



Trouble in the hills

There should be public consultation on expert reports on the Western Ghats ecology

The catastrophic monsoon floods in Kerala and parts of Karnataka have revived the debate on whether political expediency trumped science. Seven years ago, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel issued recommendations for the preservation of the fragile western peninsula region. Madhav Gadgil, who chaired the Union Environment Ministry's WGEEP, has said the recent havoc in Kerala is a consequence of short-sighted policymaking, and warned that Goa may also be in the line of nature's fury. The State governments that are mainly responsible for the Western Ghats — Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Goa and Maharashtra — must go back to the drawing table with the reports of both the Gadgil Committee and the Kasturirangan Committee, which was set up to examine the WGEEP report. The task before them is to initiate correctives to environmental policy decisions. This is not going to be easy, given the need to balance human development pressures with stronger protection of the Western Ghats ecology. The issue of allowing extractive industries such as quarrying and mining to operate is arguably the most contentious. A way out could be to create the regulatory framework that was proposed by the Gadgil panel, in the form of an apex Western Ghats Ecology Authority and the State-level units, under the Environment (Protection) Act, and to adopt the zoning system that it proposed. This can keep incompatible activities out of the Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs).

At issue in the Western Ghats — spread over 1,29,037 sq km according to the WGEEP estimate and 1,64,280 sq km as per the Kasturirangan panel — is the calculation of what constitutes the sensitive core and what activities can be carried out there. The entire system is globally acknowledged as a biodiversity hotspot. But population estimates for the sensitive zones vary greatly, based on interpretations of the ESZs. In Kerala, for instance, one expert assessment says 39 lakh households are in the ESZs outlined by the WGEEP, but the figure drops sharply to four lakh households for a smaller area of zones identified by the Kasturirangan panel. The goal has to be sustainable development for the Ghats as a whole. The role of big hydroelectric dams, built during an era of rising power demand and deficits, must now be considered afresh and proposals for new ones dropped. Other low-impact forms of green energy led by solar power are available. A moratorium on quarrying and mining in the identified sensitive zones, in Kerala and also other States, is necessary to assess their environmental impact. Kerala's Finance Minister, Thomas Isaac, has acknowledged the need to review decisions affecting the environment, in the wake of the floods. Public consultation on the expert reports that includes people's representatives will find greater resonance now, and help chart a sustainable path ahead.

Musical chairs

Scott Morrison's biggest challenge as Australian PM will be to see out his term

As Scott Morrison assumes charge as Australia's Prime Minister, the question is whether he can put an end to the country's protracted political instability. He takes over from Malcolm Turnbull after a contest for the leadership of the Liberal Party, and is the sixth person to be Prime Minister in just over a decade; during this time none has lasted a full three-year term. Political instability feeds off an elusive bipartisan consensus on Canberra's energy and environmental policy. Differences over finding an effective approach to tackle global warming go to the heart of divisions between the conservative and moderate sections within the Liberal Party in the world's largest coal-exporting nation. This week, in a bid to stave off a challenge to his leadership, Mr. Turnbull deferred legislation on national emissions reduction targets it had committed to under the Paris climate accord. The overall package, which aims to reduce energy prices and comply with emissions standards, won broad backing from the Opposition centre-left Labour Party and the business community. But the ruling Liberal-National coalition's efforts at a consensus were hamstrung by hostile backbenchers led by Peter Dutton, who launched an abortive bid for leadership and resigned as Minister for Home Affairs. Mr. Dutton is even said to have thought of pulling Australia out of the Paris accord. Last October, Canberra decided to phase out subsidies for renewable energy from 2020, under a policy that ostensibly sought to balance reductions in greenhouse gas emissions with the need to deliver reliable and affordable electricity. The climate-sceptic Tony Abbott, also of the Liberal Party, repealed a carbon emissions tax in 2014 when he was Prime Minister, fulfilling a poll promise to "axe the tax." But he was careful to project the move as a mere reduction in the tax, not as an easing of emissions targets.

