at his modest home in Karthok village of Pakyong district. His many decades as a skilled wood worker sit lightly on him. He would rather be known as the bowmaker of Pakyong.

"I was 10 or 12 when I started making things with wood. Gradually, they began taking the shape of a bow and people started buying them. That's how this bowman was born," Tshering tells us.

"Previously, the bow was made differently," he says, showing us some of his products. "This earlier type was called *tabjoo* (in Nepali). It consisted of two pieces of stick joined together, tied and covered with the *chamda* (leather). The version we make nowadays is called the 'boat design'. Making one bow takes three days, at least. But that's for an active, young hand. An old hand would take a few more days," Tshering says with a mischievous smile.

Tshering has been making bows and arrows for over six decades now in his hometown, some 30 kilometres from Gangtok. Karthok is known for its Buddhist monastery—the sixth oldest in Sikkim. Locals say Karthok had more bowmakers once, but Tshering is now the only one left.

In one vital way, Tshering's house reflects the charm of Karthok. You reach the portico only after passing through a bright and colourful garden that is home to nearly 500 varieties of flowers and plants. He even has a greenhouse and a nursery in his backyard, where you find some 800 orchids, besides herbs, ornamental varieties, and bonsai plants. This is largely

the effort of his eldest son, Sangay Tshering Bhutia, 39, a highly skilled horticulturist. Sangay designs several types of gardens, sells plants and even teaches and initiates others into horticulture.

"Six of us live here," Tshering tells us. "Myself, my wife Dawti Bhutia (she is 64), my son Sangay Tshering and his wife Tashi Dorma Sherpa (she is 36). And our grandchildren Chyampa Hesel Bhutia and Rangsal Bhutia." There is one other resident: the family's beloved dog, Dolly, mostly to be seen in the company of three-year-old Chyampa. Rangsal is not yet two.

Tshering's second son, Sonam Palazor Bhutia, 33, is in the India Reserve Battalion of Sikkim, posted in Delhi, where he lives with his wife and son. Sonam visits his father in Karthok during festivals and holidays. The oldest of Tshering's children is his daughter, Tshering Lhamu Bhutia, who is 43, married, and lives in Gangtok. Also in Gangtok is his youngest son, Sangay Gyampo, 31, a research scholar pursuing his PhD. The family are from the Buddhist Lama community and belong to the Bhutia, a major Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim.

As we try and learn about the use of Tshering's bows, Sangay Tshering pitches in. "Papa made this for me," he says, showing us a brown and yellow ochre coloured bow. "It is the only one I practice archery with." He stretches his left arm to demonstrate the technique involved in using the bow.

Archery is deeply embedded in Sikkim's traditions and is more than a sport—it is also a culture. Typically, it comes alive just after the harvests, when festivals and tournaments allow people to gather together in a period of relative inactivity. It was the national sport here even before Sikkim's integration into the Indian Union.

Sikkim is home to Tarundeep Rai, two times World Archery Championship medalist, twice an Asian Games medalist, and perhaps the only archer to have represented India in three Olympics—Athens 2004, London 2012, and Tokyo 2020. Last year, Sikkim's chief minister Prem Singh Tamang (better known as P.S. Golay) announced the setting up of the Tarundeep Rai Archery Academy in the state to honour the Padma Shri winner.

Archery teams from West Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan regularly visit Sikkim to participate in the high-end tournaments



Tshering Dorjee Bhutia at home in Karthok, with his handmade bows and the tools of his craft

Photos: Jigyasa Mishra

held at the royal palace grounds in Gangtok and other parts of this state. Interestingly, traditional games, with barebow archery, remain popular with the Sikkimese themselves—more than the modern sport where the bow can be a very complex technological device.

Oddly, the Bhutia family tells us, there are no specific shops around bow. Arrows can still be bought from some local stores, but not the bow. "Buyers get to know about us from local markets and archers—and visit us at home. It's not a big place and nobody has to struggle to find our house. Everybody knows everybody here," says the octogenarian.

The bow buyers come from various parts of Sikkim, neighbouring states, and even Bhutan. "They come here or via Gangtok and Karthok," says Tshering in Nepali. That's the language his family, like many others in the state, speaks.

While we talk about how bows are made, and when Tshering learned the art, he quietly goes inside the house, looking for something. Some three minutes later, he emerges smiling and excited—holding a bunch of bows and arrows, along with his *auzaar*, the tools he still uses.

"I made all of these, 40 or even more years ago. Some of these are very, very old. Just a little younger than me," he says smiling. "I have never used any electric appliance or tool. Everything was handcrafted properly."

"The arrows we use now are modified versions," says Sangay Tshering. "I remember when I was very little, the arrow's tail used to be different. Back then, there used to be a duck's feather mounted to the tail. Now the modern versions come mostly from Bhutan." Sangay hands over

the arrows to me and goes back inside the house to get a modern, machine-made bow.

"We sell a roughly made bow, without extensive filing and polishing, for 400 rupees to those who approach us saying they want a lighter and cheaper version," says Sangay. "That's when we use the upper part of the bamboo, which we usually don't because it's less strong. But a fine, three-coat, fully polished bow, would go for 600-700 rupees. We use the lower, stronger part of the bamboo to make that. To make one fine bow, the bamboo consumed would be worth maybe 150 rupees, the thread or string worth 60 rupees, but the pricing of the polish is difficult to calculate," Sangay laughs.

Why is that?  
"We make the polish at home. We buy the goat skin *chamda* mostly during Dashain (Dussehra) and take the wax out of it for polishing. When the bow is completed, this polish is coated onto it. Another layer is applied when the first one dries up, and this is repeated till three coatings have been done. That 1x1foot goat skin costs us 150 rupees," says Sangay. This elaborate process makes it hard to figure out the exact cost of the polishing.

"Oh, and the main material, the backbone of the bow," he adds, "the bamboo for that costs us 300 rupees a piece. We can make five bows from one big bamboo, easily."

Sangay goes inside, and reappears with a huge archery kitbag, and takes out a bigger and heavier version of the bow from it. "Here is the latest bow design. But this is not allowed in our local tournaments. One can practice with it, but to participate in the competition, the traditional handmade bow is mandatory. My brothers and I play in those tournaments with the

bows made by papa. This time, my brother brought some different kind of wood polish from Delhi, and painted his bow with it. Mine is polished with the traditional paint that papa has been using for ages."

The Bhutias regretfully tell us that the sale of bows has reduced over the years. Their product mostly sells at the Buddhist festival of Losoong, which is the Sikkimese New Year of the Bhutia tribe. Observed through December, it is a post-harvest festival that also sees archery tournaments. "That's when most people come to the monastery here, and buy from us. In recent years, we have sold barely four to five pieces, annually. The artificial bow has taken over the market now, a Japanese product, I think. Earlier, till about six or seven years ago, I was able to sell around 10 bows annually," says Tshering Dorjee.

But even 10 bows a year would not have brought him any appreciable income. It was his work as a carpenter, repairing and making furniture, and other little woodwork items that sustained the family. Tshering says that when he was the sole earning member of the family as a fulltime carpenter—well over a decade ago—he earned about Rs. 10,000 a month. But it was, and continues to be, the bows that fascinate him.

The bows the Bhutias craft are made from a special kind of wood commonly called Bhutanese bamboo. "All the bows papa makes are crafted from Bhutanese bamboo which was earlier not available in India," says Sangay. "Our supply now comes from farmers who planted the seeds of this variety in Kalimpong, located in West Bengal, 70 kilometres from here. I go there myself, and buy two years' worth of supplies at a time, which we store here at home in Karthok."

"You need a guru first. Nobody can do anything without a guru," says Tshering. "Initially, I was just a carpenter. But later, I learnt bow making from my father. I saw the designs of the bows my friends used to play with, and tried making some. Gradually, it started turning out fine. Whenever someone would approach me to buy one, I would first of all show them how to use it!"

Tshering is nostalgic about his early days in the craft of bow making. "My earnings from it are presently negligible. My home, this house, is being run by my children for about a decade now. The bows I make now are no more a source of income but a labour of love."

"Papa does not make many of them now—his eyesight has weakened," says Sangay Tshering, adding wistfully, "We have no clue who will carry on this craft after him." ■

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India (PARI)



Father and son display both traditional and latest models; (right) Sangay Tshering demonstrates the bowman's stance



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NATION

**TUNNEL VISION**  
The Char Dham tunnel disaster has ‘man-made’ written all over it



► P2

THINK FREE

**INDIA'S JOBS CRISIS**  
Why accelerated growth can't take care of unemployment



► P4

WORLD

**GENOCIDE KNOWS NO NUANCE**  
The perfidy of our foreign policy on Palestine



► P5

AIR POLLUTION EMERGENCY

(–)10 years of your life

That’s just one stark measure of the cost of air pollution in our cities. But maybe there’s hope yet, writes **Bharat Dogra**

Air pollution is more than a concern, it’s the crisis of our times, the one we feel in our lungs with every tortured breath. Worldwide, as many as 7 million premature deaths from lung cancer, heart disease and stroke are attributed to air pollution every year. As air pollutants like carbon dioxide are also greenhouse gases, the need to reduce them becomes even more urgent.

India’s cities are at the centre of the air pollution crisis. The IQAir ‘World Air Quality Report 2022’ reveals that in 2021, not one single city in India met the updated WHO safety standards of 5 micrograms of PM (particulate matter) 2.5 per cubic metre of air; while almost half our cities exceeded the limit by almost 10 times.

A study by the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago (EPIC) has shown that life expectancy may be reduced by as much as nine years in a highly polluted city like Delhi, the fourth most polluted city in the world based on an annual average PM2.5 concentration (µg/m³). This despite the National Clean Air Program (NCAP) having been started in 2019, covering 100 of the more polluted cities. Serious air pollution has been repeatedly reported not only in the context of landlocked cities like Delhi (as well as several other towns and cities of the National Capital Region), but also from a coastal city like Mumbai which, until some years ago, was supposed to be relatively well-protected from the worst of air pollution due to fresh sea-breezes. No more, thanks to several man-made factors, including relentless, indiscriminate construction.

With the whole world reeling from this upsurge, the few notable successes in checking air pollution could go unnoticed. A recent note by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) mentions some encouraging initiatives in five cities—Paris, New York, Seoul, Bogota and Accra, which is the first African city to join the BreatheLife campaign started as a joint initiative by several international agencies. One highlight that struck me in particular was in Seoul, where a ‘wind path forest’ has been created by planting trees at calibrated intervals along rivers and roads to channel air into the city centre. India needs to come up with such innovative solutions.

While the launching of the NCAP was a much-needed step, it was stymied from the start due to underfunding and blinkered vision. Some short-term successes have been reported from cities like Raipur, but the overall situation remains very bleak and worrying.

