



## Free fall

The Tamil Nadu government's attitude towards news media has hit a new low

Any which way one looks at the Puthiya Thalaimurai case, one conclusion is inescapable: it is a direct attack on press freedom. That the Tamil Nadu government could have slapped a case against the Tamil news channel under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code (pertaining to promoting enmity between groups), and other sections of the law, would be laughable if it wasn't so unspeakably appalling. The cause for the action was certain remarks made by a couple of the TV channel's guests who had participated in a roundtable discussion on current affairs before an invited audience. Although it was a right-wing section of the audience that was disruptive, first information reports (FIRs) were filed against the two guests — who, from all accounts, said nothing that was inflammatory — as well as the reporter and management of Puthiya Thalaimurai. All the more shocking is the fact that this was done even before the roundtable discussion on the role of protests was aired. Any debate in Tamil Nadu on whether protests such as the protracted and heated anti-Sterlite agitation are politicised is bound to evoke radically divergent views. But it is extraordinary that people have been booked for either hosting such a debate or merely expressing their views in it.

If proof was needed that the Tamil Nadu government was acting in a vindictive way, it was provided by another, and even more insidious, attempt to intimidate Puthiya Thalaimurai. On the State government-owned distribution network, the Arasu Cable TV Corporation, the news channel was suddenly pushed from the 124th to the 499th slot, removed in some places from the Tamil cluster of channels and regrouped with those in other languages. As for those subscribers who are linked to Arasu via analogue, the channel has become simply unavailable in many areas. Around 60% of the 1.5 crore homes that have cable television are serviced by Arasu, which was set up to link homes to television through multi-system operators and local cable operators at an affordable cost. As Arasu has grown in influence, private players no longer enjoy the patronage that they did earlier. Lately, there have been apprehensions that the State government is using its domination of the distribution space to bring news coverage by TV channels in line. There have been allegations that access to a couple of other news channels were disrupted as well; some have found themselves pushed back in the slots allotted by the Arasu network. This is why many in the media have been led to believe that the rationale or purpose for coming down on Puthiya Thalaimurai with such a heavy hand is to send a larger message to the rest of the media. The only way the Tamil Nadu government can prove they are wrong is by withdrawing the FIRs registered in this case.

## All in the name

Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia finally end a long-standing dispute

Skopje has resolved a festering dispute with Athens over the name of the Balkan nation that emerged following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The landmark agreement signed with Greece this month, to rechristen Macedonia as the Republic of North Macedonia, opens the doors for its admission, long vetoed by Greece, to the principal Western economic and security blocs. The two governments have locked horns on the issue for nearly 30 years, ever since the independent Slav state proclaimed itself the Republic of Macedonia in 1991. Greece refused to accept this, as one of its own provinces goes by that evocative name. More than 100 countries in the United Nations — including the United States, Russia and China — have recognised the country's official name. But Greece has so far insisted on referring to its northern neighbour as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), as per a UN-negotiated interim arrangement. According to the agreement signed this month, the Republic of North Macedonia will be the name used in Skopje's dealings with other countries too. Many attempts to break the deadlock had failed earlier, including a Macedonian offer to change its name in exchange for handsome financial aid and investment. It did not help that Greek apprehensions were heightened when the port city of Thessaloniki, the capital of Greek Macedonia, was depicted on the maps of the new republic. Matters also heated up with the erection of a grand statue closely resembling Alexander the Great in the central district of Skopje, as Greeks resist any signal that the Slav republic may be laying claim to their ancient civilisation.

A more diplomatically ticklish issue was Greece's insistence on a constitutional amendment to clarify that Skopje had no territorial right over the Greek region. Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev held that such changes were in the realm of domestic law, and that in any case these can always be reversed by a future government. Among the concessions the Macedonian government has made in recent months is to change the name of the Alexander the Great airport to Skopje International. It has also renamed a motorway named after Alexander. It has not been easy for Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras either — he survived a vote of no confidence on the issue last week, and is still to secure parliamentary ratification without support from his nationalist coalition partner. His counterpart in Skopje similarly faces the awkward prospect of the President rejecting the deal, besides having to win a popular referendum. But none of these hurdles is insurmountable. The resolution of the dispute now clears the way for talks on the Republic of North Macedonia's membership of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

# Wages of vigilantism

Episodes of mass communal violence have given way to smaller-scale attacks against individuals



ZOYA HASAN

The recurring incidents of lynching and targeted mob violence against vulnerable groups reported from various parts of the country are a direct challenge thrown by right-wing groups to political processes, especially electoral processes, especially electoral processes and the rule of law. According to India Spend, a data-journalism website, 86% of those killed in lynching incidents in 2017 were Muslims. In September 2017 the Supreme Court, responding to a Public Interest Litigation, directed all State governments to take measures to prevent vigilantism in the name of cow protection. However, public lynching or vigilante violence hasn't subsided; in fact, it has spread from Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Haryana to Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. An overwhelming majority of these attacks are bovine related, although there are other reasons for anti-minority attacks, too. Hate violence has also happened around festivals such as Ram Navami (Bihar and West Bengal), provocations over *azaan* and *namaz* (Gurugram in Haryana) and violence against those looking overtly Muslim (U.P. and Haryana trains). The victims in cases of lynching are almost entirely from poor families.

