



Safety first

T.N. must assure Kerala that all instruments for monitoring the dam's safety are in place

The Supreme Court's direction on Monday to the supervisory committee for the Mullaperiyar dam on the issue of the maximum water level has revived the controversy surrounding the dam. Located in Kerala, the water body is operated and maintained by Tamil Nadu to meet the water requirements of five of its southern districts. The order was issued while hearing a petition raising apprehensions about the supervision of water levels of the reservoir, especially during the rainy season; Kerala has also been experiencing unusually heavy spells of rain. During October 18-25, the dam too received a substantial inflow. Despite the Court's nod in 2014 to store water up to 142 ft, Tamil Nadu has been careful in drawing as much water as possible so that the level does not reach the permissible level ordinarily. A few days ago, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan wrote to his Tamil Nadu counterpart, M.K. Stalin, referring to the heavy rainfall in the catchment and emphasising the "urgent need for the gradual release of water". His letter should be viewed more as a note of caution than anything else. During a debate in the Assembly on Monday, Mr. Vijayan categorically stated that there was no threat to the dam and was also appreciative of the Tamil Nadu authorities, who, he noted, were "highly empathetic" to Kerala's demands.

With camaraderie prevailing between the two States, Mr. Stalin and Mr. Vijayan would do well to send out a strong message that there is no room for passion and chauvinism on a technical and complex subject such as the operation and maintenance of Mullaperiyar. As the issue of dam safety is a recurrent one, it would be in the interests of all stakeholders that the remaining works to strengthen the dam are done at the earliest, for which the approval of the Kerala and Central governments is required. Some sections in Kerala may argue that the completion of the works will only make the case of Tamil Nadu stronger in the context of its long-standing demand of raising the water level to the original 152 ft. But, what needs to be kept in mind is that the works are meant to strengthen the dam. It has been suggested that Kerala give its permission – a pre-requisite for Tamil Nadu to get the Centre's clearances – while stating that this will not be prejudicial to its position on the issue. Tamil Nadu too should ensure that all the instruments for monitoring the safety and health of the dam are installed and are functioning properly. As there are sufficient scientific and technological tools to respond effectively to any legitimate and genuine concern, every player should adopt a rational approach while deciding on the storage levels and safety aspects of the dam.

Coup in Sudan

The military should restore the transition government and allow free elections

The move by Sudan's military to dissolve the Sovereignty Council where it shared power with civilian leaders has thrown the African country's fragile transition from dictatorship to democracy into chaos. Almost three years ago, tens of thousands of Sudanese rose against the regime of Omar al-Bashir in what they call a "revolution" that eventually led to the dictator's fall in April 2019. Ever since, the military and leaders of the civilian movement came together to form a transitional government. In their agreement, the acting Prime Minister would run the day-to-day affairs while the military chief would remain the leader of the Sovereignty Council for two years. Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military chief, was scheduled to hand over the leadership of the transitional government to the civilian leadership in a few weeks. Instead, he disbanded the government, proclaimed himself the new leader, declared a state of emergency and imprisoned the civilian leaders, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Tensions were brewing in recent weeks. Pro-military mobs had been carrying out protests demanding the government's removal amid soaring prices of essentials. Port Sudan, the country's largest port, on the Red Sea, had been blockaded by a tribal group, with help from the military, which worsened the economic situation, including acute shortages of food, currency and fuel. The civilian leadership had accused the military of exploiting the economic crisis.

The overthrow of the Bashir regime and the promised democratic transition were the best hopes for Sudan to end its international isolation, heal the wounds of decades of oppression and state violence, and build a stable economic and political order in an otherwise violence-ridden Horn of Africa. Sudan had taken the steps in that direction. Last year, the U.S. removed the country, which hosted Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and announced financial aid. Earlier this year, the IMF had reached a \$50 billion debt-relief agreement with the transitional government. The civilian leaders had promised that they would send Bashir to The Hague to prosecute him over allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The country was also gearing up to organise its first free and fair elections in decades. But the power-hungry generals appear to be more concerned about protecting their interests, which they feared would be at risk had a democratic government taken full control of the country. After all, Sudan's military cannot absolve itself from whatever allegations Bashir is facing. But this time, it faces a stiff challenge from the public. The protesters who brought down Bashir are back on the streets fighting the security personnel. A violent showdown is most likely. Gen. Burhan should desist from more violence. The military should release all the arrested leaders, restore the transition government and let free elections decide the future of the country.

The vaccination milestone and a distant goal

The Government ought to realise that vaccinating all Indians as quickly as possible is linked to their health and progress



SONIA GANDHI

Our frontline health-care workers deserve our fullest congratulations for crossing the milestone of 100 crore COVID-19 vaccine doses. They, along with our scientists, researchers, medical professionals, and vaccine manufacturers, have heroically overcome multiple obstacles in the quest to protect our citizens from COVID-19. Thanks to their efforts, our vaccination drive has picked up pace after the initial months of delay, indecision, and confusion.

