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Tenggol p. 34*

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in Uttar Pradesh p. 48*

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THE CARAVAN



**THE TYRANNY
WILL GET WORSE**



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The Tyranny Will Get Worse

Hindutva's consolidation of a varna autocracy is destroying the republic

HARTOSH SINGH BAL

We have never had an election like this before, with the people split between elation and foreboding. The majority eagerly anticipates the result, with many among them unconcerned about what it would mean for India or for the compact under which the country came into being. The smaller fraction hopes for, at best, any possible reduction in the Bharatiya Janata Party's numbers that might bring a temporary respite to its betrayal of constitutional values. Pre-election surveys and anecdotal reportage point to a growing unease with the state of the economy, particularly on the issues of unemployment and inflation. But, when faced with making a choice in the polling booth, it appears that the question of identity—in particular, an all-usurping Hindu identity—is going to prevail. The unfortunate fact remains that, even with a weakened BJP, increased tyranny and autocratic control seems a given as we look ahead.



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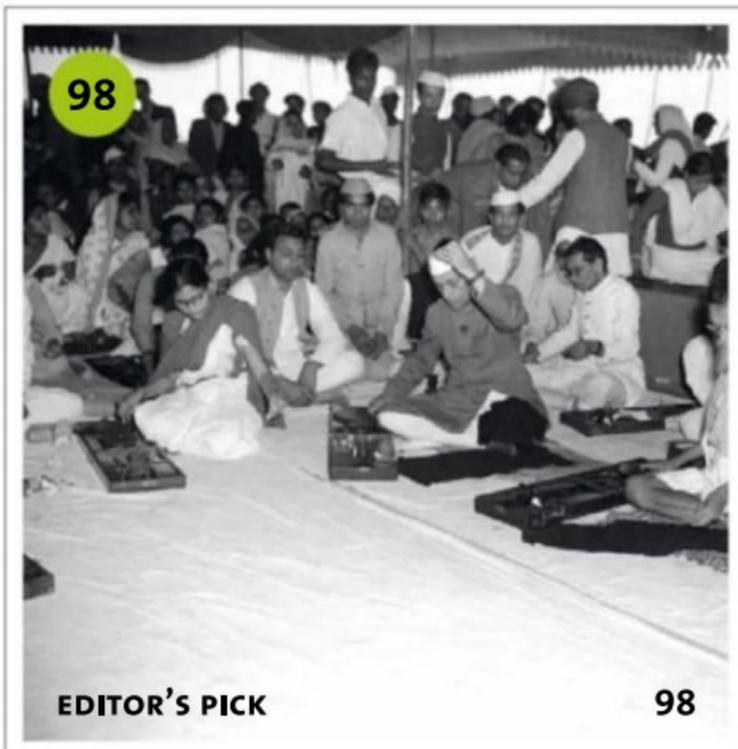
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THE LEDE



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Mixed Messaging

The contradictory queer films of a small-town director / **Films**

/ **SHUBH BADHWAR**

Sitting in a vibrant room riddled with Wi-fi routers and cables, and his YouTube Creators Award perched upon the top shelf, Amrish Bhatia lit a cigarette. “I didn’t even know the ABCDs of photography and filmmaking. I had never owned a camera,” Bhatia said. The 58-year-old’s story is a curious one. Though he currently runs a software company in Haryana’s Faridabad, his claim to fame is his diverse portfolio of short films exploring queer themes, such as *Marichika* (2014), *Invisible*

Anguish (2017), and *My Father is Gay* (2014), among others, where he takes on the roles of producer, director, cinematographer, narrator and, in some instances, actor. His low-budget short films, despite their visibly amateur production and acting performances, have achieved quiet success, with over 119 million views and nearly three hundred thousand followers on YouTube. But the source of his films is unexpected for someone from small-town northern India—a place where traditional values still hold sway and queer identities are often marginalised or ignored. As a

queer director, who prefers not to label his sexuality, Bhatia is a beguilingly bold specimen.

Bhatia’s films range from heart-warming stories of self-discovery to darker narratives that depict the harsh realities faced by queer individuals in India. *Sleeping with a Criminal* (2023) is, according to the online description, a romantic thriller about “a young hot boy who is looking for a place to hide,” and touches upon politics, radicalisation and need for social harmony. *Invisible Anguish* deals with loneliness and social isolation among older people.

Paribhasha (2015) deals with friendship and transgender identity. Among the films that do not have queer themes, *Dharam* (2016) is about poverty and religious conversions. Some of his more recent works, like *Defining Love* (2022), also touch upon themes of religion and class. The viewership of his films ranges between tens of thousands for most and, in the case of *Invisible Anguish*, a staggering 11.7 million.

Bhatia's journey into filmmaking began as a casual experiment. He bought a camera on a whim, intending to use it for weekend trips to Delhi's historic sites. When a couple of handsome young men he met at a shopping mall asked him to take their portraits, he realised he could do more with his camera. Soon, he began to explore the idea of making short films. Relying on YouTube to learn the craft, he said, he quickly began producing films. Eventually, he focused on queer identity and themes that tackled issues rarely discussed in the conservative circles he hailed from.

His choices led him to be ostracised by many. "When I announced the film *My Father is Gay*, my software industry clients began to sideline me," he said. "And almost everyone, with the exception of my family, began to sideline me in one way or the other." But he found encouragement in the popularity of his films on the internet, which even secured him a deal with a prominent queer social-networking app that purchased some of his films.

On one hand, his work sheds light on the struggles of queer individuals and challenges societal norms. On the other hand, his personal views and social media persona reflect a more traditional and Right-leaning mindset. For that reason, his filmmaking becomes a unique glimpse into the lives of queer individuals in small-town North India.

"In each of these films, what struck me was the raw portrayal of love, lust and desire in a manner that brings to life the human complexities we often find overshadowed by the use of props and aesthetically opulent set designs in many mainstream films that explore queer love and intimacy," Disha Chaudhari, a queer feminist researcher, told me, in her review of *Sleeping with a Criminal*, *Paribhasha*, and *Defining Love*. According to Chaudhari, these films explore complex themes

of class, gender and religion, showing how social hierarchies influence and define our experience of desire, to "disrupt some of the elite perceptions of non-heteronormative love." Additionally, she found it intriguing to examine Bhatia's politics as part of "the quintessential homonational subject, the queer savarna Hindu whose fidelity lies with the conservative right."

Bhatia grew up in Agra before moving to Faridabad. Both these places treated sex as a taboo subject—neither to be spoken of at home nor among friends. According to him, his conditioning was such that he would often label the people who spoke about sex as "dirty." And so, it took him a long time to figure out his own sexuality. This could explain the odd blend of eroticism and information-heavy dialogue in his films. There are several erotic frames and fetishised shots of rippling muscles, reminiscent of ancient Greek sculptures, foreshadowing the Socratic turn the dialogues take as the films draw towards a conclusion. Bhatia said that his films aim to instil self-respect and to prevent queer people from "making mistakes." "You have to educate the LGBT people," he said. His films are his message to the younger queer community. But the delivery of his messages often verge on moral policing, tending to also leave audiences confused. His films often put the burden on queer people to become "acceptable" to society. A viewer of *My Father is Gay* commented, "I would think this is an anti-gay film from the 'moral of the story' at the end if not for all the male body attention."

Bhatia admitted that he did not set out to make films with queer themes. His 2012 film, *Kashmakash Jindgi Ki—Life's Struggles*—for instance, was inspired by events from his own office. But it attracted the attention of men seeking sex with other men. "When I promoted the films on social media, we received a lot of sex-oriented messages. The actors were quite handsome and many of

"When I announced the film *My Father is Gay*, my software industry clients began to sideline me," he said. "And almost everyone, with the exception of my family, began to sideline me in one way or the other."



OPPOSITE PAGE: Principal photography in progress for the queer short film *Sleeping with a Criminal* (2023), in Haryana's Faridabad. Amrish Bhatia's low-budget films have achieved quiet success, with over 119 million views and nearly three hundred thousand followers on YouTube.

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these messages were predatory towards them,” he told me. He said he had seen young men in the industry being sexually exploited by casting directors, and his next production, *Marichika*, was made with the intention to expose this group of people. It follows the story of a model who falls into an exploitative relationship with a gay modelling agent. Somewhat confusingly, however, the film ends with the message that people exploit those who are willing to be exploited.

Bhatia seems to want to warn gay men against casual sex, viewing it not as an outcome of a sexually repressive

means they are also human beings, they are having feelings.” At the same time, he wanted to hold up a mirror to the double standards of a people and society refusing to acknowledge homosexuality.

Bhatia has faced criticism from within the queer community. After the release of *Double Standard* (2015), which depicted abuse within queer relationships, for instance, a queer viewer accused him of defaming the community. Commentators on YouTube often criticise his actors as lacking capability. Bhatia’s films also contain anti-trans messaging. In *Paribhasha*, a gay character, who

TV go through these procedures and change themselves but there are only a few people like this. When a common person goes through these surgical procedures, they have to resort to clapping,” he said—a denigrating reference to the hijra community.

Bhatia also reflected a flawed understanding of sexuality itself, claiming that “being gay is a choice that develops and matures around the ages of 14 to 19. If at that time they receive proper guidance and support, they can be motivated to make a different choice.” It was clear that he was conflating gay and trans identity with lifestyle choices, a stance common among homophobic or conservative communities.

His films also appear to take a secular stance, but even these betray problematic underlying assumptions. In *Defining Love*, a story of young lovers from different religious backgrounds, a character named Priya alias Shabnam, who had kept her Muslim identity hidden from her lover and colleagues, delivers a monologue lamenting the barriers drawn by the contentious relationship between Hindus and Muslims. But she then goes on to marry a Muslim and rejects Arjun, a Hindu. In *Sleeping with a Criminal*, Ambrish’s character of a “mature gay man” tells an extremist Muslim youth, “I believe in mankind, not religion.”

Bhatia has frequently voiced his support for Hindutva, be it through chastising those who went to watch the film *Adipurush*, which was widely panned by Hindutva supporters, or nods to propaganda films like *The Kerala Story*. On being asked about his political affiliations, Bhatia said “I don’t support any political parties. I support the cause.” Yet, Bhatia was in support of same-sex marriage, which the Hindu Right opposes.

Despite these contradictions, Bhatia’s films have found an audience, both within India and internationally. They reveal the complex and often conflicting layers of his identity as a conservative queer filmmaker. This paradox may ultimately reflect the broader struggle faced by many queer individuals in conservative environments: the desire to be true to oneself, while navigating societal expectations and cultural norms. ■



ABOVE: Poster for the film *My Father is Gay* (2014). In his films, Bhatia often takes on the roles of producer, director, cinematographer, narrator and, in some instances, actor.

and conservative society, but as a fault of sorts, which contributes to their exclusion. This stance appeared to stem from a time when gay sex was still criminalised, when “LGBT people were viewed very differently and discriminated severely,” he said. He recounted incidents he witnessed in the late 1990s, when men would openly have sex in public toilets or sexually harass other men in public transport. He concluded that “there were a lot of minus points within the gay community, giving them a bad name.” He said he wished to send across the message that “being gay does not mean hungry for sex only. It

undergoes a commendable character growth, falls in love with their friend, who rejects their advances. The character then undergoes gender-affirmation surgery to become a woman, so that their friend will now consider a romantic relationship with them. The film evidently belittles such surgery, depicting it as a means of securing the attention of men. But Bhatia insisted people from the trans community had found the film relatable. He told me that he often found himself mentoring gay youth, and that he cautioned them from repeating the “mistakes” he has seen made by others—which sometimes include gender-affirmation surgery. He claimed to have swayed many away from undergoing the procedure, which he maintained was not for everyone. “We see people on

PERSPECTIVES



Debacles of Diplomacy

The Modi government keeps losing the neighbourhood to score petty domestic points / **Politics**





LEFT: Narendra Modi at the twentieth Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit in Jakarta in September 2023. Modi's rhetoric about ASEAN does not match the test of reality.