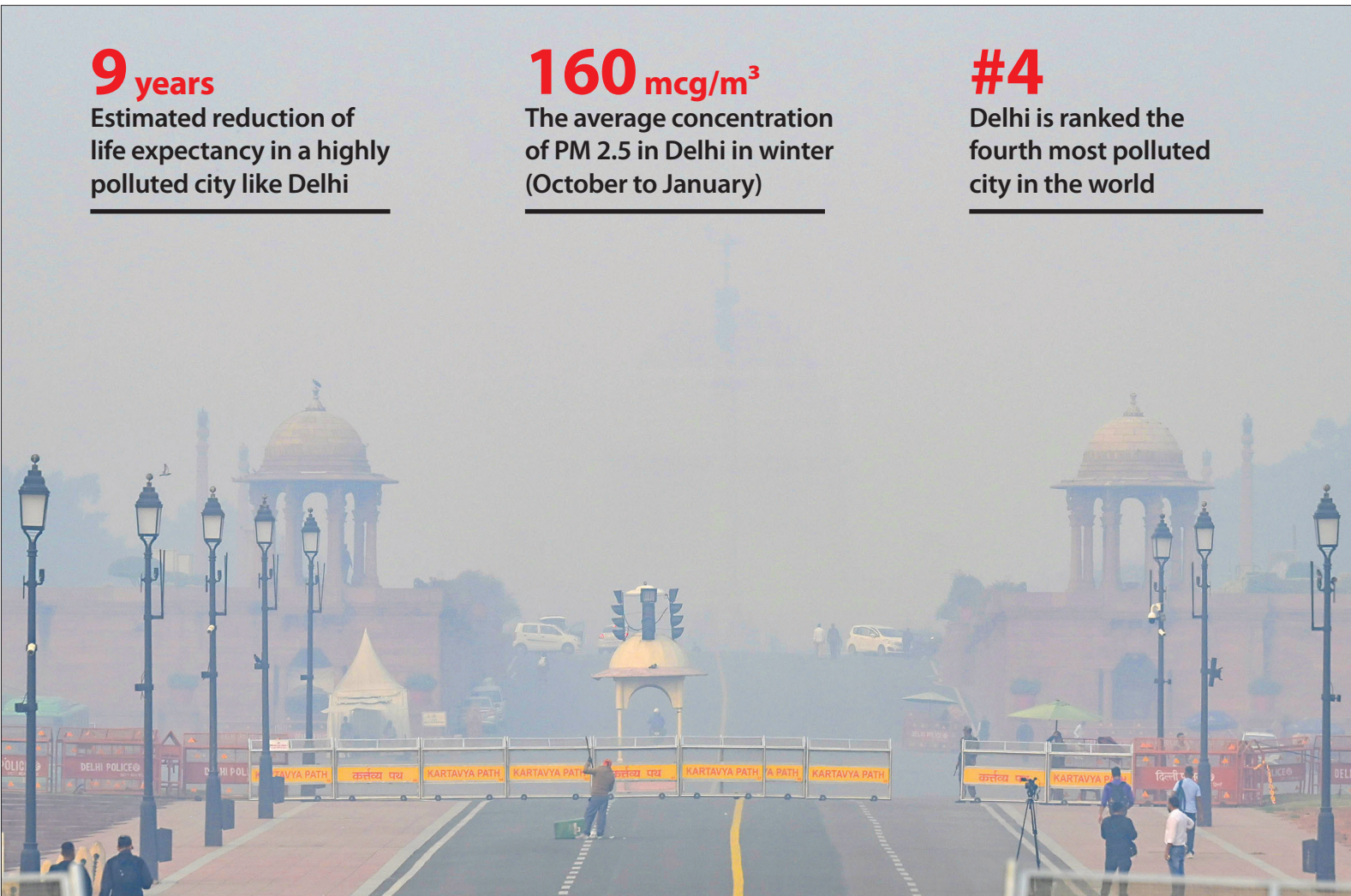
As many cities under the control of different governments suffer from similarly grave pollution problems, the blame cannot be laid at any one particular door—rather it should be seen as a larger failure of governance. The failure lies in falling short of the requirements of 21st-century urban governance—one which involves attentive and adequate care for the environment. Instead of well-informed planning and thoughtful implementation, urban governance in India is driven all too often by ad-hoc responses, populism and corruption.

What is still not being acknowledged is the fact that pollution control should be at the core of urban development. Given our bedevilled legacy, and mounting worries for the future, urban planning needs to play a bigger role, with multi-layered improvements.

Measure of the Menace

- 7 million Premature deaths worldwide attributed to air pollution
- 2.5 micrometres Diameter of the fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) that can penetrate deep into the respiratory system, get into the bloodstream and cross even the blood–brain barrier
- 5 mcg/m³ ‘Safe’ concentration of PM 2.5 per cubic metre of air, as per updated WHO safety standards
- 7.91 million Motor vehicles on Delhi roads in 2021–22
- 3.38 million Private cars registered in Delhi as of 2021
- 80,000 tonnes Debris generated from the demolition of two illegal residential skyscrapers in Noida

Photos: Getty Images



The silhouette of Rashtrapati Bhavan struggles to pierce through the toxic haze that engulfs Delhi on the morning of 13 November 2023, the day after Diwali

When it comes to a city like Delhi whose importance as the country’s capital is well recognised, there has been no dearth of statistics, studies and various initiatives based on them. Yet, glaring deficiencies remain. Most of the hectic attention paid to this issue is confined to a concentrated period when the problem is most acute. For the rest of the year, it’s on the back-burner, with the result that the base level of pollution is not reduced, and is already at a high level when the difficult days of maximum pollution arrive.

Much has been said about the various steps being taken by the government to reduce vehicular pollution, including Bharat Stage VI Emission Standards. These may have played a positive and helpful role, but if you zoom out, you see how these policies have also supported the very rapid growth of private car ownership, at a far higher rate than is good for the health of our cities. Meanwhile, public transport has not received equal attention, and has, in fact, gone from bad to worse in several places.

Another aspect that has generated more media attention than actual results is stubble burning. Several solutions have been suggested, not all of which are consistent with each other. One much-discussed solution has been to find economically profitable uses for paddy crop stubble, setting up the infrastructure for which may involve disproportionately high investments. The other suggestion is to replace paddy cultivation in the kharif season with crops that are less water-intensive. This, we are told, will solve not just the stubble problem but also the problem of over-exploitation of water. Clearly, the two approaches are not consistent with each other but after years of debate neither seems to have been moved to the next level.

There are other indications of how skewed our attention to the pollution question has been. In August last year, for example, two 100-metre high skyscrapers—one with 29 storeys, the other 32 storeys, both in NOIDA, very close to Delhi—were demolished using 3,700 kgs of explosives. The demolition generated 80,000 tonnes of debris along with massive amounts of dust, endangering human health as well as birds. While there were genuine complaints of construction regulations having been neglected, there was no complaint of the buildings being unsafe. Hence, instead of demolition, an inventive solution would have been to fine the constructors an equivalent amount, and use the money to create a garden of several thousand indigenous mixed trees. Instead, we got 80,000 tonnes of debris and highly polluting dust mixed with explosive residues on a massive scale.

Have demolitions been identified as one of the prime causes of dust pollution? No. On the contrary, demolitions are on a roll, with more unnecessary and unjust ones being carried out in recent times than we can keep track of. This draws attention to another neglected aspect of our so-called urban governance—distorted policies that not only escalate pollution but are, in addition, highly unjust to people, particularly from the weaker sections.

Recently, I spoke to several victims of demolition drives in Delhi. Evicted several years ago from the relatively central parts of the city to its outskirts, they told me that while earlier

The poorest people languishing in neglect and unemployment can play an important role in the ecological regeneration of urban India

also spotted the same pattern. The spike in transport-related pollution caused by daily travel to workplaces, in addition to demolition-related debris and dust pollution.

What is more, the outer areas of the cities where the poorest people are being pushed have not seen a commensurate rise in essential facilities, including sanitation and water. Widespread squalor and widespread unemployment are the two immediately visible outcomes of official ‘clean-up campaigns’.

This is a missed opportunity. If creatively used, para-urban areas can become centres of afforestation and agro-ecology, contributing to cleaner air; as well as the supply of fresh and healthy food to the city. While thus far the reduction of pollution has been envisaged more in terms of an agenda which displaces the poor from their homes and livelihoods, there is a strong case to be made for greening programmes in urban and para-urban areas which can provide highly creative jobs to the poor on a big scale. Integrating concerns for social justice and environmental protection seems to me the best way forward for urban planning and governance in India.

While any efforts to check pollution must have a sound scientific base, an excessively technocratic approach will not work. Ultimately, the big tasks ahead must be related to the dormant energy and creativity of common people, particularly from the weaker sections. Some of the poorest people languishing in neglect and unemployment today can play an important role in the ecological regeneration of urban India—if adequate creative livelihoods are generated for them in the greening of cities.

In the voluminous literature on reducing air pollution, you will not find much of a mention for integrating justice and ecology concerns, but this is where hope lies for the future of our cities. ■

Even a coastal city like Mumbai has seen a spike in air pollution

In Seoul, a ‘wind path forest’ has been created by planting trees at calibrated intervals along rivers and roads to channel air into the city centre. India needs to come up with such innovative solutions



Even a coastal city like Mumbai has seen a spike in air pollution



# No light at the end of this tunnel

The Char Dham tunnel disaster is only the most recent in a long line of mishaps, and it has ‘man-made’ written all over it

Rashme Sehgal

On Diwali morning, 40 workers found themselves trapped in a 4.5-km-long under-construction tunnel connecting Silkyara to Polgaon in Uttarkashi district. This is only the most recent in a long line of mishaps that have plagued the construction of what is being touted as one of the longest tunnels being built under the Char Dham Yojana.

While keeping the benefits of motorists at heart—the tunnel will reduce the distance from Uttarkashi to Yamunotri by 26 kilometres—it is completely insensitive to both human and natural resources in this vulnerable zone.

Bhim Singh Rawat, a scientist working with SANDRP (South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People) points out, “No safety protocols were in place when the accident occurred. When the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) arrived at the tunnel site on this black Sunday, they found there was only one JCB (mechanical excavator) available at the site. The Augur drilling machine needed to dig a hole through the tunnel reached the disaster site only on 14 November, a full 48 hours after the accident had occurred.”

The most regrettable aspect of this tragedy is that part of this very same tunnel had collapsed in 2019. (Fortunately, at that time no workers were trapped.) Rawat is horrified to note that “no safety ducts had been put in place despite the fact that they were working along a fault line, which the supervising engineers know to be extremely risky. The government had also sent for a 900-metre-long pipeline in order to reach the workers, but since that operation failed, they sent for Hume pipes (precast concrete pipes) which will be used to try and rescue the trapped workers.”

The trial-and-error method make one’s blood run cold. Government officials maintain they have established contact with the trapped workers but have not parted with simple voice recordings of messages that might reassure the stricken families of the poor workers.

Local politicians, when informed that most of these workers are from outside the state (only two are from Uttarakhand), point out that when the Char Dham yatra was started, the central government had claimed it would provide large scale employment to the local youth. Clearly, this has not been the case.

Varun Adhikari, an engineering geologist says, “The collapse at Silkyara is a classic case of unprofessional tunnelling practices and negligence toward essential tunnelling principles. It also highlights the importance of maintaining diligence in

adhering to proper procedures especially in reprofiling and utilising hydraulic breakers or minor blasting with due consideration of the tunnel’s specific conditions and potential consequences on the surrounding rock mass.”

Dr C.P. Rajendran, a scientist who specialises in earthquake geology and tectonics, is equally aghast. “No SOPs (standard operating procedures) were being followed here, with serious consequences. Previously, such excavations in the mountains were carried out under the supervision of competent geologists, followed by continuous tunnel logging, among other precautionary measures. Why were no safety norms or reviews ordered by the authorities even after the tunnel collapse in 2019?”

The answer is not hard to find. The tunnel construction was being supervised by the National Highways Authority of India along with DSCL (DCM Shriram Consolidated Limited) which, in turn, contracted it to the Navyug Construction Company which, in turn, sub-let it to another company that obviously lacks the expertise to undertake such a project.

Inadequate geological understanding of the natural composition of the rocks in the region and non-compliance with regulations are a lethal combination. Cost constraints (such as they are) compromise regulations (such as they are), while the extensive use of explosive triggers landslides. Environment Impact Assessment had been done away with for the entire Char Dham project and people on the ground are paying for this with their lives.

Consider the toll taken by the road and rail construction activity in Uttarakhand under the Char Dham Yojana and the Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd respectively.