This milestone also marks the triumph of science and of India's research and manufacturing infrastructure built and nurtured over decades. It is opportune to recollect that it is the Patents Act, 1970, that contributed hugely to the development of our drugs and pharmaceutical industry, which has enabled India to become a globally respected manufacturer of vaccines.

The shock of the second wave

This jubilant mood though must not give way to complacency. It is still fresh in our memory how the Prime Minister told the Chief Ministers early in April that "we defeated COVID-19 without vaccines". Just months earlier, before the disastrous second wave triggered by premature claims of success and unregulated large gatherings, punctured these claims, he had boasted at the World Economic Forum how well prepared India was to cope with the pandemic, defying the dire predictions of several international experts. With complacency firmly in command, vaccine procurement was not prioritised and crucial efforts, including ensuring supply of oxygen in case of a surge of infections,

were neglected. The public also dropped its guard believing the Government's reassurance. As we all know, disastrous consequences followed, and lakhs of Indians paid with their lives.

Even as the Prime Minister has heralded in his usual self-promotional style the 100-crore vaccination mark – even though there are only two countries in the world that are called upon to reach this level of coverage and we were not the first to do so – the harsh truth is that the second wave was a colossal tragedy that could have been averted had the Government not let down the people of India. During that horrific, difficult time, the Prime Minister and the Home Minister were nowhere to be seen or heard but reappeared only when the situation improved. This was a repeat of their performance during the first wave, when, after the sudden announcement of the lockdown, lakhs of migrant workers were abandoned, left to themselves to trudge thousands of kilometres home to their villages. Untold numbers perished along the way.

The nation has not forgotten the heart-rending images of people gasping for breath and of families desperately trying to obtain oxygen and hospital beds. Their enormous suffering is seared in our memory through pictures of bodies scattered in riverbanks and floating on rivers. The Government is yet to give an accurate count of the number of people who died as a result of its negligence. Callously, the Government has yet to provide compensation to bereaved families. Instead, the powers that be have stubbornly doubled down on efforts to divert attention and pass on the blame to others. The Government clearly hopes that denial will cause people to absolve it of responsibility for their miseries.

Vaccine orders

We applaud science, but we know that our vaccination drive would have rolled out faster if the Go-



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vernment had respected scientific breakthroughs in other countries and placed adequate orders for their vaccines. Indeed, the situation would have been mitigated had the Government had the foresight to place orders with India's own leading vaccine manufacturer. The Government's initial "smart" vaccination strategy asserted that "there would be no requirement for vaccination of the whole population of the country". Thus, India, the biggest manufacturer of vaccines in the world – a status achieved long before May 2014 – only fully vaccinated 0.5% of its population ahead of the second wave.

Another misstep

The intensity of the second wave demonstrated how wrong the Government's vaccination strategy was. But the blunders were compounded as the Government rolled out a procurement policy that had cash-strapped States competing with each other over vaccine supply. Sustained pressure from State governments, the Supreme Court of India, Opposition parties, the scientific community, and civil society helped tide over some missteps.

Unfortunately, the Government continues to treat the fight against COVID-19 as an event management exercise. The Prime Minister's birthday saw a record two crore inoculations, partly achieved by hoarding vaccines in the run-up to the day to shore up numbers for the "event". Such vanity is inexcusable. It demonstrates that India has the capacity to vaccinate at a faster rate, but for some inexplica-

ble reason the Government has chosen not to. The Government should answer a simple question: if two crore can be vaccinated on one chosen day, why not every day?

The gaps in vaccination

In the nine months since we started the vaccination drive, we have only been able to fully vaccinate less than a third of our adult population. Countries with comparable COVID-19 figures and even those with smaller or poorer economies have performed much better. Even if manufacturers ramp up production rapidly, our vaccination rate will fail to catch up. In the first three weeks of October it was 50 lakh doses a day. This rate will have to be tripled to inoculate all eligible adults by year-end.

Not only that, the gap between the proportion of the population that has got at least one dose and two doses is widest in India. This gap is likely a result of domestic supply falling short of the demand. The Government refuses to explore diverse methods, including compulsory licensing, to raise our domestic production of vaccines. Moreover, the Government is yet to roll out a plan to inoculate our children who could be particularly vulnerable to future waves. We must protect our children urgently so they can go back to school. India has had one of the longest school shutdowns worldwide and the damage to their education and growth has been incalculable.