/ **SUSHANT SINGH**

“ASEAN is the central pillar of India’s Act East Policy,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared in Jakarta last year, at the twentieth summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Upon assuming power, in 2014, Modi rebranded the Congress government’s 1992 “Look East” policy—in which India sought to develop its economic and cultural relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region—as “Act East.” Since then, the Modi government has often boasted about ASEAN’s central role in his policies. In a speech in 2018, Modi asserted that Southeast Asia was one of India’s top priorities, stating that, “for India, no region now receives as much attention.”

Modi’s rhetoric, as with many of his foreign-policy claims, does not match the test of reality. The latest evidence comes from the ASEAN Studies Centre’s *State of Southeast Asia Survey* for 2024. Presenting a snapshot of the prevailing attitudes among those in a position to inform or influence policy on regional issues in ASEAN countries, the report finds that India figures among the “partners of least strategic relevance” for the member countries of ASEAN. Only 0.6 percent of those surveyed said that India is the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia, in a list that is led by China (59.5 percent), followed by the United States (14.3 percent) and Japan (3.7 percent). Even the European Union (2.8 percent) and the United Kingdom (0.8 percent) are seen as more economically influential in the region than India.

India fares worse among countries with the most political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia, with only 0.4 percent of those surveyed naming the country. (China again tops the list, chosen by 43.9 percent of those surveyed, followed by the United States at 25.8 percent.) In what should come as a shock to those who believe that India has become a *Vishwaguru*—teacher of the world—under Modi, only 1.5 percent of respondents trusted India to “do the right thing” for global peace, security, prosperity and governance. The distrust levels were at 44.7 percent, with 40.6 percent of them agreeing that “India does not have the capacity or political will for global leadership.” That is the view about India after a decade of Modi as prime minister, in a region he claimed receives greater attention than any other part of the world.

When asked about the country they would like to live in, India again finished at the bottom of the list, as the choice of only 0.7 percent of those surveyed. China, which neither claims to be the mother of democracy nor a *Vishwaguru*, figured higher as the chosen country of 4.8 percent of respondents. This survey is a severe indictment of Modi’s Act East Policy and rather humiliating for those in the government who are in charge for the region. No surprise, then, that the survey report did not make it into almost any of India’s major newspapers. With even the rupee hitting a record low twice in rapid succession not being considered worthy of prominent headlines, the absence of the ASEAN survey in Indian newspapers should not be surprising. It is a feature of Modi’s New India.

If Southeast Asia seems too distant from New Delhi, consider the recent travails of the Modi government with some of the countries in the neighbourhood. The most astonishing among them was Modi's self-goal against Sri Lanka by raising the Katchatheevu island issue, in a desperate attempt to target the Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam for the parliamentary polls in Tamil Nadu. A right-to-information request filed by a BJP leader received a response even before the party's north Indian support base could learn to pronounce Katchatheevu properly. The *Times of India*—of “We are not in the newspaper business, we are in the advertising business” fame—carried the reply as its lead story on the front page and promoted a reductive narrative of how Indira Gandhi had handled the situation by giving away the island to a smaller country. Modi and the minister of external affairs, S Jaishankar, then stirred the pot, without explaining why the Modi government had taken a diametrically different position in the Supreme Court and in parliament on the matter in the past decade. When Jaishankar was asked whether the Modi government would walk back from the sovereign agreement with Sri Lanka, he was evasive and unconvincing.

The real embarrassment came from Colombo, where the Ranil Wickremesinghe administration refrained from commenting on the matter, dismissing it as a “clash between two political parties in the run-up to elections in India.” The subtext of Sri Lanka's mature response draws attention to the Modi government's immature and petty politicking. “This is a problem discussed and resolved 50 years ago and there is no necessity to have further discussions on this,” came the firm response of the Sri Lankan foreign minister. Nevertheless, it risked giving rise to an underlying sentiment that this was an Indian attempt to extract a price for the financial help India provided after the island country went bankrupt. By dispensing with the dictum that “politics ends at the shore,” New Delhi was slaughtering India's diplomatic gains at the altar of possible domestic electoral dividends.

Under the Modi government, a dichotomy between India's close ties with the governments in South Asian countries and its high unpopularity among the populace of these countries has become a defining feature. This is visible in Bangladesh, where an authoritarian Sheikh Hasina is seen as being over-friendly with the Indian government, even as people participated in an India Out campaign led by the opposition. When Modi last visited Bangladesh—during the West Bengal assembly election in 2021, with an eye on the Matua vote—there was rioting in the streets against him, with 13 persons killed in police firing and several more injured.

Even if we overlook the ASEAN report, diplomatic successes cannot be reduced to snubs by the foreign minister and hugs by the prime minister, while India loses its influence, standing and power in the neighbourhood.



The situation is similar in Nepal, where the Sangh Parivar's attempts to revert the secular republic to a Hindu kingdom has not sat well with the country's citizens, and even several of its politicians. Combined with New Delhi's historical tendency to interfere in Nepal's domestic politics, it has made India extremely unpopular in the Himalayan country. Bhutan is experiencing a similar expression among sections of its population, despite receiving extensive financial support from India, and the country is now keen to establish diplomatic ties with China. In Maldives, President Mohamed Muizzu has kept his vow of throwing Indian military personnel out of the country. The anger and resentment was exacerbated with right-wing supporters of Modi causing a row on social media by trolling Maldives after Modi praised Lakshadweep earlier in the year. Last month, Maldives signed an agreement with Beijing “on China's provision

of military assistance” in a deal that would foster “stronger bilateral ties.” In Myanmar, the Modi government favours the military junta which, by no count, can boast of popular support of the country's population; the democratic opposition remains disillusioned at India's stance. In Afghanistan, the Modi government's increasingly close ties with the Taliban have come at the cost of its longstanding popularity with the Afghan people.

If this is not bad enough, Home Minister Amit Shah invoked “Akhand Bharat” or Unbroken India as the moral justification for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act after the rules were notified. It comes on top of the mural of Akhand Bharat in the new parliament building, inaugurated by Modi last May. Instead of building bridges with India's smaller neighbours, this is a sure shot way to burn them. For any country that aspires to be a great power, it must have the ability to stabilise and manage its neighbourhood. With limited resources at its disposal, New Delhi cannot be frittering them away in controlling an unfriendly and insecure neighbourhood, created by its own provocations. Instead of raking up the long-settled Katchatheevu issue, Modi and Jaishankar would better use their time and energies to ensure India regains access to the 26 patrolling points that it cannot reach, after May 2020, since the Chinese troops ingressed into Ladakh.

More than anything else, it was India's success as a liberal democracy and its ability to embrace its diversity and pursue an inclusive development path that attracted vast swathes of people in the neighbourhood towards India. That advantage has been lost with the sharp decline in India's democratic credentials under Modi. The problem has been compounded by Hindutva-driven policies and cheap partisan political stunts, creating pitfalls for India's relations with other countries of South Asia. Even if we overlook the ASEAN report, diplomatic successes cannot be reduced to snubs by the foreign minister and hugs by the prime minister, while India loses its influence, standing and power in the neighbourhood. ■



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Rotten Borough

Nitish Kumar's village reveals the limits of his social coalition / **Politics**

/ SAGAR

"If someone rents out their farmland to me today, I will belong to him," Arun Kumar Singh said. "They might think I'm their man, but I will always be who I am inside." Singh, a sharecropper in his late fifties, who lives a few metres away from the paternal home of Bihar's chief minister, Nitish Kumar, was trying to explain his neighbour's recent political acrobatics. On 28 January, Nitish was sworn in as chief minister for a record ninth time, with a total tenure of less than two decades, having once again deserted the Congress and the Rashtriya Janata Dal to rejoin the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance. In Singh's

metaphor, Nitish might be loyal to his current landlord—whichever of the other three major political parties in the state, all of which are bigger than his Janata Dal (United), he is aligned with at the time—but his true allegiance was to himself. What mattered more to Singh than Nitish's infidelity was that the district administration had installed three transformers in the area, allowing him to operate an electric thresher for free.

It is not just the material benefits Singh has received over the years from the various Nitish Kumar governments that has made him a perennial JD(U) voter. Like Nitish, he is an Awadhiya Kurmi, one of the most well-off jatis among the state's Other Backward

Classes. "A Kurmi has principles," Singh told me, adding that a government headed by a Kurmi should be assumed to be fair to everyone. If Nitish shared power with the RJD, he said, Yadavs would regain control over the state apparatus. Singh distinguished between the RJD patriarch, Lalu Prasad Yadav, whom he called a "lathi swinger"—a casteist slur, referencing the Yadavs' traditional occupation of cattle-rearing—and Nitish the "peacemaker."

Awadhiya Kurmis are the dominant caste in Nitish's village of Kalyan Bigha. Most of them are significant landowners, with holdings generally between two and ten hectares. Like other villages in Bihar, it is divided into

caste enclaves, inhabited by Scheduled Castes such as Musahars, Paswans and Pasis; Extremely Backward Classes such as Kahars, Kandus and Nais; Yadavs and Kurmis, the dominant OBCs; and a few Brahmins. I walked through all the enclaves, and a couple of the nearby villages, to talk to residents. All of them told me that they had been voting for Nitish's parties ever since he first won the Harnaut assembly seat, in 1985. Kurmis and Yadavs were sympathetic to the chief minister's frequent defections, arguing that his coalition partners had never let him work properly, while EBCs and SCs were willing to be loyal to the JD(U) as long as the dominant castes loosened social restrictions and allowed constitutional benefits to reach them.

Kalyan Bigha is part of the Barah village panchayat, part of Nalanda district's Harnaut block. In the 2020 assembly election, the JD(U) won five of the seven assembly seats that make up the Nalanda Lok Sabha constituency, which has been held by the Samata Party and the JD(U)—both of which Nitish co-founded—since 1996. The member of parliament since 2009, Kaushalendra Kumar, is defending a margin of over a quarter million votes against Sandeep Saurav, a state legislator from the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) (Liberation).

According to a local news outlet, Kurmis and Yadavs make up about a third of the electorate, with the former outnumbering the latter by over a hundred thousand. Almost a quarter is SC, and there are nearly a hundred thousand Beldars, an EBC community that forms the primary support base for Mukesh Sahani's Vikassheel Insaan Party, which has also flitted between the NDA and the Mahagathbandhan in recent elections.

In Kalyan Bigha, residents told me, almost forty percent of the three hundred households are Musahar, while Kurmis account for thirty percent. Around ten to fifteen percent are Yadav, while the rest are EBCs. I was told that the entire Barah village panchayat, which includes at least seven villages, has only three or four Muslim families. Kalyan Bigha offers a microcosm of Nitish's support base in the state, which is

built on these socially and economically intertwined communities.