*‘How do you explain people working early morning on a holiday (Diwali)? The contractor must be under tremendous pressure to meet a deadline. Easy to guess what the hurry is in an election year’*

Photo: Yogamber Singh Bisht



The under-construction Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand’s Uttarkashi district where the mishap occurred

In October, nearly 40 workers had a narrow escape after a fire broke out (due to an inflammatory chemical) inside a tunnel being constructed for the Rishikesh-Karnaprayag railway project in Rudrapur district.

On 13 August, 114 workers and engineers trapped in shoulder-deep water about 300 metres inside the under-construction Edit-2 tunnel were rescued in the nick of time. This too is part of the same Rishikesh-Karnaprayag project. They were lucky. The water was first pumped out using heavy equipment after which a police contingent was employed to bring them out.

In July, a landslide triggered by heavy rainfall led to enormous pile-ups on both ends of the Daat Kali tunnel that connects Saharanpur to Dehradun, with commuters held up inside.

The Chamba-Tehri tunnel which is part of the Rishikesh-Gangotri road link has developed huge cracks. People living in this region are terrified because the tunnelling has resulted in major land subsidence in

this entire area with their houses developing cracks as well.

It is no consolation that tunnel collapses are not unique to Uttarakhand. On 19 May, the tunnel under construction at Khooni Nallah in Ramban district on the Jammu-Srinagar highway collapsed, resulting in the death of four workers and injuries to many more.

With multiple fatalities resulting from the 1,100 landslides in Uttarakhand alone this year, widespread human, material, economic and environmental loss has exceeded the community’s ability to cope, as we have seen in Himachal and Sikkim as well.

Rajendran warns that the intensity of disasters in the Himalayas will only go from bad to worse: “It has become clear that the exponential increase in the occurrence of landslide-related disasters in the Uttarakhand Himalayas cannot be categorised any longer as ‘natural disaster’, as much of it is man-made or human accelerated disaster, triggered by unscientific cliff cutting to widen the roads under the Char

Dham project. The tunnel construction failure on the Brahmakhal-Yamunotri road in Uttarkashi district is only the most recent in the trail of disasters we have witnessed in the Himalayas.”

Despite objections raised by expert panels, and caveats issued by courts, the government is steamrolling ahead. “How else do you explain people working early morning on a holiday (Diwali)?” asked Rajendran. “The work is going on 24x7, the contractor must be under tremendous pressure to meet a deadline given by the authorities. Easy to speculate what the hurry is in an election year.”

Every time such disasters occur, government representatives label them ‘geological surprises’. If massive infrastructural projects are implemented under incompetent supervision in a dynamic and environmentally fragile landscape like that of the Himalayas, anything would be a ‘surprise’. What is shocking is the cavalier disregard of environmental concerns and scientific advice. And the heartless, heedless risk to human life. ■

# The ‘masterstroke’ that cut deep

Aakar Patel reminds us of the damage that ‘notebandi’ unleashed on the nation

Demonetisation’s anniversary (8 November) came and went, without any defence of that masterstroke from the Indian government.

‘Notebandi’ was the idea of a man with a diploma in mechanical engineering from Latur, a town in Maharashtra. Anil Bokil runs an institution called ArthaKranti (literal: economic revolution), and describes himself as an economic theorist. His thinking was: in a country like India where 70 per cent of the population survives on just Rs 150 per day, why do we need currency notes of more than Rs 100?

Days after Modi abolished 86 per cent of India’s currency, Bokil revealed in an interview how the prime minister had got the idea. In July 2013, soon after Modi was declared the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate, Bokil went to Ahmedabad with his colleagues and sought to present an ArthaKranti proposal.

Modi gave Bokil 10 minutes. “By the time I was done, I realised that he had listened to me for 90 minutes. He said nothing after I had made my presentation,” Bokil said. This is not surprising. The idea that a simple, magical and transformational action could be executed by him would have transfixed Modi.

On the ArthaKranti website, the benefits of demonetisation which were conveyed to Modi at that meeting are listed, including: “Terrorist and anti-national activities would be reduced”, ‘the motive for tax avoidance would be reduced’, ‘corruption would be minimised’ and there would be a ‘significant growth in employment’. What’s not to like?

Conspicuous by their absence, however, are details of how demonetisation would be executed and its benefits achieved. There is no reference to or analysis of what the fallout could be.

ArthaKranti also proposed withdrawing the entire taxation system in favour of a transaction tax, accompanied by a Rs 2,000 limit on cash transactions. The ideas were reductive, simplistic and, apparently, easy

to implement. It was perfect for Modi, who picked the single most dramatic element from this—demonetisation—and pushed it through.

In his speech announcing demonetisation on 8 November 2016, Modi said India’s problems were corruption, black money and terrorism. Strong steps would need to be taken against these and he would be the one to take them. Indians were honest and yet India was corrupt, and so a powerful and decisive step was needed against corruption, black money and terrorism.

Had people ever thought about where the money for terrorism came from, Modi asked. It came from Pakistan’s counterfeiting operations in India, which was proved by the frequency of arrests. He said the circulation of cash was linked to corruption and this was why Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes comprised

80 and 90 per cent of the total currency, respectively. He was cancelling them as legal tender in four hours, at the stroke of midnight. That would mean “such notes, currently in the hands of anti-national people, would become worthless”.

Modi acknowledged that there would be some discomfort through this move, but that would not be a problem. This was because, he said, ordinary citizens were enthusiastic about sacrifice and willing to endure hardships for the country.

No preparation had been made by various departments. We know this because the Cabinet was summoned on 8 November and ministers were told to leave their mobile phones behind so the act could remain secret till it was announced at the meeting. Since ministers didn’t know, their departments didn’t know and so nobody was pre-

pared, just as was the case with the national lockdown of 2020.

Modi had been specifically warned by the RBI—the body that actually had to demonetise the notes of currency that its governor had guaranteed with his signature—that demonetisation was a mistake.

Raghuram Rajan resigned as governor after having discussed and disapproved of this move. The new governor, Urjit Patel, was arm-twisted by Modi into accepting it within weeks of taking office. He then refused to release the minutes of the meeting the RBI urgently held at 5.30 p.m. on 8 November (just before Modi’s speech) to approve the unhinged move, citing national security and a ‘threat to life’.

When the minutes were finally leaked to the press two years later in November 2018, Patel quit (he left the following month). The

RBI minutes said it had been told by the government that:

- The economy had grown by 30 per cent between 2011 and 2016 but the currency notes of higher denomination had grown at a much higher rate.
- Cash was the facilitator for black money.
- Counterfeit money of an estimated Rs 400 crore was present in the system.
- Therefore, Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes should be made invalid.

The RBI’s response to the government was as follows:

- The economic growth referred to by the government was real, while the rise in currency was nominal and not adjusted for inflation; ‘hence this argument does not adequately support the recommendation’ for demonetisation.
- Most black money was held as land or gold and not cash, and abolishing currency would have no effect on curbing black money.
- Demonetisation would have a negative impact on GDP.
- Rs 400 crore in counterfeit currency was insignificant (only 0.02 per cent) compared to the total cash in circulation, which was Rs 18 lakh crore.

Having said all this, the RBI board nonetheless put its rubber stamp on Modi’s idea. The reason why it fought to keep this capitulation secret is clear: It had done its job in pushing back and pointing out the flaws; it was now protecting Modi.

That is why Urjit Patel shamefully claimed there was a national security reason why he could not reveal the minutes, when RTI activists sought to access them.

Of course, events proved that the RBI had accurately predicted both the damages and the lack of benefits on every count. What the RBI was hiding was the fact that Modi had ignored its concerns—all of which turned out to be true—and gone ahead anyway. ■

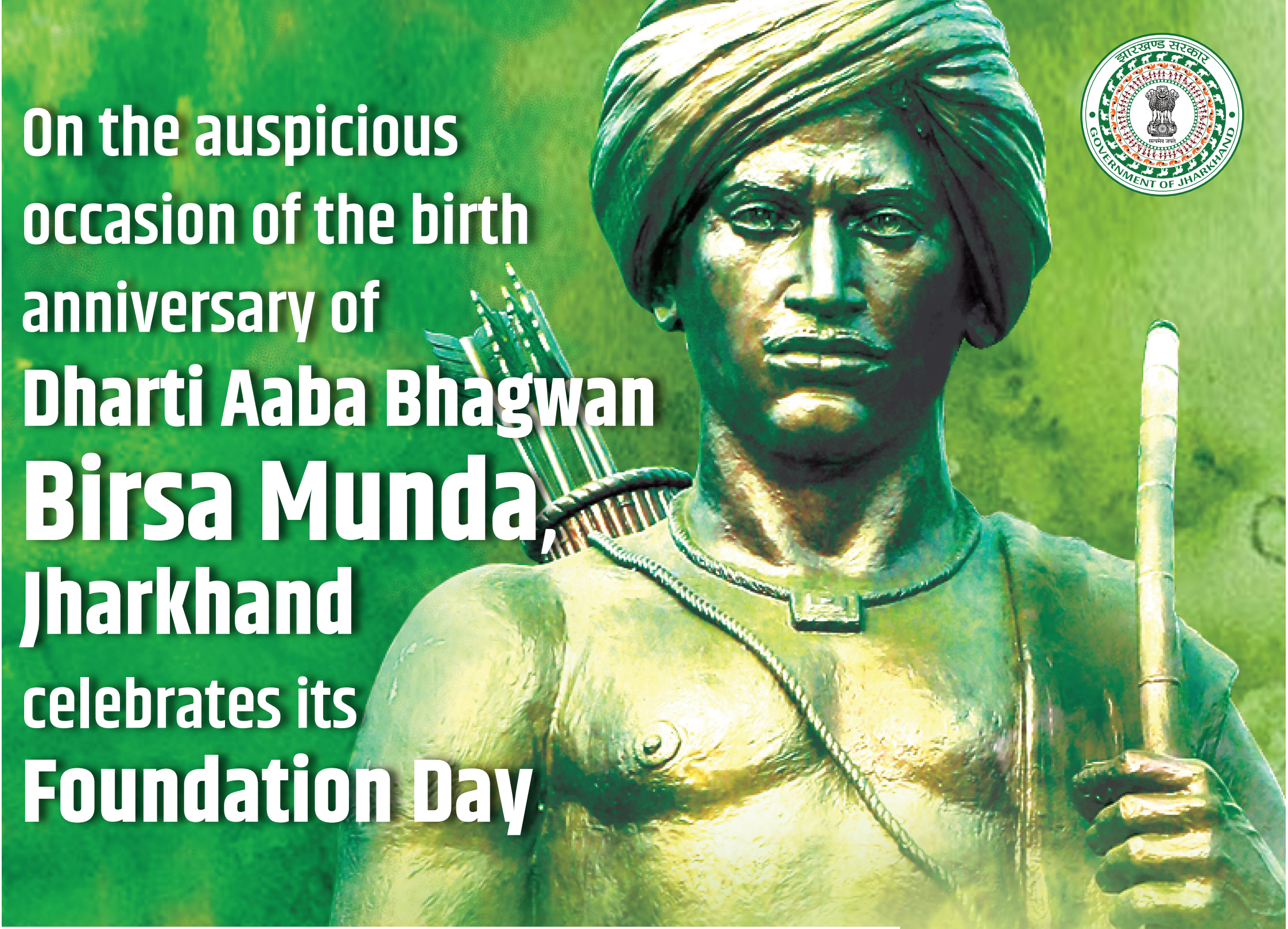


NCP workers stage a protest in Mumbai on the 6th anniversary of demonetisation, 8 Nov. 2022