We are also concerned about people's immunity waning over time in spite of having been vaccinated or infected. But the Government has dealt with queries about booster shots with complete opacity. It must work out a plan, based on scientific advice, for booster shots, like other countries have done. Most importantly, scientific procedures need to be adhered to during approval and procurement of vaccines. Truth and transparency should be the hallmark of government actions

and communication with the public to avoid any vaccine hesitancy.

A shift in policy

The Prime Minister likes to emphasise that vaccines are free, while conveniently forgetting that they have always been free. It is the Bharatiya Janata Party government that moved away from India's universal free vaccination policy. A significant section of the population was forced to pay for vaccines as government centres ran out of them. Many better-off citizens pooled in money to ensure the poor could get vaccinated. While commendable, this is an indictment of the Government, which shifted its responsibility to citizens and the private sector. Not even 10% of our population can afford to pay for vaccines, yet the Government continues to allocate 25% of vaccines to the private sector. This is unacceptable – resulting in less, not more vaccination.

In May 2021, the Government announced that all eligible Indians would be doubly vaccinated by the end of 2021. This hollow announcement has not been accompanied by either appropriate planning or execution. Experts assert that we will miss this target by at least five to six months. The Government must realise that vaccinating all Indians as quickly as possible is linked to not only the health of our citizens but also the wealth of our nation.

The floundering economy can be turned around if we can drive away the dark clouds of COVID-19. That requires us to ramp up the pace of the roll out of vaccines to all, completely free, including to our children. That is our best hope to protect our citizens, put our children back in school, revive our markets and have a cascading positive impact across sectors, thus ushering in the festive season and the new year with genuine optimism.

Sonia Gandhi is the President of the Indian National Congress

Re-evaluating the neo-Buddhist movement

The advancement of Hindutva offers residual space to symbols of Buddhism and downplays its revolutionary potential



HARISH S. WANKHEDE

Till October 14, 1956, the followers of Buddhism in India were an insignificant mass. And as a religion, it was one that was on the verge of extinction. On this date, Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in a grand ceremony at Nagpur, Maharashtra, and offered it to millions of his followers. Significant sections among the erstwhile untouchable castes divorced the degraded untouchable caste identity to find solace in the teachings of the Buddha.

Ambedkar's impact

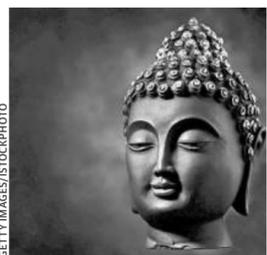
A few days ago, on October 20, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, which will help connect important Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Kushinagar is an important Buddhist pilgrim destination. The Prime Minister heralded the Buddhist sites and the Buddha's teachings as the marker of India's ancient civilisational heritage. However, he never acknowledged Ambedkar's contribution in revitalising the Buddhist faith. Buddhism's affiliation with the Dalit emancipatory movement is largely neglected, and often, its ornamental spiritual side is what is presented instead.

According to the last national population census, the Buddhists are one of the smallest minorities (0.7% of the total population) in India. Interestingly a majority of them are converted Dalits from Maharashtra. Within the conven-

tional Hindu social order, the untouchables were reduced to a sub-human category and treated with hatred and subject to prejudices. Though there were impactful social reforms to correct historic wrongs, the general social psyche of the dominant caste Hindus towards the lowest rung remained pervasive. It is with the arrival of Ambedkar on the national political stage that Dalits realised their self-potential and launched a struggle, claiming an equitable share in the modern institutions of power. Embracing Buddhism is heralded as the intellectual choice of Dalits that connects them to a robust historic past while also making them ready to enjoy constitutional rights as secular citizens.

A force in Maharashtra

Important cities in Maharashtra such as Mumbai, Aurangabad and Nagpur have witnessed the rise of powerful Dalit movements, social events and modern monuments. Deeksha Bhoomi in Nagpur, the place where Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, has emerged as a monumental heritage site, attracting millions of visitors every year. Here, Buddhism was resurrected not only as a part of India's cultural and civilisational heritage but also as a tool to escape the caste hierarchical cultural hegemony and social hostility. In the post-Ambedkar period, it is urban Buddhists – because of their educational achievements and newly gained middle class status – who have offered vital leadership to Dalit politics and organised various social and cultural struggles. Importantly, it is the creative application of the neo-Buddhist identity and ideology that has structured the Dalit movement as an autonomous political force in Maharash-



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tra. A serious debate between neo-Buddhists and Marxist-Socialists erupted during the heightened period of activism by the Dalit Panthers in Bombay. Namdeo Dhasal, a maverick revolutionary poet, offered a militant political alternative, suggesting that "Dalit" is a revolutionary collective of all oppressed communities and that they shall contest caste atrocities and state violence by radical violent means. Dhasal was influenced by the Maoist-Naxalbari movements and wanted that Dalits should build close solidarities with the Communist working-class movement.