### Minorities under siege

South Asia has a long history of communal violence, but these were primarily big episodes of mass violence. This has now given way to a smaller-scale of conflict and vigilante violence against individuals endorsed by state inaction. One possible reason for this shift could be an attempt to avoid pu-

blic scrutiny that accompanies mass violence, whilst at the same time ensuring that minorities are continually kept under siege through targeted attacks. India has a poor record when it comes to prevention and punishment of the perpetrators of mass violence and/or lynchings. Each event of violence has hardened community boundaries and widened the divide between Hindus and Muslims.

Citizens Against Hate (CAH), a civil society group investigating and seeking to provide legal help to victims of hate crimes, has documented 50 lynching deaths (Muslims), including three lynched in the last one week — two in Godda, Jharkhand (June 14) and one in Hapur, U.P. (June 18) over rumours of cow slaughter/smuggling. According to the CAH report, 'Lynching Without End', published in September 2017, 97% of cow-related lynchings had occurred since the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise to political dominance in 2014.

Most of these attacks were based on rumours sparked by accusations that the victims, almost always Muslims, slaughtered or smuggled cows. The content of these rumours and fears often circulating on social media take the shape of communal stereotypes of victims either eating beef or intending to do so, or showing any form of perceived disrespect for cows, which is broadly claimed as a motivation for lynching. Most actors leading the charge are suspected to belong to, or have connections with, groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, Gau Raksha Dal and Hindu Yuva Vahini. Professing allegiance to Hindu right-wing parties, they feel emboldened by a political regime that has prioritised a crackdown on cow slaughter. The back-end support comes from BJP MPs providing political protection to these organisations and their activities.



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What explains the phenomenon and spread of lynchings across several States? Apart from the political reasons alluded to above, the rising trend is directly related to the intensification of communal polarisation and instrumentalisation of prejudice for political ends apparent in various government attempts to infuse religion into politics and education. In the event, these acts seem to have acquired a certain degree of legitimacy in the public mind. Also, it's important to acknowledge the widespread role of violence in Indian politics which is not considered an illegitimate form of politics. Popular anger, outrage and violence are integral features of everyday politics in contemporary India. The feeling that mobs are exacting Bollywood style justice beyond the procedures of law, with crowds of locals triumphantly watching the gruesome spectacle captured by videos that subsequently go viral, has its own vicarious fascination.

### Hate crimes

As hate crimes grow, so does the sense of impunity enjoyed by the actual perpetrators of the crime and those who prompt it. Lack of justice for victims further reinforces the vicious cycle of impunity. There is also little condemnation of lynchings by those in positions of authority except in very generalised terms. The strategic silence of the BJP-Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh (RSS) leadership works like unspoken approval to carry out the attacks. The tacit endorsement of mob violence may be the most disturbing effect of decades of communal politics in India. The lack of public reaction to recent incidents implies a degree of acceptability of violence as an expression of vengeance against 'injustices' suffered by Hindus in the past. The theory of 'Hindu insecurity' and 'Hindu persecution' comes at a time when political representation of Muslims in legislatures and administration and their presence in the public sphere is at its lowest since Independence.

The police often stand by, careful not to interfere with the actions of the majority community. Both mobs and police have regularly treated victims of cow vigilantism, rather than those indulging in violence, as suspects in ways that dehumanise these individuals. Rather than taking swift action against perpetrators, law enforcement agencies act mostly against the victims themselves, booking them for violating cow protection laws which act as a legitimate cover for taking action against people they suspect of trafficking in cattle intended for slaughter. In these attacks, whether the victim actually possessed beef, or whether cows were actually being transported for slaughter, or even that cows were not involved, is not relevant.