The Liberal Party's bruising leadership contest that led to Mr. Morrison's elevation was the second in the span of a week. Having survived a vote on Tuesday, Mr. Turnbull stepped aside from the race on Friday, which also dealt a blow to Mr. Dutton's leadership ambitions. With the dramatic developments of the week behind, there is hope of respite at least until the 2019 general elections. In any case, the ruling coalition's razor-thin majority in Parliament affords the government little leverage on policy initiatives. Mr. Morrison is considered a canny politician, capable of navigating the tumultuous currents within the Liberal Party. The first test of his dynamism will be his ability to ride out his time in office until the coming elections. But the bigger task is for Australia's leaders to rise above partisan ends to address humanity's gravest challenge of global warming.

India's greatest 'scoop-man'

Kuldip Nayar's presence in the newsroom was electric and his network of contacts the stuff of legend



SHEKHAR GUPTA

Earlier this week, *The New York Times* surprised its readers, and shocked us reporters' community, by dropping its reporters' bylines on stories featured on its home page. The following day, its editors came up with the reasoning: many more readers now access the newspaper on their mobiles than the desktop; we adore our reporters, but their bylines on top of the summary isn't the best way to display a story digitally. Good point, you might have said. But only if you missed the fact that the op-ed writers' bylines are there as before.

The newsgatherer

We bring this up in this tribute to Kuldip Nayar because reporters/newsgatherers versus editorialists is the oldest power tussle in the newsroom. The latter, with their superior intellect, weighty arguments and fine turn of phrase, have mostly won it. Their domination was total in India, until Nayar broke it in 1970-80.

He was Indian journalism's first rock star in an era when any editor would have taken umbrage at being described as such. Nayar's rise as India's pre-eminent byline came when there was no news TV or glossy magazine profiles and decades before Twitter. And for my journalism school, in prison and out of it that year, Nayar's was the most inspirational story ever. More stirring than even the then

recent Bob Woodward-Carl Bernstein Watergate exposé.

He is India's greatest "scoop-man" ever, our teacher, B.S Thakur, would say to his pupils, most of whom had strayed into his journalism class after failing to get into something more worthwhile, to teach them that "scoop" also meant something sweeter than a mere dollop of ice cream. There were classroom debates on what the Emergency meant for the press (nobody said 'media' then) and especially for our employment prospects. The Indian press had caved in, but some had shown that a fight-back was possible. After all, Nayar had even gone to jail.

A golden era

After the end of the Emergency began the first golden era of Indian journalism. Pre-censorship had sensitised the people to how much a free press mattered to them. If *The Indian Express* was the Emergency's shining star, Nayar was its face. Never mind that in the *Express's* formidable editorial star-cast, he featured third, after editor-in-chief S. Mulgaonkar and editor Ajit Bhattacharjee. Nayar was editor, *Express News Service*. But he was the paper's real masthead. His earlier books, *Between The Lines, India: The Critical Years, Distant Neighbours*, had also brought him greater intellectual heft than those above him, "in spite of being a mere reporter".

His presence in the newsroom was electric and his network of contacts the stuff of legend. "Arrey kya, George (Fernandes), why are you bent on breaking the (Janata Party)," you'd overhear him admonishing the great socialist. Or, "hello, Idris (Air Chief Marshal Idris Hassan Latif), I hope you and



K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Bilkees know Chandigarh is such a boring place." Later, around midnight, he walked in to give her a post-prandial tour of the newsroom and its hot-metal press underneath. His human rights/civil liberties phase also began in these heady post-Emergency months. He was a key member of the Justice V.M. Tarkunde Committee probing the killings of Naxalites in fake encounters in Punjab.

The best and the fairest tribute to Nayar would be that he made the reporter the prince of the Indian newsroom. *The Indian Express* itself produced a stellar team of young reporters under him, many of whom rose to editorships later. Three other young editors who emerged in that era, Arun Shourie, Aroon Purie and M.J. Akbar, then made Nayar's reporter-prince the king.