Photo: Getty Images

*Events proved that the RBI had accurately predicted both the damages and the lack of benefits on every count. What the RBI was hiding was the fact that Modi had ignored its concerns*





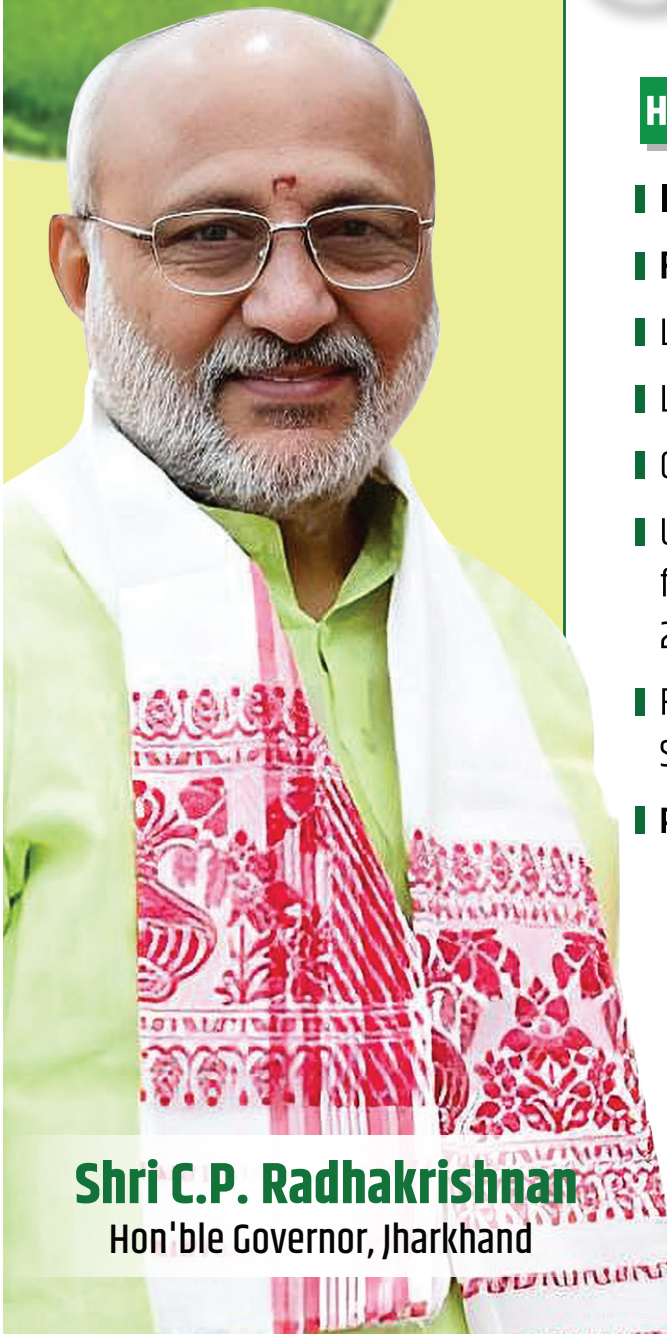
# On the auspicious occasion of the birth anniversary of Dharti Aaba Bhagwan Birsa Munda, Jharkhand celebrates its Foundation Day

Our heartfelt gratitude and homage to the valiant martyrs of Jharkhand for their struggle and sacrifice

## Johar

### Highlights of the event

- Inauguration of 229 projects worth ₹1,714 crores
- Foundation stone being laid of 677 projects worth ₹5,328 crores
- Launch of Apki Yojana, Apki Sarkar, Apke Dwar campaign
- Launch of Abua Awas Yojana and Mukhyamantri Gram Gaadi Yojana
- Offer Letter distribution to 18,034 youths under the Rojgar Mela
- Under the Savitribai Phule Kishori Samriddhi Yojana, distribution of financial assistance worth ₹261 crores to 5.5 lakh girls for the year 2023-2024
- Felicitation of 70 players with cash rewards worth ₹2 crores as per Sports Policy
- Policies to be launched
  - Jharkhand Startup policy 2023
  - Jharkhand M.S.M.E Promotion Policy 2023
  - Jharkhand Export Policy 2023
  - Jharkhand IT, Data Centre and BPO Investment Promotion Policy 2023



**Shri C.P. Radhakrishnan**  
Hon'ble Governor, Jharkhand



**Shri Hemant Soren**  
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Jharkhand

Date - 15 November, 2023 | Time - 02:00 pm Onwards  
Place - Morhabadi Ground, Ranchi

Information and Public Relations Department, Government of Jharkhand





HERALD VIEW

Survival of the Richest: The India Story

Even at the risk of offending some people, let's replay that sharp-witted, often repeated Aaron Levenstein line on statistics. The American academic once famously said: 'Statistics are like a bikini—what they reveal is interesting, but what they conceal is vital'.

You wouldn't have missed the 'India Shining' headlines that unerringly pop up in election season, headlines quoting macroeconomic statistics that have you think the Indian economy is on a roll. Take for instance the World Bank's latest India Development Update (IDU), its flagship half-yearly report on the Indian economy. It says: 'Despite significant global challenges, India was one of the fastest-growing major economies in FY22-23 at 7.2 per cent. India's growth rate was the second highest among G20 countries and almost twice the average for emerging market economies. This resilience was underpinned by robust domestic demand, strong public infrastructure investment and a strengthening financial sector. Bank credit growth increased to 15.8 per cent in the first quarter of FY23-24 compared with 13.3 per cent in the first quarter of FY22-23.'

Other reports point out that the government's GST (Goods and Services Tax) collections are rising. Corporate profits are higher. The capital expenditure budget has gone up from 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2019 to 2.7 per cent in 2023, indicating higher expenditure on infrastructure development. There's more: the number of dollar millionaires in the country is projected to double by 2026 and the number of dollar billionaires in the country has risen to 169, higher than all other countries save the US and China. The waiting list for luxury cars is apparently getting longer and the demand for luxury apartments that cost upwards of Rs 15 crore is growing. You may even have heard of the stampede in malls for Apple iPhones made in India. Sounds good, right?

Now consider what these statistics conceal.

Unemployment in India is at an all-time high while concentration of wealth at the top is back to pre-1947 levels. Savings and investment rates are at a 20-year low. Household savings are down and household borrowings are up, with indications that people are World Hunger Index rankings—it placed India at an ignominious #111 among 125 countries—but a free-ration scheme for 800 million Indians tells another story. While the luxury segments of the economy are growing, rural demand is markedly depressed, as seen in, say, the decline in sales of two-wheelers and tractors. While 10 per cent of Indians have steady and even rising incomes and continue to aspire to a better life, for the rest, survival is still a struggle.

Published in January this year, an Oxfam report, rather perceptively titled 'Survival of the Richest: the India Story', noted that the combined wealth of the 100 richest Indians had touched Rs 54.12 lakh crore—an amount that could fund the entire Union Budget for more than 18 months. These findings corroborate the World Inequality Report 2022, which had flagged India as one of the most unequal countries with yawning income and wealth disparities. Said income gap between India's rich and poor has been increasing over time. As per the report, the income of the top 10 per cent of India's wage earners is 20 times more than what the bottom 50 per cent earn. It is this creamy layer of the top 10 per cent of wage earners, holding about 57 per cent of the country's income, who seem to be driving demand, consumption and India's so-called growth story.

The concentration of wealth is even more stark: while the top 1 per cent of Indians hold 22 per cent of the total net worth, only 13 per cent rests with the bottom 50 per cent. The Oxfam report has yet another startling figure: between 2012 and 2021, 40 per cent of the wealth created in India has gone to just 1 per cent of the population and a meagre 3 per cent has reached the bottom 50 per cent. A UNDP report this year spoke of poverty concentration in states that are home to 45 per cent of India's population but house 62 per cent of its poor.

India's economic growth story is not for these poor sods. For them, we have election-time doles.

Letters to the Editor

Rupee hits a record low

The Indian rupee dropped to an all-time low of \$83.30 to the US dollar last week. Did it register? One did not see screaming headlines in the 'mainstream' media. There were no debates and panel discussions on the causes and impact of the tumbling rupee on the country's economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who in his unlimited ignorance used to loudly say—before he became the PM—that the rupee's fall was in fact the fall of the government of India's reputation, is silent as a dummy. As if nothing has happened! Hasn't the Modi government's reputation hit a new low along with the falling rupee? We urge the prime minister to speak up and admit his guilt or tell the nation that he was wrong when he made such irresponsible statements.

Subhajit Dasgupta, Ghaziabad

In a recent 'pakodas' employment

In a recent report, learned economists at the State Bank of India (SBI)—India's largest bank and largest lender—have claimed that the unemployment level in the country is at a 'record low'! Well, that qualifies for Ripley's Believe It or Not, doesn't it? They have argued that the jump in the self-employed populace within employment estimates (57.3 per cent in FY23 against 52.2 per cent in FY18) has been 'wrongfully interpreted by labour economists and others' as a signal of shrinking employment opportunities. They didn't stop there. They further stressed that 'earnings have increased across all categories'. While we can leave it to the experts to argue it out, we can certainly put forth what we see happening around us and to us—our

incomes have remained stagnant over the years, jobs are harder to come by, and inflation across sectors has actually made us poorer. The self-employment the SBI economists are talking about is nothing but a regurgitation of what Prime Minister Modi said on a TV channel a few years ago—selling pakodas and earning Rs 200–250 a day is employment. If that is the kind of employment the Modi government and its sarkari economists brag about, they should be ashamed.

Alok Sharma, Delhi

Shameful silence on Gaza

Israel has crossed all civilised limits in bombing and killing civilians in Gaza, including a large number of children. Demonstrations against the Israeli government are being organised across the world, including those where Jews are prominently present, at times even leading such protests. Our country, however, has made it a crime to protest peacefully against Israel's excesses, because it embarrasses our prime minister, who apparently has a deep personal friendship with his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu. Our more-loyal-than-the-king despot has banned peaceful protests in India. Those speaking up for the poor Palestinians on their social media pages/ handles are being booked by the police as criminals. And these same elected autocrats and their minions howl and throw fits when a global report points out that India has slipped several notches on the democracy and freedom index in the past 10 years.

Anurag Dey, Kolkata

India's Growing Unemployment Crisis

The assumption that unemployment can be overcome only if the growth rate is accelerated is false

In an economy like ours where the workforce is not neatly divided between the employed and the unemployed, and where there is massive and mounting casualisation of work, measuring unemployment is a tricky business. Since it necessarily entails asking a person how much work he/ she got over a certain period in the past, the unemployment measure varies, depending on the period taken into account, and how much work over this period is taken to constitute employment.

The National Sample Survey (NSS) has therefore three different concepts in place: usual status, weekly status and daily status. And while it carried out its large sample survey every five years, its annual survey was based on a much smaller sample, because of which its figures were, at best, tentative.

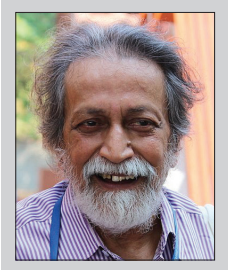
Researchers therefore have increasingly been relying on the figures provided by the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), a non-official organisation that carries out a sample survey every month. An urban survey is conducted every week that asks people whether they were employed on the date of the survey.

The unemployment rate is defined as the ratio of the unemployed (who are willing to and seeking work) to the total labour force, comprising both the employed (i.e., the work force) and the unemployed. One may have reservations about its measure, but the CMIE provides a consistent set of figures over time that can be useful for analysing trends.

The latest CMIE figures for October 2023 showed that the unemployment rate in the country stood at 10.05 per cent; the rural unemployment rate was 10.82 per cent while the urban unemployment rate was 8.44 per cent. The overall unemployment rate was not only higher than in the previous month (7.09 per cent), but the highest since May 2021 when there had been a sharp spike. The previous sharp spike occurred in 2020 because of the lockdown.