Raja Dhale, another founding member of the Dalit Panthers' movement, criticised such a 'Leftist turn' of the Dalit movement. As an alternative to Dhasal's 'Marxist Manifesto', he offered a Buddhist perspective, suggesting that the social justice movement must be based upon a primacy to Ambedkarite liberal principles and making a break from the ideas of a violent class struggle. Conversion to Buddhism helped the community appreciate the constitutional values of secularism and social justice substantively and develop a critical distance from the ideologies that legitimise any brutal usage of violence. Dhale visualised the neo-Buddhist movement not as a sectarian project for the

emancipation of untouchables only but visualised it as a revolutionary project that would enlighten the wider Bahujan mass.

Second, conversion to Buddhism also helped Dalits to find a robust meaning about their cultural past. They reinvented the Buddhist cultural symbols (by building monuments, *viharas* and religious sites), rituals and practices (by celebrating Buddhist festivals) as the proud markers of their new social identity. Buddhist cultural assertions and claims over public spaces became the symbols of their rejection against Hindu cultural hegemony and its social tentacles. Such assertiveness often put them in opposition with right-wing ideologies.

Niche ideological space

In Mumbai, under Bal Thackeray's leadership, the Shiv Sena responded to the neo-Buddhist social activism with street violence and riots. In the early 1990s, the neo-Buddhists launched a mass movement to liberate the Bodhgaya temple from the control of Brahmin priests and also raised legal claim over the controversial site of the Babri Masjid, thus putting Hindutva politics into conundrum – on how to deal with the neo-Buddhists' demands.

Though the Bharatiya Janata Party regime at the centre appears more accommodative to Dalit cultural and religious symbols and avoided much skirmish on this front, it is difficult for the right wing to attract neo-Buddhists under the Hindutva project. As an ideological force, neo-Buddhists offer an alternative reading of history and imagine Buddhism as the chief challenger to Brahmanical Hindu traditions, caste order and orthodox ritualism. Buddhists thus stand distinct from the mili-

tant Hindutva hegemony and wish to retain their own autonomy in sociocultural spaces.

Non-allegiance with the Left militancy and later its opposition to Hindutva politics have created a niche ideological space for Dalits especially amongst neo-Buddhists. However, as a political force, they have failed to provide any significant challenge to the dominant caste and class elites and failed to mobilise other marginalised communities under their social or political programmes. In recent times, neo-Buddhism has generated a passive communitarian exclusivity that often engages with ritualistic and spiritual endeavours rather than building impressive struggles for social justice or to gain political power.

A democratic dialogue

The revolutionary promises made during Ambedkar's historic Buddhist conversion would be fulfilled only if the polity is sensitive towards secularism and social justice. The current advancement of Hindutva is coercive and hegemonic as it offers residual space to Buddhist symbols and keeps a distance from its revolutionary anticaste struggles. Though it is vital to protect the autonomous cultural space that the neo-Buddhist intellectual class has developed, it is equally important to build a unified people's movement to protect the merits of India's constitutional democracy. It is only by initiating democratic dialogue with other marginalised and struggling communities that neo-Buddhists can revitalise Ambedkar's transformative project.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Mullaperiyar and safety

The scaremongering, especially on social media platforms, about the safety of the Mullaperiyar dam following torrential rain that lashed the catchment areas in Kerala is unwarranted. The expert committee constituted by the Supreme Court of India has certified the dam to be safe and even specified the

water level to be maintained. However, the safety of the people living downstream cannot be overlooked. As the dam is very much in the control of Tamil Nadu, the State must ensure that there is proper monitoring which will go a long way in assuring Kerala that safety does come first.

M. JEVARAM,
Sholavandan, Tamil Nadu

Narcotics case

The twists and turns and the levelling of all sorts of allegations in the high-profile cruise ship drug incident make one wonder which direction the case is going. Most sensational cases suffer either from obstacles in the form of external influences, allurements, threats, or flaws by way of a botched

investigation and inadequate monitoring. In order to unravel the entire ramifications in the case and to guard against any modicum of suspicion, a probe monitored by the judiciary is essential. Importantly, the prosecution should travel on the right and legally stipulated path to reach a fair, unbiased, early and

independent conclusion.

V. JOHAN DHANAKUMAR,
Chennai

At Dubai

Pakistan can be famous as well for meltdowns against its arch-rival in sport, but this time, it appears it was determined to prove things otherwise. India may have lost the match in Dubai but captain Virat Kohli's

wonderful move to congratulate the Pakistan openers at the end of the game must have won many a heart across the world. His gesture only reiterates the point that cricket has the magic to mend relations between the two nations.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai



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