Although Musahars are the largest community in the village, they are dependent on the Kurmis and Yadavs, on whose lands they labour. Nitish's supporters from the dominant OBCs seemed to be ideologically closer to the BJP's Hindutva agenda than to the socialist movement that much of his early political career was spent building. Of the over two dozen Kurmi and Yadav residents I spoke to, everyone wanted the JD(U) to remain in alliance with the BJP, deplored the Mahagathbandhan government's caste census and took pride in the construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya. They viewed Dalits as freeloaders who took advantage of the government's welfare schemes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, the day the JD(U) ceases to hold the balance of power in the state, this support base will naturally shift to the BJP.

I met Arun Kumar Singh, Nitish's neighbour, as he was walking home from his fields. April is harvest season, and he had spent hours separating wheat from chaff. His sharecropper status is a rarity among Kurmis, most of whom live in cities or supervise Musahar labourers in their farms. Shiv Ranjan Singh was among the latter category. The 27-year-old finished a polytechnic course, a couple of years ago, that he had hoped would enable him to follow his father into a job in the railways. In 2004, as railways minister, Nitish had introduced a scheme that offered guaranteed employment for the children of employees who took voluntary retirement. The Modi government suspended the scheme in 2020. Shiv Ranjan did not blame Modi for his lack of employment, instead blaming himself for failing to get a government job. He had recently married and was happy living off the family farm. He knew little about agriculture, but Musahar labour was cheap enough for him to turn a profit.

As I spoke to Shiv Ranjan and his friends, I tried to correct their understanding of reservations, which, as with most dominant OBCs I met, tended to parrot the upper-caste rhetoric of merit being compromised. When I pointed out that the OBC share of reservations

OPPOSITE PAGE: Nitish Kumar receives petitions from residents of Kalyan Bigha during a visit to his village, on 29 November 2022.

in the state was almost double that of SCs, Shiv Ranjan argued that the benefits did not reach individual castes, since OBCs are a large section of society. He would not accept affirmative action, even if OBCs were given a larger quota. "If, by the grace of god, anybody from my family became prime minister, they would first abolish reservations," he said. He welcomed the construction of the Ram temple, noting that, even though he had watched the Doordarshan serial *Ramayan*—a key component of how consent was manufactured for the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign—as a child, there had been no temple at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid all these years.

Ritesh, a recent engineering graduate I later met in the neighbouring village of Balwapar, echoed Shiv Ranjan's aversion to reservations. He will be voting for the first time in this election. Even though his family has always voted for the JD(U), he told me that he prefers the BJP. He said that he did not like Nitish because the chief minister had introduced reservations for women, whose intelligence, Ritesh believed, was inferior to that of men. The acceptance of Hindu scriptural views on women and oppressed castes has made the younger generation of dominant OBCs a natural constituency for the BJP.

Sahibi, a Kurmi man in his late forties whom I had met on the electric rickshaw from the Harnaut railway station, waited patiently for me to finish my conversation with Shiv Ranjan. As soon as he found out I was a journalist, Sahibi had insisted on taking me to the temple complex he was building, on the banks of an underground tributary of the Ganga that passes through the village. He had built the first temple, to the Hindu deity Ganesh, a few years ago, but recently decided to upgrade it to a *dham*—pilgrimage site. "I realised there was a lot of enthusiasm among the people towards the temple," he told me. "To make it a *dham*, I need five–six new temples at the site."

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When we reached Sagarpar, the would-be dham, I found a small temple next to a newly built bypass. It had no caretaker, though a loudspeaker installed on a pillar blared devotional songs at a deafening volume. Sahibi showed me a nearby construction site, meant to be a shrine to Surya, that looked more like a telephone kiosk. He said that he was not aware of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, whose mission he was unknowingly fulfilling.

Sahibi's enterprise had earned him tremendous respect in the village. When we arrived at the temple, several residents had gathered, waiting for him to go door to door, collecting funds for an *akhand yajna*—a ritual sacrifice—at the temple. Rajiv Kumar, one of Sahibi's followers, told me that they could collect up to ten thousand rupees a day. Moreover, during Hindu festivals, Sahibi charges the various hawkers who set up stalls and attractions near the temple. This, and the revenue he makes from leasing out farmland, makes up for his various failed business ventures, which he started ever since he was released, in 2016, after spending seven years in jail on a murder charge.

While Sahibi was enabling religious revivalism in the village, there was no corresponding movement for social reform—something one would expect in the native village of one of the leading claimants of Rammanohar Lohia's legacy. Nitish was once an active advocate of equality and, in 2017, proposed reservations for OBCs in private employment. Sahibi, however, was a bitter critic of affirmative action, despite having always voted for the JD(U) out of caste affinity. He told me that the district administration had installed a transformer solely to provide free electricity to the dham, after he had requested it during one of Nitish's visits to the village.

The Harnaut assembly constituency, under which Kalyan Bigha falls, has no history of anti-caste struggles. Instead, politics in Harnaut evolved around the Kurmi identity in the aftermath of the Belchhi massacre. On 27 May 1977, Kurmi landlords shot dead 11 Paswans and burnt their bodies in a village that is five kilometres away from Kalyan Bigha. Indira Gandhi, who

had just been removed from office in the post-Emergency general election, resuscitated her political career by arriving at the village on an elephant, because of the lack of motorable roads.

In the following month's assembly election, Nitish contested the Harnaut seat for the first time as a Janata Party candidate, losing by almost six thousand votes to the independent Bhola Prasad Singh, a Kurmi who openly supported the perpetrators of the massacre. Nitish seems to have neither supported nor condemned the killings at the time. He again lost the seat in 1980, by a similar margin, to one of the key accused. He was able to finally win the Harnaut seat in 1985 on a Lok Dal ticket, by over twenty thousand votes.

In July 2023, Arun Kumar, a long-time party colleague and opponent, told a news channel that Nitish had won the 1985 election after "surrendering"

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, the day the JD(U) ceases to hold the balance of power in the state, this support base will naturally shift to the BJP.

to the Belchhi perpetrators. Nitish's biographer Arun Sinha writes that his campaign aides hired private militias to guard polling booths. When the matter was brought before the candidate, Sinha adds, the aides interpreted his "deliberate indifference as silent acceptance." Before the 2020 assembly election, *NewsClick* published an interview with Janaki Paswan, the last surviving witness of the Belchhi massacre, who accused Nitish of deliberately neglecting the village.

After returning from Sagarpar, I met Niru Devi, another Awadhiya Kurmi who runs a *gumti*—cigarette shop—near Nitish's house. "Twenty years ago, I couldn't go around bicycling alone, but now I can go anywhere," she told me. Niru, who is in her mid-thirties, no longer rides a bicycle. Nor has she benefited from Nitish's reservations and welfare schemes for women. But

she supports him, she said, because he is a *jaat bhai*—caste brother.

Mukesh Kumar, a Kurmi autorickshaw driver, stopped at the gumti to buy tobacco. He told me that Nitish had had a nearby pond filled to build a memorial to his wife and parents, which the chief minister visits thrice a year. The garden around the memorial was barricaded with an iron grill. Next to it was a temple, which also remains closed whenever Nitish is not home. Sitaram Ramani, a household retainer, told me that he had vowed to build a shrine to the family deity if Nitish was ever elected to the assembly. After the 1985 election, Ramani told Nitish about the vow. The newly elected legislator laughed and said, "You have taken up a big venture." Nitish eventually built the temple himself.

Ramani is a Kahar, an EBC community that has traditionally performed domestic labour in landlords' homes. His father had also worked in the household. After he died, Ramani took over his responsibilities. His family had lived in the house, cooking, cleaning, raising the children and supervising the farm. After Nitish was elected chief minister, they achieved a high social status. Ramani today manages Nitish's inheritance of around two hectares, collecting rent from the tenants. He frequently expressed his gratitude to the chief minister, whom he called *malik*—master—even though he is two years older.

Nitish's father, Ramlakhan Singh, was a Congress politician since the colonial era but left the party, in 1957, after being denied a ticket in the first two general elections. He joined the Chhota Nagpur Santhal Parganas Janata Party, which had been set up by the former maharaja of Ramgarh. Arun Sinha writes that Ramlakhan forged alliances with local Rajput leaders while contesting the Barh Lok Sabha constituency but managed less than six percent of the vote. Nitish would win the seat five times in a row.

Born in 1951, Nitish grew up in Bakhtiyarpur, where Ramlakhan had set up an Ayurveda clinic. According to Sinha, he was not subject to the discrimination that other OBC children faced because of his father's political

and economic clout. He attended a school that Ramlakhan had co-founded and had a fairly privileged childhood, with his father buying several parcels of agricultural land in Kalyan Bigha. He is likely to have benefited from his father's connections when he entered local politics, after joining the Lohi-aites during college. However, even as he regularly criticises the RJD for its nepotism, Nitish never talks about his own political legacy, which, Sinha writes, instilled a hostility towards the Congress over how the party had mistreated his father.

The intertwining relationship between political choice and social compulsion became clear when I visited Musahar Tola. In all of Barah, it was only the Dalit ghettos that were named after individual castes. The residents of Musahar Tola also tend to vote for the JD(U), but for different reasons. "If the village belongs to him, who else do we vote for?" Kundan Manjhi told me. I met Manjhi and his friends, who were resting on a porch, late in the afternoon. They were all in their early twenties and worked in fields owned by Kurmis and Yadavs. They are still often paid in grain rather than cash. Once the harvest was over, Kundan said, they would go to Tamil Nadu in search of factory and construction work, before returning in the winter to sow the wheat. None of them had attended school, labouring with their relatives as children.

I asked them whether they had made representations to Nitish when he held grievance redressal sessions in the village. "If he heard us, that would be a great thing," Kundan said. "Why would we go out of the state then?" At the gatherings, he said, the police would keep the chief minister cordoned off. Whenever they arrived, he added, the other attendees would say, "*Aa gayi Musahari sab, bhagao isko*"—Here come the Musahars, get rid of them.

Kundan and his friends confirmed that the dominant castes continued to practise untouchability. "If you ever go to their houses, they will make you leave your shoes outside," Sanjay Manjhi said. "If you eat at their house"—Musahar labourers often receive part of their wages as an afternoon meal—"you must pick every grain that falls from

your plate." Jairam Manjhi, a rare matriculate in the neighbourhood, said that the landlord's family would often sprinkle water as a purification ritual once they left the house.

The JD(U) has been promoting its entrepreneurship scheme for SCs, STs and women, under which the government provides individuals a grant of ₹5 lakh, and a further ₹5 lakh as an interest-free loan, in order to start a business. There was no beneficiary of the scheme in Musahar Toli. Far from accessing credit, the residents struggle to avail of basic government services. Sanjay, whose wife, Mamata, represents the ward in the village council, told me that, a few months ago, Kurmis beat up a Musahar boy, for allegedly peeking into one of their houses. When the police arrived, they believed the Kurmi version of the story—they claimed that the boy, who had been playing cricket near the temple, had got into a fight with the other children. Sanjay added that the village head, a Yadav, never listened to the ghetto's grievances and that he often had to reach out to the block development officer to get things done.