This has naturally given rise to much discussion about the growing unemployment crisis in the economy. However, I wish to explore another aspect altogether. Since the CMIE-estimated unemployment rate appears to change noticeably from one month to the next, I have a specific rationale for focusing on a different aspect of the CMIE figures to establish the growing unemployment crisis.

According to the CMIE chief, India's workforce (which is synonymous with the number of employed persons) has remained virtually stagnant at a little over 400 million over the last five years, which means that employment has not



Prabhat Patnaik

increased at all. In October 2023, when the unemployment rate went up so sharply, the total labour force also showed a sudden increase. This rise in the labour force is the outcome of the working age population increasing without any offsetting fall in the labour participation rate. A simple calculation reveals that the absolute number of employed persons remained unchanged.

All of this explains the rise in the unemployment rate since 2019. According to the CMIE, the unemployment rate which was 5.27 per cent in 2019 rose to 8 per cent in 2020, remained at 5.98 per cent and 7.33 per cent respectively in the next two years, and went up even further in 2023.

Many commentators have attributed the stagnation in employment and the rise in the unemployment rate to the incomplete recovery of the economy from the Covid-induced fall. While GDP recovery post-pandemic has undoubtedly been slow, belying the government's boast about 'India being the fastest growing country in the world', this fact alone cannot explain the stagnation in employment numbers.

Compared to 2019, for instance, real GDP has increased by about 16 per cent in 2023 (assuming a 6 per cent growth rate for 2023). If employment has not increased despite the GDP increase, this says something about the nature of the growth process itself, rather than just its pace.

What the Indian experience confirms is the invalidity of the proposition that unemployment can be overcome only if the growth rate is accelerated. In fact, it all depends on how growth is brought about. The absolute stagnation of employment is because the nature of growth has changed in the last few years, thereby generating less employment.

The small-scale and petty production sector was adversely affected by the neoliberal withdrawal of State support and exposure to unre-

stricted foreign competition. Its woes were further compounded by two moves by the Modi government: demonetisation, and the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The draconian lockdown ordered by the government in response to Covid-19 had a further devastating impact on this sector. The most employment-intensive sector of the economy is still reeling from all these factors, and it is the uneven revival of GDP growth that is responsible for employment lagging behind, to a point where its growth has actually been almost zero.

It follows, therefore, that the gamut of economic measures that the BJP government has in its kitty is incapable of generating further employment. These measures, centring around providing incentives that induce capitalists to invest more so that the GDP growth rate is accelerated, are infructuous for two very distinct reasons. First, in an oligopolistic market, investment depends upon the expected growth in demand. Unless steps are taken to increase demand, handouts to capitalists do not raise investment—the money is simply pocketed. What is more, in so far as the transfers to capitalists are financed by cutting government expenditure elsewhere—in order to keep the fiscal deficit within stipulated limits—there is a net shrinkage of demand which is contractionary for the economy and hence counterproductive, since the capitalists do not spend the entire amount of transfers handed out to them.

Second, even if such transfers could increase investment and hence GDP growth, the sectors where such an increase would occur are not particularly employment-intensive; government measures are not oriented towards promoting the small-scale and petty production sector where employment is concentrated.

Ironically, while doling out tax concessions to capitalists in the name of promoting employment, the government does not undertake the necessary expenditure involved in filling the large number of vacancies that exist within the government sector. The ostensible reason for this is fiscal constraint; but the fiscal constraint itself is caused, among other things, by the tax concessions given to the capitalists.

Also ironical is the fact that the government is cutting down on MGNREGS at a time when the rural unemployment rate is on the rise.

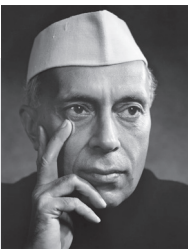
The CMIE data, while highlighting the growing unemployment crisis, also exposes the utter absurdity of the BJP government's thinking on unemployment. ■

IPA Service

NEHRU'S WORD

The Suez Crisis and Hungary 1956

India's confused foreign policy towards the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict prompts us to look for other examples of how India handled similar situations. Sixty-seven years ago, on 29 October 1956, Israel attacked Egypt, and was soon joined by Britain and France. The ostensible reason was the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by General Nasser of Egypt in July 1956. In a letter he wrote to the Chief Ministers of the provinces on 8 December 1956, Nehru, while condemning the aggression against Egypt and supporting Hungary's right to choose its own path, also emphasises the need to keep ways open for peace.



What happened in Egypt and Hungary is of importance for a variety of reasons, and the world has been rather near a major war. I should, however, like to lay stress on two aspects particularly. The first relates to Anglo–French action in Egypt. It is patent that this action has failed completely. It was aimed principally at bringing down the Nasser government and establishing a more pliable tool. This transformation was supposed to lead to a re-establishment of British influence over Western Asia and of French influence in Northern Africa and especially Algeria.

It is President Nasser who has come out of it with greater strength and far greater prestige, while both the UK and France have suffered tremendously in their prestige, apart from the great losses that they sustained.

This has demonstrated that it is very difficult now for an open reversion to colonialism. Even a strong power cannot do so at the expense of a weak country, because of world opinion, including of course Asian opinion, and the many other consequences that flow from this... England and France, two great colonial powers, have not only suffered very greatly in prestige, but have also been shown up as really not strong enough to hold empires. In effect, this has changed the balance of power in the world.

The events in Hungary have demonstrated that militant communism, however powerful its backing, cannot be forcibly imposed for long. Communism might possibly grow in a country if it is allied to nationalism and the country relies on its own strength. Hungary was, for ten years, under a Communist regime dominated by the Soviet Union. During these ten years there was, no doubt, a great deal of propaganda and indoctrination but, as events have proved, it could not stand up against the strong nationalist urge of the Hungarian people. Thus, Russia has not only suffered greatly in prestige by what it did in Hungary, but so-called international communism has also been shown to be much weaker than people imagined.

These two events are significant for the future and will, no doubt, gradually influence the policies of various countries.

Both in Egypt and Hungary, the situation is still critical, though it would appear that the immediate danger of a major war has been avoided. At the same time, the cold war

has come back and is likely to create a new crisis from time to time....

It is important that we should have a clear idea of these happenings because the burden of shaping our own country's policy rests on us... The stakes are very heavy indeed and, by some fate or circumstance, India's responsibilities have grown. Reports come to us from many of the West Asian countries that wherever an Indian flag is seen on the car of one of our representatives, crowds gather round it to express their high appreciation of India and her policy, and expect India to do something to help them.

So also, in Budapest. That is a terrible burden for us to carry. Our capacity to do anything is limited, and our good name has gone far beyond that capacity. This prospect rather frightens me. It is easy enough to give expression to our views in brave language, condemning this country or that, but it is not

desperation and even war. Therefore, it would seem that we should always try to have an honourable way of escape from a difficult position. I remember that Gandhiji always left a door open in this way, without ever sacrificing his principles. Gandhiji's wisdom and practical good sense justify itself again and again.

England and France, losing the active help of the United States and having to face an angered public opinion, became too weak to carry on their rash adventure in Egypt and are trying to end it with such grace as they can. The Soviet Union is not weak and relies on its own strength. Even so, it has bowed to world opinion to some extent. The danger is that it may be pushed too much in an attempt to humiliate it and then it may react wrongly.

The Soviet Union was alarmed at what might well develop into a collapse of its authority in the East European countries and bring a hostile frontier right up to its own borders. There is nothing that Russia fears so much as a re-armed Germany. Twice in our lifetime, German armies have invaded and brought havoc to Russia...

How, then, are we to deal with this situation? I can offer no simple recipe. We may, however, lay down some broad considerations. The first one is that we should stand on our basic principles. That means that foreign forces should be withdrawn from Hungary, and Hungary should enjoy real independence with a political or economic dependence of her people's choice. For this purpose, Soviet troops will have to withdraw. We should make it easy for the Soviet Union to do so. If we make it difficult, then the process of withdrawal will be delayed and the crisis will continue.

It becomes ever more clearly evident to me that the system of pacts and alliances—whether it is NATO or the Warsaw Treaty or SEATO or the Baghdad Pact—weakens peace and maintains a constant dread of each other.

If we ask the Russians to withdraw from East European countries, as we logically should, foreign bases in other foreign countries should also be liquidated. I am quite sure that if all these pacts and alliances are put an end to, there would be great relief all over the world. ■

Selected and edited by MRIDULA MUKHERJEE, former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library



# Genocide Knows No Nuance

When neutrality is complicity. **Avay Shukla** on the perfidy and posture of our foreign policy on the Palestine question

In my previous column (‘War Crimes Redefined’) I had opined that what Israel and the USA were doing in tandem in Gaza was a war crime. Since then, the criminality has only intensified—11,261 innocent Palestinians have already been murdered (per *AlJazeera’s* Live Tracker), with the whole world—Global North, South and Middle—either remaining mum or muttering inanities of the Blinken type that are specious and intended to give Netanyahu more time to achieve his objective of depopulating the strip. A non-binding UN resolution moved by Jordan for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds has been passed by the General Assembly, but to our eternal shame, India has not voted in favour of a ceasefire. A reliable estimate states that Israel has already killed 1 per cent of Gaza’s population; in Indian terms that would amount to about 14 million deaths. Surely, both the irony of our posture and its perfidy cannot be lost on any serious observer of our foreign policy. The self-proclaimed leader of the Global South—the Vishwaguru no less—having just blown up Rs 4,000 crore on the G20 conclave to burnish his delusive credentials, has now become a mere camp follower of the Global North! The irony lies in being a ‘leader’ without any leadership. The perfidy lies in an external affairs minister who has spent his entire career in the IFS supporting the Palestinian cause (our time-tested and age-old policy), but now has no stirrings of conscience in joining pro-Israeli ranks. Either he has changed his mind or he has sold his soul for the proverbial loaves and fishes of office. I am inclined to plump for the latter explanation, given his strident expressions of loyalty to right-wing ideology for quite some time now. This diminishes him as a human being: he has abandoned his principles and values and has now become a full-fledged member of a callous, opportunistic, amoral and transactional universe. I wonder if he can sleep at night; he probably can, benefitting from the experience acquired in the Ukraine war, where we did precisely the same.