Ramnath Goenka had a great eye for editorial talent. He brought Arun Shourie into journalism from scholarly activism as executive editor in 1979. Suddenly, from number 3, Nayar was 4, despite his stardom. More importantly, Shourie was more accessible, less distracted, brimming with ideas and energy. Younger reporters gravitated towards him. Goenka wanted to modernise his paper. He saw Shourie, 37, as the man for it, not

Nayar at 55. Plus, as is often the case with owners, he wasn't particularly dazzled, but impatient with Nayar's new fame. Soon enough, all of the editors were sidelined and some, including Nayar, were let go. It's a different matter that within three years Goenka grew insecure with Shourie as well and dismissed him prematurely. Several of us reporters too left in Shourie's wake.

With regrets

Nayar returned to the *Express* newsroom in the summer of 2014 "for the first time after 1980" (1981, actually) for a conversation with the editorial team while promoting his memoir, *Beyond The Lines*. He began that conversation by ruling that he had been fired by Goenka because Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980 and he wanted to make peace with her by sacrificing him. This part of the recording has been re-published by the paper with its report on his passing away. This was untrue. It simply isn't in that paper's DNA to fire editors to please governments. Some of us did, respectfully, say this to Nayar.

Nayar also said, in the same recorded chat, that he regretted that "nobody offered me any job after 1980". It rankled with him. As did the fact that many who worked at entry levels under him, and who he believed were way lesser journalists than him, rose to be editors of newspapers, a title that eluded him. He had the innocence and honesty to say this often to many of us. He later became High Commissioner in London, a Rajya Sabha member, but all this new eminence wouldn't compensate for the title he had missed. The *Express* did make it up to him, at least

symbolically, by conferring the Ramnath Goenka Lifetime Achievement Award to him in 2015.

What he missed by way of an editorial title, Nayar more than made up in fame, as a columnist and a subcontinental peace activist. Critics joked about him being the 'meta' of the 'mombatti' gang (candle-light marchers at the Wagah India-Pakistan border crossing). But he was unfazed in his commitment to India-Pakistan rapprochement. This peacemaking became his new calling and took him away too early in his career from the kind of journalism he was best at. He was indeed never offered a job after 1980, but it isn't because he had become unemployable. He had chosen a more varied life, and excelled in it.

From the parochial point of view of us reporters, it is a loss that he gave up so soon. Or he would have risen as India's finest reporter-editor and its most influential and insightful columnist too. Today's generation of reporters could've done with a figure like him, just when the trend of reporter-editors that he pioneered is being reversed in India, with owners either becoming editors themselves, or preferring diligent, sharp but non-threatening backroom choices. Or when the venerable *New York Times* junks its reporters' bylines from its home page, while retaining the columnists'. As that eternal newsroom tussle is again being lost by us, we will greatly miss Nayar for the reporter-editor he was and equally rue that he was denied what he could have been.

Shekhar Gupta is Founder and Editor-in-Chief of ThePrint

Battleground Madhya Pradesh

On its own, the Congress will find it difficult to dislodge the BJP in the Assembly elections



SANJAY KUMAR

If one goes by conventional wisdom on how people vote, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who faces 15 years of anti-incumbency, should find it difficult to win another term when the State goes to the polls by the end of this year. This is suggested in the results of urban local body elections across 13 districts in which the Congress won nine of the 14 municipal seats, and the by-elections for the Assembly constituencies in Mungaoli and Kolaras (early this year) and Ater and Khajuraho (last year).

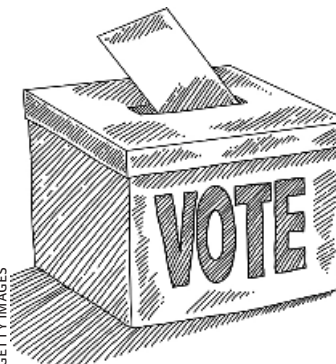
There are some signs that sections of the electorate, especially farmers, are unhappy, but that may not be enough for the Congress to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is in power. The electorate could be inclined towards voting for the Congress, evident from a survey conducted by

the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) a few months ago. Some other surveys also indicate a marginal shift away from the BJP. But a divided Congress does not seem to be ready as yet to capitalise on this.