In September 2023, while supporting the Modi government's women's reservation bill, Nitish recounted his own initiatives to empower women in the state. He posted on social media that half of all panchayat seats have been reserved for women since 2006. While the step was revolutionary, it did not translate into the political empowerment of women. It is not uncommon for the husbands of women councillors, such as Sanjay Manjhi, to exercise power. Hare Ram, whose wife represents Balwapar in the Barah village council, told me that, in 14 of the 17 wards reserved for women, the husbands were effectively acting as the elected representatives. This situation is not unique to the panchayat. In my municipality of Bihar Sharif, the elected mayor is Anita Devi, but her husband, the JD(U) leader Manoj Tanti, uses her office and takes all meetings on her behalf.

Sanjay Manjhi said that Musahars voted for Nitish out of compulsion. "We have to vote for the one who belongs to the village," he told me. "As long as he hails from Kalyan Bigha, we will have to vote for him. Only then can we hold

on to whatever remains—we are getting electricity and roads for free." Even though the incumbent MP is not from the village, the connection with Nitish will ensure his re-election.

Antaro Devi, an SC woman in her fifties, had similar reasons for supporting the JD(U). Whatever little her family was getting, she told me, would be lost if the party loses the Nalanda seat. She and her family members—a daughter, two sons, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren—wake up a little before 3 am every day. They board a tractor sent by their landlord that takes them to the fields, where they perform ten hours of hard physical labour for around three hundred rupees each. "I have been doing this since my youth," Antaro told me. "My sons have taken over now that I am frail. When they grow old, my grandsons will be ready to inherit this work. This is the employment available for us."

Like Sitaram Ramani, Antaro referred to Nitish as "malik." She had been given land to build a home under the Indira Awas Yojana, she said, but the district administration told her the building costs would only be reimbursed once the house was ready. She did not have the money to construct and soon mortgaged the land to a member of a dominant caste. Antaro was not the only one to have lost land to Kurmis and Yadavs. The half dozen young Musahars I spoke to had all mortgaged at least some of their families' land in exchange for credit. None of them had managed to redeem it by paying off the loans.

Nitish Kumar's support base, which has earned him the chief minister's post for almost nineteen years, needs to be viewed in this context. The caste system rarely allows marginalised communities to exercise a free choice—they usually go with the candidate whose community controls their social lives. The argument, often made by urban liberal upper-caste Hindus, that SCs vote for right-wing parties and their coalition partners merely for five kilograms of foodgrains is an insult to their human dignity. It ignores the social structures that coerce Dalits into agreeing with their oppressors. For all his socialist bona fides, Nitish is a beneficiary of this system. ■

THE TYRANNY WILL GET WORSE

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Hindutva's
consolidation of
a varna autocracy
is destroying the
republic



COVER STORY / POLITICS

HARTOSH SINGH BAL



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WE HAVE NEVER HAD an election like this before, with the people split between elation and foreboding. The majority eagerly anticipates the result, with many among them unconcerned about what it would mean for India or for the compact under which the country came into being. The smaller fraction hopes for, at best, any possible reduction in the Bharatiya Janata Party's numbers that might bring a temporary respite to its betrayal of constitutional values. Pre-election surveys, most notably the one carried out by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, as well as anecdotal reportage, point to the fact that there is growing unease with the state of the economy, particularly on the issues of unemployment and inflation. But, when faced with making a choice in the polling booth, it appears that the question of identity, in particular, an all-usurping Hindu identity, is going to prevail.

When Narendra Modi first came to power, in 2014, most people—including many liberals and all those who, even today, remain on the fence despite the

prime minister's rising concentration of power—did not think that the country was witnessing a radical departure from the past. They witnessed the overt Islamophobia, the lynchings of Muslims, the anti-intellectual environment in which all dissent was portrayed as “anti-national” and deluded themselves into believing that all this would not enjoy lasting popular support.

The 2019 results should have put paid to such delusions. Within months of the BJP returning to power with an increased majority, some key elements of the Hindutva agenda, such as the abrogation of Article 370 and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, were immediately put into force. Despite this buildup to a Hindutva, or a Hindu, nation—no one has been able to clearly articulate the difference, but we are constantly told to avoid conflating them—the opposition, political or intellectual, has remained in denial.

Modi is most frequently attacked on his record of governance. It is, of course, the job of the opposition, as well as of an independent media and

civil society, to continually monitor and criticise the policy failures of a ruling government. At any other time, these failures would be enough to unseat an incumbent government. But why is it that, today, almost no one believes that Modi will lose power?

Part of the answer lies with India's institutions, most of which have ended up helping the BJP in the election. As we documented in our April issue, the Election Commission of India is no longer seen as a neutral observer. Among its various failures, the lack of transparency over repeated question-

At any other time, these governance failures would be enough to unseat an incumbent government. But why is it that, today, almost no one believes that Modi will lose power?



ing about the use of electronic voting machines has increased doubts about the electoral process. On 21 April, Modi made an openly Islamophobic and incendiary speech, in Rajasthan's Banswara, violating not only election laws but also several sections of the Indian Penal Code. The ECI has so far refused to act directly against Modi, instead choosing to write a letter to the BJP president. The playing field is further skewed by the mismatch in campaign funds between the BJP and all other parties combined. Back in 2014, when the Congress had been in power for ten years, the BJP raised more money for its campaign. Today, with the BJP in power for ten years, it has the ability to outspend the Congress seven to one.

Moreover, for a party that came to power trumpeting the supposed misdeeds of the Congress, the Modi government now faces a slew of serious allegations of corruption after the Supreme Court ordered the State Bank of India to make public details of corporates who had funded political parties through electoral bonds. In several cases, campaign contributions to the BJP followed raids by the government's investigative agencies, or led to contracts or legislation favouring the corporations making the donations. This documented quid pro quo far exceeds anything that the previous Congress-led government was charged with. The Enforcement Directorate, meant to investigate financial crimes such as money-laundering, is today one of the most dreaded organisations in the country, weaponised under Modi with powers that would be the envy of police forces in authoritarian countries.

In a democracy as vast as India, where almost all Lok Sabha seats have at least more than a million voters, the most powerful route of communication between the government and the electorate is the media. However, when this communication becomes one-sided, with the media echoing the government without ever asking questions, all accountability is compromised. This has all but happened in India, where the mass media is entirely in the grip of the government and willingly spreads propaganda.

What we are seeing is the triumph of an ideological project. Even the grip on the media is not simply the result of fear—large sections of the media support the government, are participants in its mission. While this magazine has, over the years, documented in detail the contours of how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has shaped this ideological project, the reason for its continued political success remained under-analysed.

THE PRE-ELECTION SURVEY conducted by the CSDS found that 44 percent of respondents wanted to give another chance to the Modi government.

While this reflects a high degree of support, the share of those saying no—39 percent—is also strikingly high, reflecting the unease about jobs and prices. The pollsters write that “the BJP is leading not *because* of its economic performance but *despite the lack of it.*”

We do not have to search far for the answer to this paradox. In response to the question of what people considered “the most admired” work of the government, the Ram temple tops the list, at 23 percent. The degree of satisfaction with the government was significant across castes. Among Hindu upper castes, over two-thirds were either fully or somewhat satisfied. The figure was 63 percent for the Other Backward Classes among Hindus, 57 percent for Scheduled Castes and 58 percent for Scheduled Tribes, but only eight percent of Muslims said they were fully satisfied, while a further 24 percent were somewhat satisfied. We can reliably read into the figures a consensus around the BJP and RSS's Hindutva ideology.

This suggests that Hindutva is not only a project of elite dominance but also appeals to a majority of SCs, STs and OBCs. This is an uncomfortable fact that is often dismissed in debates about upper-caste control over a population that is often represented as easily exploited or manipulated. There is an act of agency here in the support for Hindutva that cannot be discounted and needs understanding.

The figures also indicate that most Muslims and other minorities, such as Christians and Sikhs, who lie outside the Hindutva project, have chosen not to back Modi, irrespective of the economic situation. This is not something gleaned just from the polls—only 40 percent of “Others” in the CSDS survey were fully or somewhat satisfied—but has been demonstrated in election after election in states as far apart as Punjab and Kerala.

This Hindutva project, then, has overwhelming acceptance primarily among those who identify as Hindus. The varna order sanctifies the hold of the Hindu upper castes—Brahmins, Banias and Kshatriyas—and, in some measure, this grouping has exercised control over the society of a large part of the subcontinent for over a thousand years. Rulers from the Vaishya or Shudra fold who grew powerful enough to stake control were eventually granted Kshatriya status. Even when invading rulers, or Muslim and Sikh rulers from the subcontinent, took charge, they were temporarily placed on top in the secular sphere, without disrupting this structure in any way.

Control remained concentrated within the same structure in independent India. The single biggest failure of the Nehruvian era was how the Congress leadership dealt with caste inequity. It is

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Delhi policemen stand next to a giant billboard of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi during a campaign rally during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
On 21 April, Modi made an openly Islamophobic and incendiary speech, in Rajasthan's Banswara. The ECI has so far refused to act directly against Modi, instead choosing to write a letter to the BJP president.

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easy to point to reservations, which we owe to BR Ambedkar, but to restrict our understanding of caste inequity simply to untouchability—its most visible, egregious and criminal manifestation—is to ensure its persistence. Throughout the twentieth century, and this is still true of the RSS, thinkers from within the Hindu fold consistently decried untouchability while upholding the preservation of the varna system.

Nehruvian India created the foundation for a constitutional democracy, which allowed a political process to flourish. That, in turn, allowed new leaders to make space for themselves. For a brief period after Independence, these issues were debated and led to reservations for SCs and STs, as well as the setting up of the Kalelkar commission for backward classes, whose report was turned down by

the government. But, from then on, almost all ideas related to caste equity emerged from outside the Congress ecosystem, from leaders such as Rammanohar Lohia and Karpoori Thakur. A political pressure was created for extending the idea of reservation to other communities, now mostly categorised as dominant OBCs and the Extremely Backward Classes, which have little to no landholdings. But the intellectual ecosystem formed by the Congress largely remained immune to these issues.

The Nehruvian intellectuals of the day, from the historians to the economists, who ranged in their views from Marxism to left liberalism, were almost all drawn from the upper castes. Within this ecosystem, there was little interrogation of caste as a formation whose grip extended well outside untouch-

ability. This remains one of Marxism's most glaring theoretical and practical limitation in South Asia. The idea of a Brahminical communist intellectual should have been an absurdity, but it became reality.

Throughout the twentieth century, and this is still true of the RSS, thinkers from within the Hindu fold consistently decried untouchability while upholding the preservation of the varna system.

The Sangh's revival—after it had been banned following the assassination of MK Gandhi—had much to do with the political space provided to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh by the socialists, also a process we have recently documented. But this failure of the socialists cannot absolve the Congress for abdicating the quest for social equity. It was the Congress's failure to accommodate and empower the EBCs and dominant OBCs who make up around half the population that created the political opportunity of leading a non-Congress alliance. If the demand had come from within, this space would have been unavailable for others. The BJS and, then, the BJP stepped into this vacuum, all the while keeping intact the same Brahminical codes that animated the Congress as well.

During this period, post-Independence intellectuals of various stripes believed that modernity would make caste disappear. This led many of them to actually oppose the implementation of the Mandal Commission report—not because the recommendations failed to account for the distinction between EBCs and dominant OBCs but because they felt the idea behind the commission was, in itself, an error, a perpetuation of caste.