Most of these are not spontaneous acts of violence; there is usually systematic planning behind them. Common to all the episodes of violence is coordination across groups and States and districts, and no other political force masters this better than the Sangh Parivar with its numerous affiliates. Active support of powerful political figures in the current establishment at the Centre and in the States has helped to build networks, gain new recruits, resources and legitimacy that Hindu right-wing groups did not have in the

past. The newly acquired organisational capacity, including manpower, money and feet on the ground, has proved crucial for translating dark ideas into concrete action across districts and converting rumour and prejudice into attacks across State borders. Apart from providing employment opportunities to youth belonging to right-wing groups, another big incentive is participation in electoral politics as these foot soldiers double up as campaigners and booth committee members of the BJP during elections.

### Sustained propaganda

Lynchings are encouraged by the atmosphere of hate and suspicion created through sustained propaganda. Always ready to refurbish the deep historical archive of anti-Muslim prejudice by focusing on the past to demonise all Muslims, the BJP has weaponised Hindu anger and paranoia into a legitimate expression of a majoritarian nation. Localised violence happening with regularity also serves a political purpose. By allowing lynchings to continue unchecked, the Hindu right boosts its image as the lone protector of Hindu religion and culture in India and this can help expand its social base. Cow vigilantism, which is a pretext to exacerbate social conflicts between religious communities, serves the political purposes of ideologies and political formations that thrive on hate and polarisation. Preventing further atrocities requires respect for the rule of law and legal institutions and strong prosecutions and expeditious punishments. Unless checked, it can cause irreversible harm to the social fabric of our society and to the tenets of democracy that have shaped and sustained the idea of India.

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# An adviser with nobody to advise

Arvind Subramanian brought heft and pizzazz to his role as CEA — but who was listening?



T.C.A. SHARAD RAGHAVAN

Arvind Subramanian has had quite a paradoxical tenure as the Chief Economic Adviser (CEA) to the Finance Minister. While he brought a lot of pizzazz and heft back to the usually staid Economic Surveys and lent his voice to a number of pressing economic issues, the government repeatedly failed to heed his advice or consult him on important economic decisions on the other. It must be frustrating to be being an adviser with nobody to advise.

### Some solutions

Mr. Subramanian's first major contribution to the socio-economic framework was in the Economic Survey 2014-15, in which he wrote at length about the various developmental possibilities that arose from the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) trinity. The plan here was to use data obtained through the financial inclusion network of the Jan Dhan Yojana, the identity data of Aadhaar, and the accessibility offered by the mobile revolu-

tion to target financial assistance to those who need it. It was a great idea. It was not revolutionary in terms of innovation — it was bound to happen eventually — but it takes somebody in an official capacity to write it out and argue the merits and demerits before it is taken seriously. That's what Mr. Subramanian did.

The idea has since taken off, with the government wholeheartedly embracing Aadhaar. The next Economic Survey saw the CEA bring to light an issue with doing business in India that few had actively thought or talked about until then: the difficulty of exit. While it was easy enough to begin a business venture in India, the CEA explained how it was extremely difficult for them to pack up or declare bankruptcy in such a way that they could easily dispose of their assets and settle their liabilities.

He called this, in his usual witty style, the chakravayuh problem. The Central government has since then taken decisive steps, such as bringing out the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, to address this issue. But credit must go to Mr. Subramanian for discussing a purely business issue in a way that made it relatable to even those with no business acumen.

However, it's about at this point that the CEA's role began to bump

up against a ceiling of non-responsiveness. Along with the JAM trinity, Mr. Subramanian had (in the 2014-15 Survey) also discussed the problems with public-private partnerships (PPPs) in India and suggested ways to improve them. Several of his suggestions, such as restructuring existing contracts to share the load between developers and lenders, might have actually worked. But PPPs have yet to take off in any meaningful way.

### On demonetisation

The 2016-17 Survey came amid great anticipation; it was the first time the CEA spoke about demonetisation. However, in keeping with his diplomatic silence following the announcement on November 8, 2016, the chapter on demonetisation was far more vanilla in its critique than previous analyses overseen by the CEA on other topics. Maybe it was still too early to gauge the impact of the move in any real sense. Or perhaps he had been instructed to go easy. Either way, the demonetisation episode brought to the fore the extent to which the CEA's office was becoming sidelined in the current dispensation.

Several Surveys under Mr. Subramanian have talked about the 'twin balance sheet problem' afflicting corporates and banks. In



KAMAL NARANG

other words, the effect high levels of bad loans were having on the abilities of banks to lend and companies to borrow. One of the solutions he came up with was to create a 'bad bank', to purchase bad loans clogging bank balance sheets and resolve them. While not a new idea per se, this was the most recent attempt to create a discussion about it. The idea was barely debated outside the Survey, and died a quick death with Finance Ministry officials dodging questions about it until they stopped being asked.