India now languishes in *terra nullius* or no man’s land. We have abdicated any moral right to lead the Global South; and in the Global North we are now just another parvenu seeking only to stay in the good books of the US, putting all our eggs in one geo-political basket. Our moment of reckoning will eventually come, but it will not save the Palestinians from further slaughter. No one with an IQ above 50 (which excludes most of the bhakts, naturally) will buy the canard that we are

maintaining ‘neutrality’ in the Gaza conflict. Neutrality in a dispute between the world’s fourth most powerful army (a nuclear power to boot) and a putative ‘nation’ that comprises millions of displaced people with no government, economy or army, where 80 per cent survive on humanitarian aid is no neutrality—it is complicity with the former. As Martin Luther King had said: there can be no neutrality between right and wrong, or between good and evil. Neutrality in such a context means supporting what is wrong and evil. Which brings me to my next point. My earlier piece elicited quite a few responses. I won’t bother with the bhakts and trolls since radical Hindutva, Nazism and Zionism are all poisonous fruits of the same genealogical tree and, by definition, can only ooze venom. But there are a lot of otherwise well-read and reasonable people who appear to have succumbed to the ‘theory of nuance’ on the ongoing pogrom and slaughter of Palestinians. This fake theory, and their argument, goes something like this: Israel’s disproportionate assault on Gaza is not a simple black-and-white issue, it has *nuances* which must be understood. It is defending itself from a terrorist organisation that has beheaded babies and raped grandmothers, which launches rockets against Israel, and has taken 250 hostages. The Gazans fully support Hamas and must now pay the price for it. Most importantly, Jews have a right to the lands of the Palestinians since they were the original settlers. 900,000 Jews were evicted from Palestine in the early 20th century by the Arabs; some apologists even go as far back as the Old Testament and the Canaanite period to justify Israel’s claim to Palestinian lands. Most of this is misleading hogwash, an attempt to deflect the debate and to redirect it to a path that leads away from the war crimes being committed in Gaza. Today’s global outrage should not be about who has the more justifiable claim to the land, the Jews or the Palestinians. The

*Looking for nuances in this conflict, or claiming neutrality, is sheer Islamophobia and complicity in the neo-colonial game playing out before our eyes*



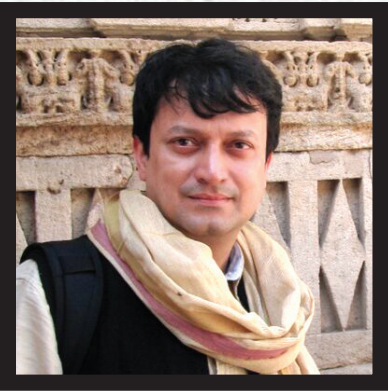
An Iranian singer performs amidst shroud-wrapped packages, part of an anti-war art installation symbolising dead Palestinian children, at Palestine Square in downtown Tehran, 13 November 2023

anger should be about the slaughter of thousands of innocent non-combatants, women and children in Gaza. There are no nuances here—not in the killing of over 4,500 children and more than 3,000 women; not in the further 2,000 buried under the blasted rubble; not in the bombing of hospitals, schools, refugee camps; not in the forced eviction of 800,000 Gazans from their homes in the north; not in the use of starvation as a weapon of war; not in the prevention of food, fuel and medicine from reaching a people already horrendously deprived by 17 years of blockade. There are no nuances in killing tens of thousands of innocents in order to assert a legal right to land which was never yours in the first place. (At the onset of the modern era, which in the case of the Middle East can be said to begin with the conquest of Arab lands by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century, there were barely 5,000 Jews left in Palestine. Jews started arriving in large numbers only after 1947, from which point on the dispossession of the Palestinians only grew more relentless—a claim borne out by the United Nations, and by the Oslo Accord.)

There are no nuances in determining the culpability of Israel in the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing. Even if Hamas is said to be a terrorist organisation, this does not entitle Israel to behave like a terrorist itself, as it has been doing since 1947. A sovereign, democratic State has to abide by international rules and covenants, both during peace and war; in fact, it has to be held to a higher standard than a terrorist outfit. If it conducts itself like a terrorist entity, subtlety has no role in determining its guilt. In any case, independent evidence is now emerging that Netanyahu himself covertly supported and funded Hamas as a counter-balance to the Palestinian Authority: it is his creation. Even more damning evidence is beginning to indicate that most of the Jewish settlers killed on the 7 and 8 October were casualties of retaliatory fire by the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) which, under its ‘Hannibal Directive’, is authorised to wipe out the enemy at all costs, even the death of its own citizens. Some reports reveal that these Israelis were killed by tank shells and 5.7mm bullets which the Hamas does not possess. Nor does Hamas possess lethal

missiles like the one which killed 500 people in a Gaza hospital in a single midnight strike. The news about the beheading of babies has been debunked by independent journalists. Netanyahu is using Hamas as a pretext to stay on in power, with subsequent savagery. His buddy in India seems to be doing the same, with bankrupt ‘neutrality’. Looking for nuances in this conflict, or claiming neutrality, is sheer Islamophobia and complicity in the neo-colonial game playing out before our eyes. The Western colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries is back with a vengeance; riding this time around on Biblical justification, oil, the Ben Gurion canal and racial hatred. Its messiahs are a self-proclaimed Zionist in the White House who cannot climb three stairs without stumbling and a psychopath whose mind is ‘a black hole’ that cannot be penetrated, according to his psychiatrist who has just committed suicide. Truly has it been said: *Homo homini lupus est*. Man is wolf to man. ■

**AVAY SHUKLA** is a retired IAS officer and author of *The Deputy Commissioner’s Dog and Other Colleagues*. He blogs at [avayshukla.blogspot.com](http://avayshukla.blogspot.com)



## When Art Meets Prejudice

Mumbai, 12 November 2023

**Dear Prof. Dr. Andreas Hoffmann**  
Managing Director, Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH)

These last few days have been among the most deeply distressing days of my life. The monstrous charge of anti-Semitism has been brought against my name in Germany, a country I have regarded with love and admiration, and to whose cultural institutions and intellectual life I have contributed for several decades, as a writer, curator, and cultural theorist. Members of the German commentariat who have no acquaintance with my life and work have judged, denounced, and stigmatised me on the basis of a single signature on a petition\*, taken out of its context and not approached in the spirit of reason. I have been written about with harshness and condescension, and none of my detractors has thought it important to ask me for my point of view. I have been subjected to the proceedings of a kangaroo court. It is clear to me that there is no room, in this toxic atmosphere, for a nuanced discussion of the issues at stake. And now—in what strikes me as a doomed attempt to save a situation that is beyond saving—I am being asked to accept a sweeping and untenable definition of anti-Semitism that conflates the Jewish people with the Israeli state; and that, correspondingly, misrepresents any expression of sympathy with the Palestinian people as support for Hamas. My conscience does not permit me to accept this sweeping definition and these strictures on human empathy. Such a definition and such strictures have been opposed by prominent Jewish thinkers such as the philosopher Omri Boehm, the historian Moshe Zimmermann, the columnist Gideon Levy, the philosopher Michael Marder, and many, many others, who reject the equation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. A system that insists on such a definition and such strictures—and which chooses to ignore both criticality and compassion—is a system that has lost its moral compass. I say this with the greatest sadness. It pains me to say that such circumstances negate Documenta’s historic openness to a diversity of positions and its capacity for sustaining the life of the imagination in a supportive environment. I greatly fear that these circumstances will compromise the generosity of spirit and the willingness to engage in dialogue that have long been sterling features of Germany’s contribution to global cultural politics. As such, I find myself unable to perform my

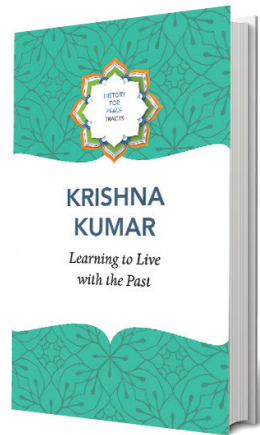
duties towards Documenta, an institution for which I have had great affection and which I have known well for more than twenty years, ever since Okwui Enwezor invited me to chair a panel at the Delhi platform of Documenta 11 in May 2001. It has been an honour to serve on the Finding Committee for Documenta 16, and it has been a pleasure to get to know you and work with you. With much regret, I must offer you my resignation and step down from the Finding Committee. You will agree that it is fair that I should be permitted to state my side of this case, for the record: 1. I have the highest regard for the Jewish people, and have always had the deepest empathy with their historic sufferings and admiration for their glorious cultural achievements. This is evident in my essays, my lectures, and my books. I am appalled by the accusation that I am anti-Semitic, and the suggestion that I am in need of instruction on this sensitive subject. Simple biographical factors render this accusation absurd. I was brought up in a pluralist family, which took pride in the diversity of India, including the presence, among us, of three distinct Jewish communities—the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews—for centuries. My first mentor and dear friend, the great Indian poet and art critic Nissim Ezekiel, was a member of the Bene Israel community. Indeed, one of my great-aunts, Kitty Shiva Rao, was born Kitty Verstandig in a Viennese Jewish family; she made her home in a newly independent India, applying her knowledge of the Holocaust to healing a young country that had been born amidst the horrors of the Partition. The Shoah is not external to me; it is one of the strands in my own family history. 2. Putting aside biographical factors, I wish to place on record also that I have publicly opposed the intellectual and cultural boycott of Israel—on the grounds that this will further weaken and isolate our liberal, progressive, critical, and inclusive colleagues within Israel. I do not share the BDS position, and disagree with it. My heart goes out both to the Jewish people and the Palestinian people, who have suffered an unrelenting condition of strife for more than seven decades in West Asia. I condemn unequivocally the terror unleashed by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the horrendous massacre by Hamas militants of Israeli men, women, and children as well as Palestinian, Thai, Filipino, Nepali, and other individuals. I mourn the deaths of these innocent people. At the same time, I cannot ignore the brutal program of annihilation that the government of Israel has launched against the Palestinian civilian

population, in retaliation. I cannot look away from this humanitarian catastrophe, its cost exacted in the lives of innocent men, women, and children. Now, more than ever, there is a compelling need to bring the communities of Israel and Palestine together, to renounce the exceptionalism of suffering on both sides, and to craft a solidarity of grief, a communion of shared vulnerability, and a process of healing and renewal. 3. Let us now consider the so-called evidence that has been presented against me: my signature on a petition circulated by the Indian Cultural Forum and dated August 26, 2019, protesting a discussion hosted by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai, on ‘Leaders’ Idea of Nations: Zionism and Hindutva’. The invitation for this event presented a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the founding figure of Zionism, alongside a portrait of V.D. Savarkar, a founding figure of Hindutva. My reason for signing this petition was because the event clearly posited an equivalence between Herzl and Savarkar, and was intended to develop intellectual respectability for an alliance between Zionism and Hindutva. I found this highly ironic, since Savarkar was known to be an admirer of Hitler and openly expressed his admiration for Nazi ideology and methods, which he proposed as a model for a Hindu-majoritarian India to follow, especially with regard to the treatment of the religious minorities. No member of the German commentariat who denounced me has asked herself or himself why the Israeli Consulate General thought it appropriate to equate Zionism with Hindutva in the first place. I have dedicated my life to opposing authoritarian forces and discriminatory ideologies, and my signature carried with it the weight of my commitment to dialogue, inclusiveness, mutuality, and the ceaseless quest for common ground. This commitment remains with me, as the cornerstone of my life. With warm good wishes,

**Ranjit**

\* I did not author the petition, nor do I agree with every detail of its wording. But, as anyone who has ever signed a petition knows, even sharp differences of stance are temporarily set aside to establish a coalition to address an urgency. In this case, as the list of signatories shows, the coalition consisted of some of India’s best-known artists, intellectuals, curators and academics. As it happens, the artist who sent me the petition, asking if I would sign it, was Vivan Sundaram, whose grandmother, Marie Antoinette Gottesmann-Baktay, belonged to a Hungarian Jewish family.





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# Making Sense of History

Educationist and former NCERT director **Krishna Kumar** on how to live *with* the past rather than *in* it

**T**he functioning of schools as a modern institution involves the essential device of regimentation of the child's body, mind and heart, which is used to reach the educational goals of the State. Studies conducted in India and around the world have shown that compliance is a necessary skill for child to learn, which starts from the nursery years.

The compliance of the body, which French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes as 'habitus', is an important aspect of this culture that includes body language, behaviour and thoughts. In order to become a successful student, a child must internalise and take on this enveloping culture. The ability to make a group of 30 or 40 children work together is essential for any school education to function, and if you are a schoolteacher, you understand its importance. Although the word regimentation is commonly associated with the military or police, its use in schools is equally interesting and compelling. Therefore, it is essential to understand how schools function as a process and institution. It is important to note that this regimentation occurs not only in public schools but also in private ones.