Despite the Vyapam scam, Mr. Chouhan is still very popular and the BJP has the advantage of projecting him again as its chief ministerial candidate. In this, the Congress is handicapped as it does not have a chief ministerial face. Despite the Vyapam scam being highlighted in the media, the Congress has failed to make it an issue that resonates with the common man. Compounding matters, the Congress's State unit is a divided lot and there are many factions. Discussion about the Congress's electoral prospects in M.P. invariably ends up being about factionalism within the party. In this the BJP could score over the Congress, especially when the electorate compares the local and national leadership of the two parties.

Strong leads

The BJP came to power in the State in 2003 winning 173 of the 230 Assembly seats with a 42.5% vote



share. The Congress, which had been in power for 10 years (1993-2003), won only 38 seats with a 31.6% vote share. Though the vote share of the BJP declined from 42.5% to 37.6% in the 2008 Assembly elections, it still managed to win 143 Assembly seats against the Congress's 71 seats. The BJP went on to register its third successive victory, winning 165 seats (44.9% vote share) in 2013; the Congress had a 36.4% vote share.

The BJP has won seats in five regions — Chambal, Vindhya Pradesh, Mahakoshal, Malwa Tribal and Malwa North. It is particularly strong in Malwa Tribal (28 seats) and Malwa North (63 seats). In these two regions, the BJP has al-

ways led over the Congress by huge margins. It also has a sizeable presence in the Mahakoshal region (49 seats). The Congress had a strong presence in Chambal (34 seats) and Vindhya Pradesh (56 seats), which borders Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP factor

During the last 15 years the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has been able to make inroads in these two regions and erode the Congress's support base. While the overall vote share of the BSP has never crossed 10% — it got 7.3% in 2003, 9% in 2008 and 6.3% in the 2013 Assembly elections. But its votes are concentrated largely in the Chambal and Vindhya Pradesh regions. In the Chambal region it got a 13.7%, 20.4% and 15.6% vote share during the 2003, 2008 and 2013 Assembly elections, respectively. In the Vindhya Pradesh region, its vote share remained at 14.3%, 14.7% and 12.0% in these elections, respectively. All the Assembly seats which the BSP won (two in 2003, seven in 2008 and four in 2014) came from these two regions. Surveys indicate that the BSP may not have been able to ex-

pand its support base in other regions of M.P., but its vote share seems to have remained intact in these regions, which would be disadvantageous to the Congress.

What seems to still work in favour of the BJP in M.P. are its strongholds in the Malwa and Mahakoshal regions and its edge over the Congress in Chambal and Vindhya Pradesh due to a vote split between the Congress and the BSP.

Given these circumstances, the Congress might still find it difficult to defeat the BJP. At best, it could pose a challenge. The BSP is nowhere close to emerging as a viable alternative to the BJP. In the event of a three-way electoral contest, the Congress would need a 5% swing in its favour to cross the magic figure. An alliance with the BSP would make the Congress's task easy. If the two form an alliance, which would help consolidate the anti-BJP votes, they would need only a slight swing to defeat the BJP.

Sanjay Kumar, a Professor, is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). The views expressed are personal

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.

Foreign aid and relief

Just as it did in the case after Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. government did not seek help from the international community for a few weeks after the BP oil spill. But in the end, it did, reaching out to Sweden for specialised equipment. Given the fact that Indians from Kerala constitute about 80% of the over 2 million-strong Indian diaspora in the United Arab Emirates, the offer of assistance by the UAE should be taken as a recognition of the contribution of those from Kerala.

Political parties across the spectrum should set aside their egos, forget the destructive political-opportunistic approach and work in a united manner by accepting assistance from every source. There must be proper machinery in place to streamline such aid and also ensure that it is properly accounted for.