The idea of a Universal Basic Income, mooted in the 2016-17 Survey, also met the same fate. The chapter was a fascinating discussion framed as if it was taking place with Mahatma Gandhi himself — another example of the vigour and interest the CEA brought to the document. Here too, discus-

sion within the government ended as quickly as it began.

Mr. Subramanian's departure comes on the heels of other noteworthy economists (former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan, and former NITI Aayog Vice Chairman Arvind Panagariya) also returning to the U.S.

Perhaps the time is ripe to overhaul the structure of economic advisers to the government. The post of the CEA should be moved to the Ministry of Statistics, which itself should be renamed the Ministry of Economics and Statistics. That Ministry is currently as much in need of an economist as of an econometrician. The post of the Chief Statistician of India has been lying vacant since February 1.

Next, all economists in the government advising the various ministries should be consolidated under this single ministry which can then decide how best its resources are used.

For now, however, the question Mr. Subramanian's departure leaves us with is this: whether the position of the CEA is one the government finds useful at all. The answer may lie in how quickly the vacancy is filled and how much weight is given to the 'adviser' part of the role.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

### Kashmir politics

It is unfortunate that the BJP has literally dumped Kashmir, almost disowning the problem it helped create in the years it was in power in Jammu and Kashmir. Given that the country is close to an election year, the party's hard line and self-righteousness must now be sold in the open as there is nothing much to claim by way of its performance, especially in connection with the economy. New slogans about development will not be convincing. What happened in the State is an abdication of responsibilities in favour of politics. Even when there was terror from across the border, there were phases of relative peace in the Valley, thanks to the more accommodative approaches of previous governments. The BJP should have stayed the course with the PDP

and looked at ways and means to constantly improve governance. The political development in Kashmir shows that we need to fall back on time-tested philosophies.

M. BALAKRISHNAN,  
Bengaluru

■ Subversive activities have reached a flashpoint in the Kashmir Valley ("Editorial page, 'An old Kashmir-Jammu dilemma'", June 22). Unending stone pelting and instances of attacks on defence and paramilitary personnel are something that cannot be tolerated. While genuine grievances need to be addressed, the establishment cannot allow and should not have allowed anti-national elements to let their writ prevail. The Mehbooba Mufti government was ineffective in upholding law and order. Though the decision of the BJP to end the political experiment in the

State may be perceived to be due to political consideration for Jammu, the fact is that the situation in the State is extreme. Peace-loving people in the Valley need to isolate all separatist and militant elements.

R. RAMANATHAN,  
Coimbatore

■ The BJP speaking about national integration and curbing terrorist acts will cut no ice now as it was a party to all this while in power in J&K. In opting out of the alliance, the party has demonstrated beyond doubt that it will stoop to any level to achieve its selfish ends. This betrayal should be an eye-opener to the leaders of other parties that have a political partnership with the BJP.

THARCIUS S. FERNANDO,  
Chennai

■ The BJP cannot deny that fact that under the pretext of

"deteriorating security situation" in Kashmir it made a decision that was linked to the party's concern over its dwindling support base in Jammu. Opting out of the alliance was an example of political expediency at its best.

SAKSHI MALHOTRA,  
New Delhi

### Caught in a spiral

That nobody wins a trade war in a globalised world is an axiom that U.S. President Donald Trump chose to ignore when he fired the first shot by imposing tariffs on Chinese imports into the U.S. It has now escalated as more countries including India have been drawn into the battle. Mr. Trump's payback to those who bankrolled his campaign has been to install hawk in his administration. The hardliners in turn take orders from special interest groups who want to straighten their financial and

industrial empires. There is no reason why the world should pay the price for the shady abnormalities and manipulations of the American political system. The major powers must intervene to stop the ugly trade war which is a lose-lose proposition for all countries.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

■ The global trade war is fast becoming a threat to the world's largest economies. It can only result in a loss of production and slower economic growth. Countries should not spoil their ties for the sake of special interest groups. How they will deal with this crisis is hard to imagine.

JOBSON ANTONY,  
Pavarratty, Thrissur, Kerala

### Cans as prosthetics

The standalone picture, "Walking on hope" ("World page", June 22), and its

caption that described how a Syrian father, who is handicapped, has made a pair of prosthetic limbs for his daughter out of tin cans filled with cotton and scraps of cloth, left me speechless. I hope the picture jolts the medical world into action.

S.S.R. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Hyderabad

### Shock for Argentina

It was heartbreak for many of Messi's fans ("Sport" page, "Croatia runs Argentina ragged", June 22). While Ronaldo, his rival, has been electrifying with his goals, Messi has failed. Croatia's game plan worked perfectly well. Many of us hope that Messi takes control of the situation in the next match, or else the World Cup will elude him forever.

VIDHYA B. RAGUNATH,  
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

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