I understand that in order to ensure effective functioning of schools, certain forms of 'habitus' creation are necessary, particularly when the classroom is diverse. I am presenting these points for analysis purposes and not for criticism. As one goes up the hierarchy of schools, one notices that they distinguish themselves in terms of their effectiveness and quality by using another word that is almost a cousin of regimentation—discipline. The higher the status of the school in the market, the more they depend on their ability to claim that their children are disciplined and can be relied upon to behave in certain ways.

By the time students finish school, the school's stamp is so deeply imprinted that they carry it with them for the rest of their lives, and they identify themselves by saying 'I am from such-and-such school!' They can even spot another person from their school in a crowd without having to ask. This is

what Bourdieu referred to as 'habitus'—institutional memories that manifest not just in our language but also in our bodies.

In addition to compliance and discipline, another important regimenting device that is often ignored in schools (you might use the term elite for those schools that use it more successfully and purposefully) is the ability to answer questions quickly without thinking. Unthinking quickness is an aspect of regimentation that 'good' schools inculcate, which helps students become increasingly competitive.

In ninth-grade classrooms in famous schools in Calcutta or Delhi, for example, the teacher may not even finish the question before students start raising their hands. This unthinking quickness and the desire to answer before anyone else is a consequence of long-standing socialisation values that do not quite match the expectation of critical inquiry, which requires reflection and taking a few seconds or minutes before answering a question. That is something that regimentation cannot create. Answers are given on the assumption that the question does not require thought—it only requires recall.

This leads to the fourth source of regimentation: fear of examinations, where so much needs to be recalled under great pressure that preparation, from nursery to the next 13–14 years, may prove inadequate.

*In an environment where regimentation is deeply ingrained, socialising the mind into critical enquiry through the study of history is challenging*

Hence, the use of fear as a tool for regimentation is prevalent in schools, causing students to live in a constant state of anxiety and adopt a rote learning approach for exams. Drill and coaching classes are seen as supplements to school education, especially in higher grades.

As a history teacher, one must be cognisant of these factors when using history as a means to foster critical thinking. In an environment where regimentation is deeply ingrained, socialising the mind into critical enquiry through the study of history can be challenging.

During my research on Indo-Pak history, I spoke with history teachers in both countries who acknowledged their lack of control over such aspects of school life. In the lower grades, history teachers may not even have a background in history. It is only in higher classes that history becomes an optional subject and a qualified history teacher can be guaranteed. Therefore, the question of whether teaching history alone can promote reflexivity and open-mindedness in a culture of regimentation requires careful consideration of the many difficulties involved.

One major aspect that history tributes to nation-building is the creation of a national narrative in the modern world. At the school level, all history narratives are essentially national narratives that describe how events unfolded within the nation's territory. However, it is important to approach the nation-building project without excessive sensitivity, as the nationalist project has been hijacked and vitiated by the current political circumstances in India. The situation was similar in Pakistan 70 years ago.

In this context, it is worth considering whether nation-building can be achieved without political nationalism or whether it is possible to engage with political nationalism in creative ways. Can we aspire to be Indians without being nationalists, as Rabindranath Tagore dreamed? This is a challenging question that requires careful consideration.

Moving forward, we must consider the present-day concern regarding school text-

books and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). It is noteworthy that the very first word of the acronym NCERT is 'national'. The creation of new textbooks for different subjects, including history, in 2006, 2007 and 2008 has been well received, particularly among those of us who are involved in English-medium schools and who could be considered part of a national elite. As someone who was a part of the NCERT during those fortuitous years, I feel especially gratified. The success story of these textbooks makes us believe that we can make a positive impact through education.

[...]

So, how do we create a sense of the past where the possibility of learning about its wider landscape of life remains insatiable and uncertain, yet full of possibilities?

There are, shared pasts and conflicting histories, and the task of the judicious, capable and interested history teacher is to make the subject a means of creating interest in the past, and learning about the ways in which the past presents itself as a challenge to our intellect, to our abilities to inquire about the past. Then alone can history serve the purposes which we would consider synonymous with peace.

History otherwise is a subject that lends itself very easily to political hostility, simply because of the conditions in which it is taught and because of the manner in which it is structured for inclusion in the education system. History lends itself most easily to that structure as a means of creating a sense of a continued battle with the past.

Instead of learning that the past is actually past and the best it can do is to help us to become curious about it, to respect it and to create in us the capacities to live with what has already happened, history often ends up creating a sense of nostalgia. The idea that something that happened 400 years ago can now be undone or that it ought to be undone so that justice can be served, is the product of precisely that kind of thinking. ■

“  
*Even if I died in the service of the nation, I would be proud of it. Every drop of my blood... will contribute to the growth of this nation and to make it strong and dynamic.*  
—Indira Gandhi

## Remembering Smt. Indira Gandhi on her birth anniversary

19 November





EAT.WANDER.REPEAT

# On picky eaters and playdates

Denise D’Silva on how there’s no accounting for children’s taste in food

People have nightmares about maths exams well into their 60s. Some people aren’t that lucky. Me, for instance. My nightmares jolt me awake with a racing heartbeat and a cold sweat, simply because I have seen my little daughter eat her chicken curry and, hold your breath, ask for seconds. It’s just the opposite conundrum for most mums, since the more typical nightmare is getting your kids to eat veggies.

Not in my home. Born into a family of voracious, carnivorous, food-crazy people, my daughter turns out to love *bhindi!* Would I feel a little better if she loved Enoki mushrooms or even aubergines? Who knows! But lady’s fingers? I thought that’s exactly the kind of slimy vegetable most kids would run away from. Legions of 5-to-8-year-olds crave crunchy fried bhindi, while mothers, fathers and cooks turn out stellar bakes, elaborate curries and exotic stir-fries, all thanks to the MasterChef we have awakened in us, and what are we met with? Absolute sulks and disapproval at the dining table. That’s the thing I’ve noticed about children and food—there’s literally no accounting for their taste.

So, what makes kids so peculiarly picky when it comes to eating? Reams have been written about young taste buds adjusting to new flavours, parental control and even maternal eating preferences. I personally don’t think the last one applies to my daughter, because if it did, she’d be eating everything in sight.

The good thing that has come about because of my daughter’s fussiness, though, is an inventiveness to match. I hide chicken mince in potato tikkis, I plant spinach and carrots in idlis and serve them to my unsuspecting angel as pieces of the rainbow. Then there are my ‘really-evil-mum-muffins’—savoury muffins that look deliciously unhealthy topped as they are with cream cheese but are, in truth, a

*It is true that the more they see their friends trying new flavours, the more they are inclined to do the same. It is also true that they do this only when the parent is nowhere in sight*

healthy treat packed with millet flour and vegetables. What they cannot see really cannot hurt them at all, this is what I’ve learnt. Because once they see a plate with different types of food on it—oh heavens!

A picky eater with peculiarly personal tastes is one hurdle. A picky eater who doesn’t like food groups touching each other is quite another level of trauma. I mean, how do you serve an Indian meal of rice, rotis, fish and veg in a plate without a single grain of rice touching the veg, or some curry finding its way to the other side? Katoris or bowls are the answer, right? But get this—they’re also a gaping trap set up by kids to fool you into thinking you’ve sorted the issue. Because once food is categorised into bowls, then entire bowls are returned as is, since there are ‘too’ many bowls and we cannot expect them to eat ‘so’ much food.

I have been subjected to tirades about how blue plates are not good for boiled egg sandwiches or how white plates need to be filled with only white food and nothing else. I’ve even made the mistake of thinking that if chicken sausages are manna from heaven as is pasta in a pesto sauce—then this combination would actually make a great dinner. But of course not! How can sausages and pasta and pesto be touching each other? Perhaps the famous chef Ferran Adria was also tortured by a toddler when he came up with the idea of deconstructed cuisine. I once had a friend call me at an odd hour of the night to ask how to cook French beans with onions which she had wrangled out of a farmer’s market somewhere in Spain, because her son had refused to eat anything else for a whole day and absolutely needed it at breakfast.

Scientists and researchers say that kids being fussy about food is part of their developmental phase and a natural evolutionary response to things. They term it neophobia, which is a fear of the new. Part of me wants to award these scientists with their rightful due for studying this phase so minutely. And the other part of me would like to introduce them to the many bottle caps, buttons and pens that have been frighteningly coaxed out of these tiny mouths, popped in when their mothers had turned away for three seconds. Absolutely no neophobia for small dangerous objects at all.

On mom self-help groups (yes, they’re very popular and most common), you’ll find mothers breaking down by the dozen via posts on how little their child has eaten in two-three days or how he or she refuses to try new things; mothers asking for tips, and which songs to play during feeding time. Apparently, ‘Baby Shark’ and ‘Senorita’ score high when it comes to the number of



times the child opens his/her mouth while distracted by the song, and so, God bless YouTube, can be ‘force-fed’.

And while force-feeding sounds so inappropriate in the woke times we live in, timing morsels to a song hardly qualifies. I distinctly remember our mothers (from the 80s and the 90s) listing the dire consequences of not finishing what was on the plate, ranging from being left out on the dark staircase to being sent off to boarding school. The trauma associated with cauliflower and spinach meals was very real and a cry-fest for both moms and kids alike.

Every child has a routine of fussing at meal-time. Surprisingly, this routine vanishes when it comes to playdates. The number of times I have felt completely stupid giving the other mother a list of things my child won’t eat, only to be told later that she loved the food and took thirds, has got me convinced that my daughter will indeed make an excellent politico. I have been accused at 6 a.m. on a school day for not making dhoklas like XYZ’s mom, when I had no idea that my

*I hide chicken mince in potato tikkis, I plant spinach and carrots in idlis and serve them to my unsuspecting angel as pieces of the rainbow*

ceiling aquarium, but how can we get our opinionated children to appreciate a wonderful coastal meal in such surroundings? First show them those beautiful fish swimming in the display and then have Nemo for dinner? Not on! When a 5-year-old tells you incessantly about how uncool it is to eat food with a face, it cuts deep.

My advice to myself, and hopefully this works for those in the same boat, is this—take a deep breath, lie to your lovelies about the aeroplane in the sky for their mouths to open, and once a week, every week: serve them some fries for your sanity. It’s a phase, it will pass. Oh yes, and don’t ever take them to a café which asks you: latte, single-shot, with milk, without sugar et cetera. Because then you’re setting yourself up for this lethal shot: “Mumma, you ask *me* why I’m so fussy, and the lady has to ask you so many questions just to get your coffee right?” ■

DENISE D’SILVA is the author of Beyond Curry Indian Cookbook, and co-founder and creative head of Hyphen Brands



Diwali festivities in Trafalgar Square

### Diwali on the Square

Diwali came to London early this year courtesy London’s Mayor Sadiq Khan. Amidst all the doom and gloom induced by the Israel–Hamas war and the economic crisis at home, the mayoral office tried to lift the mood by organising a day-long Diwali festival in Trafalgar Square, almost a fortnight before the actual event.

On 29 October, hundreds of people, including many from outside London, braved the pouring rain to join the festivities. The free public event featured traditional Indian dance, music, fun activities, and food from different parts of India.

Describing the festival as “an amazing day” that brought different communities together, Khan referred to the Bollywood blockbuster, *Amar Akbar Anthony*—a film about camaraderie and integration—and said he wished someone would make a sequel set in Britain.

“As our communities come together to

share hospitality and remember the story of Rama and Sita, I am delighted to welcome the return of Diwali festivities in Trafalgar Square. The spirit of this vibrant festival brings us all together and embodies the diverse and welcoming spirit of our great city,” he said.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was left catching up with his own more exclusive Downing Street Diwali celebrations a few days later.

**Londoners gear up for ‘Chicmas’**

Meanwhile, Christmas festivities are already knocking at the door, and for all the moaning and groaning about the cost-of-living crisis, people are set to splurge more on decorations and presents than last year.