SUDDAPALLI BHASKARA RAO, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

■ Perhaps the most acceptable method to provide financial assistance by foreign governments to

Kerala for relief and reconstruction would be to route it through the United Nations. This would be in accordance with the Government of India's policy of accepting foreign aid from international foundations. The UN has to, however, monitor the funds to ensure that they are spent for the desired purposes.

N. RAMA RAO, Chennai

■ The simple fact is that the magnitude of devastation in Kerala is enormous. It requires a huge economic package in monetary and material terms. There should not have been any sort of hesitation or confusion in accepting assistance from abroad, especially when it has been voluntary. It must be accepted as a kind gesture and one which will keep our diplomatic relations fine-tuned.

RAVI BHUSHAN, Kurukshetra, Haryana

■ The sceptical attitude towards the acceptance of foreign funds at such a crucial juncture is avoidable and may only result in abhorrence of the Centre's stand. Citing the existing

policy is also unacceptable as it is riddled with ambiguities. The unhappy developments are a case for completely overhauling disaster management strategies.

N. VIJAL, Coimbatore

Handling trauma

Is enough attention being paid to the psychological impact of the calamity? Research has shown that in post-trauma scenarios, raised degrees of stress could lead to depression and other mental illnesses especially among those who have lost their loved ones and livelihoods. Other findings are that rescue workers and volunteers who are exposed to mass destruction and life-threatening situations could be affected by psychological disorders. Counselling centres are also required. What we need is the psychological understanding of people from their ethno-cultural traditions, community practices, beliefs and value perspectives. Only then will the services provided be worthy and value-oriented.

Dr. NANDEESH Y.D., Uppinangady, Karnataka

Importance of history

An inquiring mind matched with a seamlessly interesting method of teaching can do wonders in shaping the collective self of our population (Editorial page, "Why history matters so much", August 24). Our perception towards prevailing crises — whether they are regarding long-standing, self-deterministic movements, politico-geographic problems, and even the legal ones — is shaped by a proper understanding of their provenance. Today the science and technological revolution has been guiding our potential behaviour but regressive problems still hinder bright prospects which stem from a fragile public ethos and lack of perception of a shared identity. Issues such as the Naga insurgency, the Gorkha turmoil in West Bengal, and problems concerning the Rohingya present an opportune moment to leverage the analysis that history has to offer.

ATIN SHARMA, Jammu

■ The urge to mould history to suit a particular narrative

in present times is something not hidden from anyone but what is being forgotten is the falsehood being propagated. For example, one only has to look at history books in Pakistan to see the quantum of distortion. Of course it is not so bad in the Indian context. Such adventures with history will only lead to a decline in intellectual discourse. History requires not only the right way of teaching it but also its acceptance in higher and competitive education.

NAVEEN RATTU, Chandigarh

A collaboration

I would like to add a few more examples to what the writer has highlighted in his article, "A chronicle of collaboration" (Editorial page, August 20). Malayalam for instance has many Christian kirtanas set to Carnatic tunes, which were composed by those like Mosavalsalam Sastrinar in the early 20th century. The late Bishop Amritham organised a kutcheri by Yesudas many years ago to celebrate Christmas. The only issue was that those who came to listen to him could not appreciate classical music.

There is a priest in Kerala, Fr. Paul Poovathingal, who runs a Carnatic music school, and who is known as the 'Padum Padre'.

D. BABU PAUL, Thiruvananthapuram

■ That music transcends religion is a universal truth, but trying to justify the 'super imposition' of music of a different character on devotional songs is hardly convincing. It amounts to meddling with what is revered by lovers of Carnatic music. The issue should be settled amicably.

B. GURUMURTHY, Madurai

Let off to sea

The report about 100 tmc of Cauvery water having been let into the Bay of Bengal in the last month is distressing. At a time when large parts of Tamil Nadu are facing water scarcity — this includes Chennai — the government should have had measures in place to channel the excess water to these parts. It may be a long time before we get such a monsoon bounty.

RAMDAS NAIK, Chennai