It is an idea prevalent even today in a large number of the liberal upper-caste support that the Congress enjoys. In private conversations, I have

found that some of India's foremost historians and social scientists continue to argue that the very structure of reservation hardens identities to the point that caste cannot be overcome. This is an enduring intellectual strain—that caste in its current form is largely a colonial construct, melded into a certain rigidity by the British census and, subsequently, by reservations in independent India. Such arguments often descend into debates about what is meant by the term “caste” but, within the sphere of Indian politics and society, this is rather clear. It is a shorthand for the varna order, with its myriad endogamous jatis. The exact structure of jatis is not fixed and, for some, their place in the varna structure varies both with space and time, but the vast majority of jatis are rather fixed in the graded hierarchy. The entire strand of bhakti poetry or, for that matter, the seventeenth-century Guru Granth Sahib, speaks of a system of inequity much like what we see in our times.

The assertion of political strength based on jatis, eventually, came from an alternate politics of assertion manifest in both Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party and the Janata Dal of Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav. This directly reflected in a change in the social composition of those who controlled the union and state governments.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Kashmiri women shout slogans during a protest in Srinagar on 23 August 2019, weeks after the Modi government abrogated Article 370. Within months of the BJP returning to power with an increased majority, key elements of the Hindutva agenda, such as the abrogation and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, were immediately put into force.

BELOW: Members of the Hindu Right celebrating the opening of the Ram Mandir—built atop the demolished Babri Mosque—on 22 January 2024.



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ANUSHREE FADNAVIS / REUTERS

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in the country, exemplified this transition. The Congress gave the state a succession of chief ministers drawn from the upper castes, from the Brahmin Govind Vallabh Pant, in 1950, to Charan Singh, a dominant-caste Jat, in the late 1960s. After Charan Singh's second term ended, in 1970, the Congress gave the state more upper-caste chief ministers. In 1977, Ram Naresh, a Yadav from the Janata Party, became the chief minister. After returning to power, in 1980, the Congress, having learnt nothing from the evident change in the social composition of a successful opposition, gave the state four more upper-caste chief ministers. In 1989, the party lost power, never to regain it.

The BJP got a brief look in after Mulayam Singh Yadav came to power. The first thing the party did was to appoint Kalyan Singh, a Lodh OBC, as chief minister, in 1991. Even as the BJP

was making a bid for power through its hard-line Hindutva, manifested in the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, it had already taken a leaf out of Kanshi Ram's Bahujan strategy by drawing a number of non-dominant OBCs, particularly the Lodhs, to its ranks.

The Lodhs had suffered at the hands of the upper-caste Thakurs, who had enjoyed considerable leeway under the Congress. The BJP had worked among the community primarily through figures such as Govindacharya, an RSS *pracharak*—worker—who was the party's general secretary. Other Lodhs who were drawn to the BJP fold included the future Madhya Pradesh chief minister Uma Bharti.

After Kanshi Ram's protégée and successor, Mayawati, and Mulayam Singh Yadav alternated as chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP came back to power in 1997, with Kalyan Singh as chief minister. He was soon replaced by two upper-caste figures.

Between 2002 and 2017, the state was governed by either Mayawati or Mulayam's son, Akhilesh. Finally, the BJP came to power with Adityanath, a Thakur, as chief minister. He was to win again five years later.

The BJP had successfully managed a Congress in reverse. It first found its way into power through an OBC face, then steadily built on this to achieve what had seemed impossible in Uttar Pradesh: the return to power of the varna hierarchy, with a Thakur chief minister. This is its real attraction for the Hindu upper castes. This is what led them to abandon the Congress and head to the BJP in droves. The Congress was in no position to control the upsurge from below in the varna hierarchy. This is exactly what the BJP has successfully managed. It did so while accommodating Hindu OBCs, SCs and STs, turning their attention to a hate directed outwards, towards Muslims and Christians.

Today, the various varnas of the Hindu order are no longer searching for equality. They are, for the moment, content with the beginnings of equality that come with some representation in power—representation the Congress had never even thought of providing them. For now, the BJP's Hindutva has managed to keep the varna hierarchy in place and resist the forces of equality from within the caste system.

THE PRESENCE of an upper-caste chief minister in Uttar Pradesh is not the only indication of a reassertion of upper-caste control under the BJP. Consider the BJP manifesto for the 2024 election which claims that sixty percent of the union council of ministers are from OBC, SC and ST communities. While this is an achievement of sorts, it does not mention that real power resides with the union cabinet, which today comprises of 29 members, at least 15 of whom are upper-caste. The major portfolios of defence, home, highways, economy and external affairs are all with the upper castes. Moreover, the 15 do not include Modi's own Ghanchi Teli caste, a trading Bania community that is only notionally an OBC; the Scindias, who are Kurmi but, as royalty,



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Additional evidence for the fact that the upper-caste transition from the Congress to the BJP was about elite dominance, where ideology served as the means of consolidating power, comes from the nature of Muslim support for the Congress.

have traditionally married into the Rajput aristocracy; and landowning castes such as Reddys and Yadavs.

Additional evidence for the fact that the upper-caste transition from the Congress to the BJP was about elite dominance, where ideology served as the means of consolidating power, comes from the nature of Muslim support for the Congress.

The entire Muslims leadership in the Congress was drawn from the Ashrafs, who are the equivalent of Hindu upper castes. The caste system among Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, while far more flattened than it is among Hindus, still bears the hallmark of endogamous jatis and hierarchies that are peculiar to each such religious community, while departing from the traditional varna hierarchy.

On the subcontinent, ritual hierarchy appears to be the primary social formation, and religion in the form of Hinduism, Islam or Sikhism sits atop this hierarchy. Over the seven decades of Congress domination, this right of the Ashrafs to speak for the entire Muslim community was never challenged within the party. This Ashraf presence may have been attracted by the Nehruvian secular ethos but, when a real choice arose—between speaking up against majoritarian violence or rallying behind the party leadership—during the 1984 massacres of the Sikhs, almost every prominent Ashraf voice within the party chose to remain

OPPOSITE PAGE: Akhilesh Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav, and Mayawati at a joint election campaign rally in the run up to the 2019 general elections.

ABOVE: A woman arrives at a polling station in Uttar Pradesh's Shamli district to cast her vote during the first phase of the general elections on 19 April 2024.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Among the chief ministers the Congress has given the Hindi belt over the past forty years, only one, Ashok Gehlot in Rajasthan, was an EBC.

silent, while lining up behind Rajiv Gandhi. The intellectual outreach to other minorities, a sense of a common shared fate with other minority identities, only arose with the rise of the BJP.

It is for this reason that non-Congress political formations began attracting a leadership that was not upper-caste but also drew upon a very different Muslim class leadership. However, even though this new class of leadership was not part of the old Muslim nobility, they were also drawn from the Ashrafs. Leaders such as Azam Khan who ended the political reign of the family of the nawab of Rampur, exemplified this phenomenon.

Outside this elite Ashraf leadership, wherever Muslims have had an alternative to the Congress, they have opted for it, from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar to West Bengal. The only political space outside the BJP where the Muslims were unable to register their presence in substantial numbers was in the Bahujan Samaj Party. This problem stems directly from the BSP's brief tie up with the BJP in 1995. In a wider sense there would have been no reason to see the BSP and the Muslims as representing separate interest if the country had remedied one of the more serious constitutional lapses of the Indian republic: excluding Muslims and Christians from reservations for SCs. Once Sikh Dalits were given these rights in 1956, there remained no convincing reason to deny them to Muslim or Christian Dalits. The very nature of politics in India could have been different if there had been the possibility of Dalit solidarity across religions.

THIS, THEN, IS THE CURRENT REALITY of Indian politics: an elite dominance of the Hindu upper castes, exercised through their current vehicle of choice, the BJP, and maintained through the ideology of Hindutva. And it is not just politically that the BJP has served to reinforce upper-caste control over India. A recent working paper by the World Inequality Lab found that, by 2022–23, the share of income (22.6 percent) and wealth (40.1 percent) cornered by the top one percent was the highest it had ever been in the country, higher than in Brazil, South Africa and the United States. “As per our benchmark estimates,” the authors noted, “the Billionaire Raj headed by India’s modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj.”

It went on to specify the evident consequences of such concentration of wealth.

One reason to be concerned with such high levels of inequality is that extreme concentration of incomes and wealth is likely to facilitate disproportionate influence on society and government. This is even more so in contexts with weak democratic institutions. After largely being a

role model among post-colonial nations in this regard, the integrity of various key institutions in India appears to have been compromised in recent years. This makes the possibility of India’s slide towards plutocracy even more real.

But this is no slide towards plutocracy. It is the shoring up of an eternal “varnacacy” that was showing signs of erosion through the exercise of political power. It is no coincidence that this acceleration in inequality has happened in the Modi years, in the very period that the challenge from below in political terms had been absorbed and managed through Hindutva. It is telling, and no surprise, to consider the direct beneficiaries of this rising inequality. A majority of the hundred richest Indians are from the mercantile Bania and Khatri castes, while nearly ninety are from the upper castes. There are just five Muslims on the list, and almost no EBCs or Dalits, who make up around half the population. The post-liberalisation growth in inequality, hugely accelerated in the Modi years, has also gone hand in hand with the continued domination by Brahmins and other upper castes of the top positions in the private sector, as well as in educational institutions and the media. Almost all of the 21 Indian-origin CEOs of top multinational corporations fit this description.

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This explains the committed upper-caste support for the BJP, which is likely to break away only once the elites see the BJP as close to defeat, unable to protect their dominance. But it does not explain the preponderant support that the BJP now enjoys down the hierarchy of the varna system, as well as among the Adivasis. This is despite the Modi government having worked hard, across a range of institutions, especially in education, to undercut the reservation system—either by failing to select the required number of candidates or by the University Grants Commission attempting to change the criteria for filling seats. It has even implemented a quota for the upper castes in the guise of an economic criterion. Moreover, the issues of

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inflation and unemployment should impact these communities the most.

The simple fact is that, despite intellectual claims to the contrary, in my twenty years of reporting in the Hindi belt, I have yet to come across an OBC, EBC or Dalit community identified nominally within the Hindu fold that does not identify as Hindu. Whether this dates back to less than a century, whether this identification has deepened in the post-liberalisation era and through the accelerating process of identifying local deities with Hinduism are all issues for academics to discuss. Unfortunately, today, this places many Ambedkarite intellectuals in the same position as Hindu upper-caste liberals, concerned about what is happening but not representative of what is unfolding in their own communities.

This does not mean that these communities are interested in the propagation of the varna system, but issues such as the Ram temple do impact and motivate them. When this is tied to the manner in which the BJP has reached out to individual jatis in these folds—providing them representation

at the local level, which they had often been denied in the long years of Congress rule, and extolling or projecting community heroes in the pantheon of Hinduism—the results are a consolidation of support.

IN THE FACE of this overarching Hindutva, the opposition presents a rather disparate character. The Congress, in the composition of its leadership, is largely the BJP without Hindutva. The real challenge in the Hindi belt comes from parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal. Outside this fold lies the BSP, a shadow of what it once was.