John Lewis, the department store that sets the tone for Christmas sales, has said that despite the economic crisis, the number of homes buying and erecting two Christmas trees is more than usual; there



Photos: Getty Images

has also been a 96 per cent increase in the sale of outdoor decorations.

The first weekend of December has been dubbed as the ‘big treekend’ for a third of London households.

‘One tree is no longer enough. 40 per cent of homes with children and about 30 per cent of those without will put up a second “show tree” to brighten up a hallway or home office,’ The Times reported.

According to trading expert Kathleen Mitchell, a new trend is ‘personalising’ festivities in an effort to look different from others. And the new buzz word is ‘Chicmas’—a chic Christmas. So, a super happy ‘Chicmas’ to all.

**Sikhs, kirpans and white racism**

Sikhs living in Britain have long enjoyed the right to wear *kirpans* as part of their essential religious practice, but apparently the memo has either not gone out to all government officials or some simply don’t care.

Sikhs continue to be harassed for carrying *kirpans* into government buildings. Last week, court officials in Birmingham were forced to apologise to a Sikh man who was stopped from sitting as a juror by security staff who discovered that he was carrying a *kirpan*.

Jatinder Singh, who has served as president at Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Smethwick and as secretary general of the Sikh Council UK, said he felt “discriminated against” when he was prevented from entering Birmingham crown court where he had been summoned to serve on a jury.

He was originally allowed into the court for the morning session but when he returned after a lunch break, Singh was stopped by security staff and prevented from entering.

He said that he “felt like a child who has gone to school and taken something they shouldn’t and had it confiscated. I felt embarrassed, I felt discriminated against, I didn’t expect it to happen to me”.

A spokesman for the courts service said that it had apologised to Singh “for any distress caused” and promised to take “steps to prevent this sort of incident from happening again”.

Let’s see.



**Traffic lights tortoise wins the race**

Anyone who has ever crossed a road (and who hasn’t?) would have felt cheated by traffic lights which take too long to turn into ‘walk’ mode only to turn red too quickly.

This is because the traffic light system is universally based on a rough calculation of how long it takes an average person to cross the road. It doesn’t take into account the pedestrian’s age or disability, both of which might slow down their responses.

Now, the British government is taking a fresh look at the one-size-fits-all traffic light system.



Under the current guidelines, introduced in the early 1950s, pedestrians have 6.1 seconds to cross both lanes of a road of normal width at a walking pace of 1.2 metres per second. A new recommendation will allow 7.3 seconds to cross at a speed of 1 metre per second.

Research shows that 76 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women aged 65 and older were unable to use crossings safely because their walking speed was slower than 1.2 metres per second. Allowing 20 per cent longer crossing time will benefit people who, like this columnist, are getting a bit slow on their feet.

Any takers for this in India?

**And, finally,** Hollywood actress Joan Crawford’s date of birth was such a secret that her obituary in *The Times* recorded that ‘She died on May 10, 1977, aged between 69 and 76’.



# The Bowmaker of Pakyong

In a state whose archers have represented India in three Olympics, 83-year-old Tshering Dorjee Bhutia still makes bows and arrows the old-fashioned way

Jigyasa Mishra

It takes time to realise that Tshering Dorjee Bhutia never earned his living from making bows. For 60 years, his income came from carpentry—mainly repairing furniture. But his inspiration came from archery, deeply embedded in the culture of his native Sikkim. His life is so wrapped up in that art and craft, it's all the 83-year-old wants to talk about, at his modest home in Karthok village of Pakyong district. His many decades as a skilled wood worker sit lightly on him. He would rather be known as the bowmaker of Pakyong.

"I was 10 or 12 when I started making things with wood. Gradually, they began taking the shape of a bow and people started buying them. That's how this bowman was born," Tshering tells us.

"Previously, the bow was made differently," he says, showing us some of his products. "This earlier type was called *tabjoo* (in Nepali). It consisted of two pieces of stick joined together, tied and covered with the *chamda* (leather). The version we make nowadays is called the 'boat design'. Making one bow takes three days, at least. But that's for an active, young hand. An old hand would take a few more days," Tshering says with a mischievous smile.

Tshering has been making bows and arrows for over six decades now in his hometown, some 30 kilometres from Gangtok. Karthok is known for its Buddhist monastery—the sixth oldest in Sikkim. Locals say Karthok had more bowmakers once, but Tshering is now the only one left.

In one vital way, Tshering's house reflects the charm of Karthok. You reach the portico only after passing through a bright and colourful garden that is home to nearly 500 varieties of flowers and plants. He even has a greenhouse and a nursery in his backyard, where you find some 800 orchids, besides herbs, ornamental varieties, and bonsai plants. This is largely



the effort of his eldest son, Sangay Tshering Bhutia, 39, a highly skilled horticulturist. Sangay designs several types of gardens, sells plants and even teaches and initiates others into horticulture.

"Six of us live here," Tshering tells us. "Myself, my wife Dawti Bhutia (she is 64), my son Sangay Tshering and his wife Tashi Dorma Sherpa (she is 36). And our grandchildren Chyampa Hesel Bhutia and Rangsal Bhutia." There is one other resident: the family's beloved dog, Dolly, mostly to be seen in the company of three-year-old Chyampa. Rangsal is not yet two.

Tshering's second son, Sonam Palazor Bhutia, 33, is in the India Reserve Battalion of Sikkim, posted in Delhi, where he lives with his wife and son. Sonam visits his father in Karthok during festivals and holidays. The oldest of Tshering's children is his daughter, Tshering Lhamu Bhutia, who is 43, married, and lives in Gangtok. Also in Gangtok is his youngest son, Sangay Gyampo, 31, a research scholar pursuing his PhD. The family are from the Buddhist Lama community and belong to the Bhutia, a major Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim.

As we try and learn about the use of Tshering's bows, Sangay Tshering pitches in. "Papa made this for me," he says, showing us a brown and yellow ochre coloured bow. "It is the only one I practice archery with." He stretches his left arm to demonstrate the technique involved in using the bow.

Archery is deeply embedded in Sikkim's traditions and is more than a sport—it is also a culture. Typically, it comes alive just after the harvests, when festivals and tournaments allow people to gather together in a period of relative inactivity. It was the national sport here even before Sikkim's integration into the Indian Union.

Sikkim is home to Tarundeep Rai, two times World Archery Championship medalist, twice an Asian Games medalist, and perhaps the only archer to have represented India in three Olympics—Athens 2004, London 2012, and Tokyo 2020. Last year, Sikkim's chief minister Prem Singh Tamang (better known as P.S. Golay) announced the setting up of the Tarundeep Rai Archery Academy in the state to honour the Padma Shri winner.

Archery teams from West Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan regularly visit Sikkim to participate in the high-end tournaments



Tshering Dorjee Bhutia at home in Karthok, with his handmade bows and the tools of his craft

Photos: Jigyasa Mishra

held at the royal palace grounds in Gangtok and other parts of this state. Interestingly, traditional games, with barebow archery, remain popular with the Sikkimese themselves—more than the modern sport where the bow can be a very complex technological device.

Oddly, the Bhutia family tells us, there are no specific shops around bow. Arrows can still be bought from some local stores, but not the bow. "Buyers get to know about us from local markets and archers—and visit us at home. It's not a big place and nobody has to struggle to find our house. Everybody knows everybody here," says the octogenarian.

The bow buyers come from various parts of Sikkim, neighbouring states, and even Bhutan. "They come from or via Gangtok and Karthok," says Tshering in Nepali. That's the language his family, like many others in the state, speaks.

While we talk about how bows are made, and when Tshering learned the art, he quietly goes inside the house, looking for something. Some three minutes later, he emerges smiling and excited—holding a bunch of bows and arrows, along with his *auzaar*, the tools he still uses.

"I made all of these, 40 or even more years ago. Some of these are very, very old. Just a little younger than me," he says smiling. "I have never used any electric appliance or tool. Everything was handcrafted properly."

"The arrows we use now are modified versions," says Sangay Tshering. "I remember when I was very little, the arrow's tail used to be different. Back then, there used to be a duck's feather mounted to the tail. Now the modern versions come mostly from Bhutan." Sangay hands over

the arrows to me and goes back inside the house to get a modern, machine-made bow.

"We sell a roughly made bow, without extensive filing and polishing, for 400 rupees to those who approach us saying they want a lighter and cheaper version," says Sangay. "That's when we use the upper part of the bamboo, which we usually don't because it's less strong. But a fine, three-coat, fully polished bow, would go for 600-700 rupees. We use the lower, stronger part of the bamboo to make that. To make one fine bow, the bamboo consumed would be worth maybe 150 rupees, the thread or string worth 60 rupees, but the pricing of the polish is difficult to calculate," Sangay laughs.

Why is that? "We make the polish at home. We buy the goat skin *chamda* mostly during Dashain (Dussehra) and take the wax out of it for polishing. When the bow is completed, this polish is coated onto it. Another layer is applied when the first one dries up, and this is repeated till three coatings have been done. That 1x1foot goat skin costs us 150 rupees," says Sangay. This elaborate process makes it hard to figure out the exact cost of the polishing.

"Oh, and the main material, the backbone of the bow," he adds, "the bamboo for that costs us 300 rupees a piece. We can make five bows from one big bamboo, easily."

Sangay goes inside, and reappears with a huge archery kitbag, and takes out a bigger and heavier version of the bow from it. "Here is the latest bow design. But this is not allowed in our local tournaments. One can practice with it, but to participate in the competition, the traditional handmade bow is mandatory. My brothers and I play in those tournaments with the

bows made by papa. This time, my brother brought some different kind of wood polish from Delhi, and painted his bow with it. Mine is polished with the traditional paint that papa has been using for ages."

The Bhutias regretfully tell us that the sale of bows has reduced over the years. Their product mostly sells at the Buddhist festival of Losoong, which is the Sikkimese New Year of the Bhutia tribe. Observed through December, it is a post-harvest festival that also sees archery tournaments. "That's when most people come to the monastery here, and buy from us. In recent years, we have sold barely four to five pieces, annually. The artificial bow has taken over the market now, a Japanese product, I think. Earlier, till about six or seven years ago, I was able to sell around 10 bows annually," says Tshering Dorjee.

But even 10 bows a year would not have brought him any appreciable income. It was his work as a carpenter, repairing and making furniture, and other little woodwork items that sustained the family. Tshering says that when he was the sole earning member of the family as a fulltime carpenter—well over a decade ago—he earned about Rs. 10,000 a month. But it was, and continues to be, the bows that fascinate him.

The bows the Bhutias craft are made from a special kind of wood commonly called Bhutanese bamboo. "All the bows papa makes are crafted from Bhutanese bamboo which was earlier not available in India," says Sangay. "Our supply now comes from farmers who planted the seeds of this variety in Kalimpong, located in West Bengal, 70 kilometres from here. I go there myself, and buy two years' worth of supplies at a time, which we store here at home in Karthok."

"You need a guru first. Nobody can do anything without a guru," says Tshering. "Initially, I was just a carpenter. But later, I learnt bow making from my father. I saw the designs of the bows my friends used to play with, and tried making some. Gradually, it started turning out fine. Whenever someone would approach me to buy one, I would first of all show them how to use it!"

Tshering is nostalgic about his early days in the craft of bow making. "My earnings from it are presently negligible. My home, this house, is being run by my children for about a decade now. The bows I make now are no more a source of income but a labour of love."

"Papa does not make many of them now—his eyesight has weakened," says Sangay Tshering, adding wistfully, "We have no clue who will carry on this craft after him." ■

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India (PARI)



Father and son display both traditional and latest models; (right) Sangay Tshering demonstrates the bowman's stance



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