Kanshi Ram, while the most important Dalit figure in Indian political history after Ambedkar, is today largely absent in academic discourse. “He is rarely talked about as someone who contributed to the making of Indian democracy or even shaping Dalit identities,” the sociologist Surinder Singh Jodhka writes. “Mainstream political analysts began to forget him soon after he exited the scene.” This is a glaring omission. The shape of politics in the

Hindi belt today owes everything to him. If the BJP is harvesting any legacy, after moulding it to its own purpose, it is that of Kanshi Ram.

Kanshi Ram was a Punjabi whose political awareness grew only once he travelled outside the state, to work in Pune. He read Ambedkar extensively and saw his work beginning from where Ambedkar had left off. In his view, Jodhka writes, the Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Gandhi, which denied Dalits a separate electorate, was responsible for the political marginalisation of Dalits.

Given their demographic distribution across the country, no SC candidate could win without the support of upper-caste voters. This is how national parties (read: upper-caste parties) gained control over Dalit leaders and representatives. Dalits who managed to get elected as members of national parties did not represent their fellow Dalits but acted as agents and stooges of the upper castes, their chamchas, Kanshi Ram argued ... It was not only the elected representatives from the

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reserved seats who he was critical of, he also included bureaucrats in the same category. Given that Dalits do not have any say in the political system, Dalit employees also suffer. Even when they are selected, SCs are rarely given substantive positions of authority in the system. They too are therefore turned into chamchas. Such opportunist mobilization of a section of Dalits in the chamcha age thus produces, what Kanshi Ram calls, an ‘alienation of the elite’.

Kanshi Ram’s disenchantment with the Republican Party of India was also borne out of this belief, and he rather frankly voiced his criticism of the group. Such views have made him a difficult figure to engage with even among Dalit intellectuals. But it is from this realisation of the drawbacks of assert-

ing power by riding on the coattails of upper-caste parties that he formulated his own Bahujan politics.

Jodhka quotes a 1998 speech. “As I have come to understand, caste is a double-edged sword,” Kanshi Ram said. “We need to learn to handle it.” Savarnas, who only made up fifteen percent of the population, had used caste to oppress the rest of Hindu society, he added.

If we have such large numbers, why can’t we use it for ourselves? However, the challenge is to learn to use caste, politically ... What appears to us as a source of all our problems could also be a source of opportunity for us. We need to use it for our own good. If we use it intelligently, we can be in power ... And power is the key to all solutions. We need to be the rulers of this country.

Kanshi Ram’s idea of “handling” caste was to empower jatis by creating their own leadership and fostering a pride in their own icons, before welding them into a Bahujan whole that would be ranged against the upper castes. It was a remarkably effective strategy, propelling the BSP to power in Uttar Pradesh and helping it grow in Punjab and Madhya Pradesh.

In hindsight, the BSP’s alliance with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh was its biggest political mistake. It was to set in motion a process that led to the BSP becoming a single-jati party, with a large number of Bahujan elements that Kanshi Ram had wrested away from other Dalit and EBC communities now aligning themselves with the BJP. This accommodation of the BJP, which briefly brought power to the BSP, was further exacerbated after his death by

Mayawati's own distrust of leaders who had an independent connection to Kanshi Ram's legacy.

The rise of Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal were built around the assertion of the Yadavs. The assertion, which has come about as a result of power, must not obscure the degree of complete feudal control that upper-caste Thakurs and Bhumihars enjoyed over rural society until very recently. Despite the OBCs including both landowning castes and EBCs, it was not easy to pull them together because, in the context of rural India, the most immediate problems the EBCs faced were at the hands of the landowning OBC castes. Thus, both Lalu and Mulayam saw the need for the Muslim vote and took a strong stand against the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. The BSP's dalliance with the BJP further shored up Muslim support for these parties.

These combinations still remain alive at the state level, enjoying enough support to pose a challenge to the BJP. Even the BSP has more play on the ground in Uttar Pradesh than the Congress can manage. Both have the ability to attract EBC support through representation, and the SP is finally beginning to respond to this imperative.

The BJP's singular achievement in the Hindi belt, while maintaining and shoring up real power for the upper castes, was to invert Kanshi Ram's paradigm. It used his methods to build up jati icons, going a step forward to directly associate them with the myths of Hinduism, while, at the same time, ensuring that they did not participate in a larger political identity, either as EBCs or as Dalits. In this way, the constantly divisive nature of jatis was harnessed once again to ensure the varna system went unchallenged. It is this politics that has seen the BJP gain hold of Uttar Pradesh. In other Hindi belt states, such as Madhya Pradesh, that lack a large Dalit or Yadav core around which a political formation could arise, most OBCs, who were first attracted to the party through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, have largely become default BJP voters. It is only against this political backdrop that we can even begin to understand the dissipation of the Congress.

THE PRIMARY PROBLEM for the opposition is the complete collapse of the Congress wherever it is locked in a direct fight with the BJP. But, as the above description makes clear, the Congress lacks a clear idea of what it is and who it should appeal to if it is to regroup politically.

Among the chief ministers the Congress has given the Hindi belt over the past forty years, only one, Ashok Gehlot in Rajasthan, was an

EBC. Gehlot shows the difference such representation can make. There is little to separate the Congress in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, but the presence of Ashok Gehlot has managed to ensure that EBCs do not break away completely from the party in Rajasthan. Unlike the complete wipeout of the Congress in Madhya Pradesh over the past four assembly elections under its upper-caste leadership, the party has remained competitive in Rajasthan. Even in this general election, there are signs that, unlike in Madhya Pradesh, the party is in the fight for Rajasthan. In Punjab, Charanjit Channi, a Dalit, was made chief minister for a few months only to be discarded from leadership positions within the state. In any case, as was evident within the state, Channi was not chosen because he was Dalit—rather, his identity was used to put a spin on a political situation that had rapidly gone wrong because of direct mishandling by the Gandhi family.

The BJP used Kanshi Ram's methods to build up jati icons, going a step forward to directly associate them with the myths of Hinduism, while, at the same time, ensuring that they did not participate in a larger political identity, either as EBCs or as Dalits.

Today, as we look across the Congress high command, we see a leadership far less representative of the country than even the BJP. Mallikarjun Kharge is a Dalit who has shaped a remarkable political career, but he is from south of the Vindhyas, and the appeal and recognition of identity does not travel across that geographical barrier. A Kharge from the Hindi belt is not even a remote possibility. Leaving aside Gehlot, we are left with people such as Jairam Ramesh, Randeep Surjewala, Abhishek Manu Singhvi, Digvijaya Singh and Ambika Soni. This is a coterie, not a party leadership. Even its Muslim leadership does not reflect Muslim diversity or aspirations in the Hindi belt.

Moreover, even the Gandhis' family friends, gatekeepers and academic advisors, both in India and abroad, are drawn from the same milieu. It is easy for the liberal media to converse with such people, engage with them over ideas about the future of India in a shared hand-wringing. But none of this is a sign of effective politics.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Public gathering
of RSS and VHP
supporters in West
Bengal in December
2014.

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OPPOSITE PAGE:
A sadhu casts his vote during the second phase of the general election in Uttar Pradesh on 26 April 2024.

It is no surprise that such a political party is caught up appealing, in its atavistic imagination, to an India that does not exist. There is a constant attempt to reach out to upper-caste voters, especially Brahmins, still playing on the caste identity of the Gandhi family, even though the upper-caste vote is the BJP's most entrenched support base. The Congress cannot offer it Hindutva or any other means of ensuring its continued dominance over Indian society—why should the upper-caste voter even focus on this party?

Over the past ten years, the Congress has believed that focussing on governance and the economy would be sufficient to bring down the Modi government's popularity. They have been aided in this by intellectuals and the liberal media, largely upper-caste, that continues to believe that Modi's defeat is another article on joblessness away. In my experience on the ground, what I have found is that asking a voter their view on Hindutva or Modi is a sure-fire guarantor of knowing whether they think a particular scheme

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is good or bad. Those with faith in Modi and Hindutva will always respond favourably to any questions on the government's scheme. Reporters unaware of this reality ask questions about schemes and then claim that these have resulted in support for Modi.

Periodically, new categories, such as women or *labharthis*—beneficiaries of welfare schemes—are pulled out to explain particular election results. No reasonable explanation other than a hardening Hindu identity can explain a trend across the Hindi belt, where Hindus across the varna structure back the BJP, with the party's vote increasing as we go up the hierarchy, with the rare exception of the Yadavs or Jats in some states. What remains

equally true is the trend of the minority vote not responding to the schemes with the same enthusiasm. This is understandable in the case of Muslims and Christians, who have been at the receiving end of the hatred generated by the politics of Hindutva, but why should it hold true of the Sikhs? Do the schemes change in Punjab? Do they impact people differently?

If we have to imagine a workable and effective opposition to the Sangh Parivar, it must begin by looking past the Congress. It is not a question of restructuring or reorganising—the very thinking that animates the party is the problem. It cannot come to terms with the fact that a liberal upper-caste leadership whose main endeavour is to bring together people in the name of constitutionalism or citizenship (viable ideas that must be aims, not presuppositions) is not a workable political platform.

The same problems dogs the Aam Aadmi Party in even greater measure. Its intellectual flexibility over issues related to Hindutva has always been evident, and its silence as violence against Muslims unfolded in Delhi, where it is in power, was a clear illustration. It is no coincidence that its electoral success has been restricted to the two states, Punjab and Delhi, where jati politics is not the biggest factor.

Individual jati parties, whether they are run by Akhilesh Yadav, Mayawati or Sanjay Nishad, eventually will fall prey to the phenomenon that Kanshi Ram sought to describe in his book *Chamcha Yug*. He had spoken of how those who joined and worked within the Congress—or, now, the BJP—became useful tools for upper-caste interests. The story of the BSP is an apt illustration that those who chose to work with the BJP from the outside have also ended up becoming useful tools.

The battle against the BJP's Hindutva and jati politics must be, once again, like Kanshi Ram's struggle, animated from below, but it has to consider the minorities as equal partners. It must speak the language of jatis, not just in terms of token representation but in those that place the question of representation at the heart of its leadership. It would be the equivalent of a Samajwadi Party where the next rung of leadership is not made up of only Yadavs but would include, say, a Rajbhar, a Pasmada Muslim and a Valmiki. It must put together solidarities that Kanshi Ram instituted but the BJP has taken apart. Such a party cannot come into existence from nowhere. It must be born out of the realisation among individual jati leaders that the search for representation and respect can only go so far in an alliance with the BJP or the Congress. As Kanshi Ram indicated, there is no substitute to holding power on one's own.

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IT IS ALREADY CLEAR that this election is not like 2019, when Modi used an attack on paramilitary personnel in Pulwama to curry votes. This time, instead of coasting on a nationwide wave in its favour, the BJP is having to fight the election one seat at a time, one region at a time. Modi seeks a majority for a third consecutive term—a feat that no one since Nehru has managed.

He is doing so against an opposition that his government has depleted through arrests and defections, and through an unprecedented scale of attacks via the mass media. One of the most potent factors for the BJP's brute power is the capital that has lined up behind the party, thanks to the mercantile castes, and a media ecosystem that is complicit not simply because of possible external pressure but also because its ownership believes in the Hindutva thrust.

Despite this, the party can see the problems that lie ahead. The BJP and its allies control 346 out of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, and 117 out of 245 in the Rajya Sabha. It is difficult to see the BJP making any significant increase in its current Lok Sabha tally. It seems unlikely that the NDA alliance would get the required seats to secure a two-thirds majority and, even if it does, the Rajya Sabha remains a bigger challenge. The next large round of Rajya Sabha elections will take place in 2026, after a host of important assembly elections, including in Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Assam. The BJP already holds a significant number of the 75 seats that will be decided that year, so the possibility of achieving a two-thirds majority in both houses lies well into the future.

Next year, 2025, is the centenary of the RSS. There would be no better occasion to change the de facto Hindu nation the BJP has imposed on us into one that is set in law. The party lacks the numbers to do so, but we can expect more than symbolism over the course of the year. At least a uniform civil code, which—based on the Uttarakhand example—would not be uniform for Hindus, is set to be put in place.

For a more radical transformation, a series of steps lie ahead over the course of a third Modi term. The issue of delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies will come up. As a result, membership of the house may grow from 543 to 753—an increase of nearly forty percent. The seats for the southern states, including Karnataka, are likely to go up from 129 to 143, an increase of only eleven percent. Thus, the south's share in the Lok





Sabha is set to go down from 29 percent to just 19 percent. Combining this with the idea of simultaneous elections, the BJP could then achieve the two-thirds majorities that would allow it to unilaterally amend the Constitution.

This is where the BJP's continued control over the Hindi belt becomes essential—it is the only way that the party

can benefit from delimitation. But there is an evident paradox: Hindutva and jati politics is sustainable only for so long. After a period of time, jatis on the lower end of the varna hierarchy, which continue to gain representation, will require increasing representation at the top. This does not mean they will not see themselves as Hindus, but the very

act of demanding representation at the top is to seek to undo the varna order. It does not undo jatis, but it does challenge the hierarchy that is an explicit part of the system.

The larger question of what shape the Hindu identity can take in the face of the decay of the varna order is interesting, but part of a separate discussion.



ARUN SANKAR / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Polling officials seal an Electronic Voting Machine after the polling hours in the second phase of voting of India's general election, in Masuri village of Ghaziabad district on 26 April 2024.

The assertion of equality that could emerge from an end to the varna hierarchy justifies itself, irrespective of the fact that this new version of Hinduism may not necessarily be any more tolerant or less Islamophobic than what is being practised now.

As this general election shows, the Hindutva–jati paradigm does not operate in the same way across the Hindi belt. In states such as Madhya Pradesh, jati is comfortably ensconced within Hindutva, with no large non-upper-caste jatis that could form the backbone of an alternate political formation. Neither is the Muslim population large enough to impact the verdict in a significant fashion. The Congress cannot pose a challenge either on Hindutva or on representation. It remains a default alternative, hoping for the BJP to defeat itself.

In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the paradigm operates very differently, and here is where the challenge to the BJP's jati paradigm is immense. The BJP has not been able to control Bihar on its own and, in Uttar Pradesh, it has needed a more recent, more aggressive and violent Hindutva, magnified by the 2013 communal violence in Muzaffarnagar. This has then been sustained through an increasingly tyrannical state machinery. Here, a large Muslim population, along with numerous jati parties that have challenged the varna order, and will continue to do so, pose a clear and constant political danger to the BJP. Unlike Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan, these states do not require the overwhelming number of Hindu votes to switch for the BJP to be defeated. This precarious hold, despite its large numbers of seats in the state, means that we are likely to see a hardening of state tyranny and a more virulent Hindutva leading up to future elections.

What Uttar Pradesh points to is a phenomenon that we are likely to see at later points of time in several parts of India. Greater democratic awareness fostered through the politics of identity, which is not necessarily the negative phenomenon that upper-caste liberals often claim, will make the preservation of the varna order harder. With its targeting of Muslims, the BJP has temporarily contained the challenge from

below. As this challenge re-emerges, we are likely to see a magnification of the BJP's rhetoric of hatred. There is no other tool in the RSS arsenal left to contain the challenge. The BJP will look to make the marginalisation of Muslims more acute and more visible.

The BJP has also witnessed that, in the run-up to this election, despite its control over the mainstream media, an increasingly chaotic digital space that hosts social media, small independent organisations and content creators is getting enough traction to at least occasionally raise questions about its narrative. The new digital laws that have come into effect are aimed at curtailing exactly this phenomenon. *The Caravan* recently had a story on torture and killings by the Indian Army taken down online, even as the print issue with the same story continued to sell on the stands. This only made it apparent that there was no issue with the story that would have allowed the government to act under existing laws. The solution is already at hand. Changes to the Code of Criminal Procedure have included similar provisions enabling the government to clamp down in arbitrary fashion. We will witness much more of this in the coming months and years.

Moreover, after delimitation, the rumblings from the south will get stronger. The resistance to the Hindutva project from the Sikhs in Punjab is not going away and, at the same time, we have witnessed in Manipur the BJP's inability to deal with a situation where the state itself has been set aside by vigilante groups because its ideological compunctions prevent it from acting as an impartial arbiter. These challenges will grow stronger as and when the BJP shows signs of weakening in the Hindi belt.

The unfortunate fact remains that increased tyranny and autocratic control seems a given as we look ahead. Even a weakened BJP emerging from these elections would only move one way. If we need an example, we have one in Israel. The continued bloodlust in Gaza is fed by the fact that a Netanyahu without a war in Gaza is a Netanyahu without power. A man like Modi thrives on the aura of power. There is no way he will let go of it easily. ■

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*Why the Biren Singh
government gives
a free hand to
Arambai Tenggol*



/ CONFLICT

GREESHMA KUTHAR



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ON THE AFTERNOON OF 27 FEBRUARY, the Manipur Police received a tip that two Ambassador cars had been stolen in the Imphal Valley. Since 3 May 2023, the force has received intimation of many such crimes—often much graver ones—due to an ethnic conflict that has been raging in the state. The same day, Moirangthem Amit Singh, an additional superintendent for operations, and other officials located the cars and apprehended one individual in connection to the case. But the prompt response had its costs.

Around two hundred “armed miscreants” stormed and vandalised Singh’s residence, the Manipur Police tweeted the following day, after which additional security forces reached the spot. Singh and his escorts were abducted. The police released a statement which said that the attackers also fired bullets to intimidate Singh’s family. It was only after the intervention of the police department that Singh was released.

“We are looking the other way because we’ve been told to look the other way,” a senior police officer said. “We have no choice.”

The statement identified the men as members of Arambai Tenggol, which claims to be a sociocultural organisation working to reinstate Sanamahism as the official religion of Manipur, after it was replaced by Hinduism in the eighteenth century. However, it is actually an armed militia that has been at the forefront of the ongoing ethnic conflict. Arambai Tenggol faces accusations of rampant harassment, extortion and violence, targeting not just the tribal Kuki and Naga communities, Meitei Christians and Meitei Muslims, but also Meitei Hindus who pose any sort of a challenge to them.

The Manipur Police had earlier given cover to the activities of Meitei militants—some of whom are suspected to be members of Arambai Tenggol—as I reported earlier, but now the force was in a standoff with the militia, which

has, surprisingly, become dominant in the Imphal Valley. While few of Arambai Tenggol’s crimes are actually reported because of the fear they command, a senior police officer told me, a major reason for Singh’s abduction was that the police had registered some first-information reports against one of its top commanders, Robin Mangang Khwairakpam. Like many other Arambai Tenggol members, Khwairakpam regularly boasts about the militia’s activities and agenda on his Facebook account, which identifies him as a “Member National Executive Committee SCM, BJP HQ New Delhi.”

When I spoke to Arambai Tenggol supporters about the abduction, they claimed that Singh was corrupt. Various members of the militia also circulated similar accusations on social media. But the Manipur Police rubbished such allegations in the statement, requesting the public to cooperate and refrain from “rumour-mongering and circulating fake news.” It noted that the militia had gained “false support” under the garb of protecting the public, even as it committed several crimes and “anti-social” acts. At a press conference on the following day, the police threatened that such circumstances could lead to the re-imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Imphal.

Such statements were unlikely to make a dent in the massive support that the militia enjoys in the Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley, a fact that was demonstrated the next day. A large number of Meitei groups reportedly staged protests in support of Arambai Tenggol, which, they said, has “defended” Manipur against “Kuki aggression,” even though Singh himself is Meitei. The Apunba Manipur Kanba Ima Lup—an arm of the Meira Paibi, a civil-society organisation formed by Meitei women—blamed the union and state governments for creating enmity between Arambai Tenggol and the state police. Leishemba Sanajaoba, a Bharatiya Janata Party member of the Rajya Sabha and Manipur’s titular king, also posted on his Facebook that the standoff should be resolved at the earliest, without, expectedly, condemning the militia’s activities. (Sanajaoba later deleted the post.)

Meanwhile, the Manipur Police commandos held an “arms down” protest as senior officers allegedly asked them to “restrain themselves” against Arambai Tenggol. “There is no political will to act against them even now,” the senior police officer told me after the abduction. “We are looking the other way because we’ve been told to look the other way. We have no choice.” No arrest seems to have been made in the case yet.

SINCE INDIA’S INDEPENDENCE, Manipur has seen several brands of armed groups and insurgencies that have killed and displaced thousands. The state is inhabited by different ethnicities—Meiteis, who dominate the valley, make up about half the population, and forty percent are Kukis and Nagas, who mostly reside in the hills. In 1980, the union government enforced the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in the state, giving the military sweeping powers, which led to unabated human-rights violations but also demonstrated the Indian state’s intention to control the conflict. An elite state force called the special commandos was created specifically to combat insurgency. Today, no such measures can be seen in the Imphal Valley to resist Arambai Tenggol. The way the organisation—active for barely two years—has established its dominance suggests that the BJP-led union and state governments are not even trying to restrain them or keep the violence in check.

The beginning of militancy in Manipur can be traced to the formation, in 1964, of the United National Liberation Front, which demanded secession from India. But it was only between 1977 and 1980, when the People’s Liberation Army of Manipur and the Kangleipak Communist Party were formed and made the same demand, that armed conflict truly began to engulf the state. The 1980s also saw demands for a separate Naga state by armed groups such as National Socialist Council of Nagaland, and for a Kukiland by Kuki militant organisations, including the Kuki National Army.

The Indian government tried to negotiate with the armed groups to control the violence. In 1997, it signed a

ceasefire agreement with the NSCN(Isak–Muivah). About a decade later, the union and state governments and 25 armed Kuki groups signed a tripartite Suspension of Operations agreement. With the SoO agreements, the Kuki groups agreed to, among other things, stop all hostilities, submit a list of all their underground workers to the police and live in designated camps. In the Imphal Valley, insurgent groups appeared to start losing the support they formerly enjoyed. The efforts of civil society and these agreements led to a new era of hope for Manipur. “Imphal was emerging not only as a metropolitan hub in the Northeast,” Saki, a youngster, told me. “There was so much that we were dreaming for Manipur in the last decade.”

The roots of the ongoing ethnic conflict began after the Bharatiya Janata Party emerged as a major player in the state, in 2017, a year after N Biren Singh, a former minister in the Congress-led state government, joined the party. Even though the party did not have a majority, Biren Singh managed to poach two legislators from other parties and paved the way for the BJP to form a government in Manipur. He clinched a second term by seeking the support of Kuki legislators. But soon, his government began to demonise Kukis as “illegal immigrants.” In March 2023, it unilaterally withdrew from SoO agreements with three Kuki insurgent groups, accusing them of harbouring immigrants and enabling poppy cultivation. Such moves legitimised an existing sentiment of hatred towards Zo communities—who are known as Kukis, Mizos and Chins in different polities but share the same ethnicity—that Meiteis in the valley seemed to harbour. Matters came to a head when the Manipur High Court pushed the state government to consider the longstanding Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status, in March 2023.

The high court’s order led to the mayhem that ensued on 3 May. Over two hundred people have died in the civil war, and tens of thousands have been displaced. In my multiple reporting trips to the state since then, I have witnessed how the BJP government has paved the way for the ethnic cleansing of the Zo people in open daylight. Several armed groups—including the UNLF(Pambei), the PLA and the KCP—are again active, regaining legitimacy that they had lost over the years, and are siding with the Meitei cause. Meanwhile, newer outfits have emerged in the Kuki hills. These groups largely consist of young volunteers, some of whom are trained by the older cadre of the SoO groups, which do not have half the strength they once did.

Arambai Tenggol emerged and swiftly gained prominence in this landscape. Formed in 2020, it became active around September 2022. Within a month of the war, its name came up in several

first-information reports related to the violence and, to avoid facing prosecution, it faked its own dissolution. The militia now claims to have a strength of sixty thousand cadre—comparable to the strength of the central security forces that were reportedly deployed in the state—and over sixty units spread over Imphal. They are armed with weapons, many of which appear to be stolen from state armouries, and indulge in violence that would otherwise attract the strictest provisions of the law.

While, in my previous visits, Arambai Tenggol cadre would try their best to not be photographed, over January and February this year, I saw how its members, mostly young men, publicised their activities. The members were regularly extorting money, stealing SUVs and indulging in violence, as the police statement also pointed out. Those who have been victims of Arambai Tenggol’s activities are scared of even talking about it. The militia is not the only group active on the ground, but other groups, such as the UNLF(P), seem to support it. The UNLF(P) is another group to which the state gave legitimacy, by signing a peace agreement with it in November 2023. Through the UNLF(P), Arambai Tenggol now seems to have the means to reach the buffer areas in the hills, which were previously inaccessible to the young outfit.

Arambai Tenggol has managed all this without its members having any training or strong ideological drive. Members I spoke to and observed appeared to be frustrated youth with a streak of vengeance, who now have access to weapons. “This is not a group led by revolutionary ideology,” a former PLA leader told me. “They are just riding on sentiment.”

Yet, the union and state governments have enabled the militia to thrive. First, the AFSPA is in force in the hills but not in the valley—allowing Meitei groups in and around Imphal to operate with impunity. “We are told to keep a tab on SoO groups and what is happening in the hills, and we’ve been doing that,” a senior officer from the Assam Rifles told me. “If we had more powers in the valley, we would do the same there as well.”

Second, most of the other prominent groups, in the valley or in the hills, are either outlawed or have some sort of an agreement with the state, thus exposing them to some scrutiny from the law. Arambai Tenggol does not have either of these constraints. “We have no orders to act against AT,” another senior police officer told me. “We cannot apprehend them even if we want to.”

A third factor—perhaps the biggest one—driving Arambai Tenggol’s rise is that it appears to enjoy the personal patronage of state BJP leaders, including Biren Singh. There seems to be a push and pull between the chief minister and the party’s

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Arambai Tenggol members wave Salai Taret flags, which represent the seven clans that merged together to form the Meitei community, in front of the Ibudhou Pakhangba temple at the Kangla Fort in the Imphal Valley on 30 September 2023.

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ABOVE: N Biren Singh, the chief minister of Manipur, addresses the media on 1 August 2021, in Delhi. As the tug of war for power between Singh and the BJP high command continues, and organisations like Arambai Tenggol become more and more influential, the fate of Manipur hangs in the balance.

high command. Since June, there have been several rumours that the BJP has asked Biren Singh to step down. That month, nine state legislators from the party wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, claiming that the chief minister had lost the trust of the public. But the support that Biren Singh has cultivated among Meiteis has made it difficult to dethrone him. When the legislators came back to the state, they allegedly faced backlash and threats. Arambai Tenggol is an important component of this support base. The militia appears to endorse and spread a narrative that suits Biren Singh: that the union government, and not the chief minister, is to be blamed for the violence in the valley. The chief minister has himself publicly criticised central security forces, insinuating that they are not protecting the public but are mute spectators to the conflict.

According to an intelligence officer, the union home ministry again asked Biren Singh to step down earlier this year, after which Arambai Tenggol created a spectacle by administering an oath to sitting Meitei legislators at Kangla Fort on 24 January. “Kangla was orchestrated to show the

centre that he can’t be rendered inconsequential,” the officer told me. “And, if it were to come to that, he can run his own parallel government in Manipur.” As this tug of war for power continues, and organisations like Arambai Tenggol become more and more influential, the fate of Manipur hangs in the balance.

GUN-TOTING MEN dressed in military fatigues, with a red insignia of three horsemen charging into battle—reminiscent of the erstwhile Kangleipak kingdom’s cavalry that wielded poisonous darts—crowded the Kangla Fort on 24 January. In the fifteenth century, Kangla had become the capital fortress of Kangleipak, a feudal kingdom of Meiteis, who followed Sanamahism. It is now the property of the Manipur government. And yet, on 24 January, Salai Taret flags, which represent the seven clans that merged together to form the Meitei community, fluttered on vehicles outside—Arambai Tenggol, which means dart-wielding cavalry, had summoned 37 Meitei state legislators and two MPs to the fort. The lawmakers, who had sworn on the Constitution after being elected,

took an oath in the name of Sanamahi, a Meitei deity, to get the Indian government to meet six demands that the militia had raised.

Biren Singh was absent from the event, but this was a smokescreen—the final resolution that came out of the meeting reportedly had his signature. The events of 24 January best demonstrated how far the militia had come, thanks to the BJP government enabling it.

That Arambai Tenggol has connections with the BJP is clear from social media alone. In June 2022, Biren Singh posted photos on Facebook that showed him meeting “youth from different corners of state.” In one of these photos, he is seen with Korounganba Khuman and Leishemba Sanajaoba. Korounganba had posted several photos of meetings with Sanajaoba that month. In September, Arambai Tenggol members took oath and became active. While Sanajaoba is the titular king, Arambai Tenggol, according to one of its commanders, equates itself to the warriors who once served the kings of Kangleipak.

The ideological synergy is also clear: Arambai Tenggol pushes for a brand of Meitei nationalism that aligns with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's politics. It endorses the ruling BJP's projects, such as the National Register of Citizens, supposedly to save the state from illegal immigrants, including Chins from Myanmar. The militia's promotion of Sanamahism is not antagonistic towards Hinduism or the RSS, the largest political organisation associated with the religion in India today. Instead, the militia's brand of Sanamahism is in conflict with Meitei Muslims and Christians. In April 2023, when Arambai Tenggol was protesting a Meitei Christian priest's remarks against Sanamahism, Sanajaoba threatened to “skin him alive” if he did not apologise.

There are several indications suggesting the organisation considers violent means justifiable to achieve its ends. Korounganba has often used the phrase “warrior blood,” in trying to evoke the feeling of being a soldier of the Manipur kingdom. An Arambai Tenggol commander, who wished to be anonymous, described the militia's

main intention presently as protecting the territory of Manipur from “external aggression”—a statement that echoed what Biren Singh and union home minister Amit Shah have previously said—and betrayed the reality that the militia was not merely a revivalist sociocultural organisation, as it had portrayed itself to be. His underage son and nephew, who were present in the room during this conversation, pitched in to say that the war could end only if “all Kukis die.”

Even before the onset of the war, the militia's political affiliations was clear. Weeks before 3 May 2023, several BJP leaders tried to oust Biren Singh as chief minister. One of them was Khwairakpam Raghumani Singh, who, in April, resigned as the chairperson of the Manipur Renewable Energy Development Agency—the fourth BJP legislator to resign from such a post. These legislators had camped in Delhi, pressuring the union government to bring about a change in the state leadership. Along with them were Kuki legislators who had turned against Biren after the withdrawal of the state government from the SoO agreement, and his eventual targeting of the community. As criticism grew, individuals openly critical of Biren were arrested.

Groups such as Arambai Tenggol bore the brunt of challenging the criticism against Biren Singh and doled out propaganda—projecting poppy cultivation as the real issue, using an illegal eviction in a hill district to justify referring to the Zos as “illegal immigrants” and portraying Biren Singh as the true fighter against “narco-terrorism.” All this proliferated after 3 May, when critical voices within the valley were silenced further.

A police officer told me that, on 2 May, he had received complaints that individuals who identified themselves as Arambai Tenggol members had blocked a highway that led to the Saikul hills. The officer added that a team, led by an Indian Police Service officer, visited the highway and asked the cadre to leave. Similar counter-blockades, the officer added, were visible on other borders between the hills and the valley, between Kangpokpi and Imphal West districts, and

between Churachandpur and Bishnupur. When the violence was unfolding in Churachandpur district at that time, viral messages and fake news, such as those of mass rapes, spread in Imphal. In response, mobs started gathering across the valley. A professor told me that he saw the militia lead these mobs. But the state government seems to have taken no real action against Arambai Tenggol.

The Kangla Fort meeting could not have taken place without support from the establishment. Ahead of the meeting, a team of the union home ministry flew into the state to talk to Arambai Tenggol. Following this, the central forces protecting the fort disappeared from the site overnight. This could have happened only under the directions of the unified command formed to deal with the situation in Manipur, which reports to both the union and state governments. The militia then appeared in what seemed like a flag march, dressed in attire similar to those of the state and central forces.

At the meeting, the militia reportedly beat and abused three legislators, two from the BJP and one from the Congress. The Congress legislator was reportedly beaten up after he suggested “that the responsibility for all recent trouble lay with the BJP-run state government.” The two BJP MLAs, Raghumani Singh and P Brojen Singh, had vocalised their dissent against Biren Singh's leadership several times. No FIR appears to have been registered in the matter.

The six demands that the militia raised at the meeting were: to get the NRC updated with 1951 as the base year; to abrogate the SoO agreement with Kuki armed groups; to relocate Burmese refugees in the state to Mizoram; to fence the Myanmar border; to withdraw the Assam Rifles from the state, as they allege it is biased against Meiteis; and to remove “illegal migrants” from the list of Scheduled Tribes. Videos on social media showed Korounganba walking in front of a cheering crowd with Salai Taret flags after the meeting. He declared to the media that the lawmakers had agreed to stage protests if the militia's demands were not met. “The clock is

ticking,” he said. “We set a timeframe of fifteen days for all the points to be addressed.” He added that, “if the centre does not listen, we will take the movement to the people to protect Manipur.”

The events of Kangla Fort made national headlines, but neither the state nor the union government condemned the event. “If summoning elected constitutional functionaries and forcing them to abandon their sworn oath of office to uphold the Indian constitution, while coercing them to take an ethno-political pledge, isn’t an affront to India’s national security and political integrity,” John Simte and Angshuman Choudhury wrote in *The Wire*, “then what is?”

Instead, within two weeks, the union government declared it would build a border fence, meeting one of the demands. This move will end the free-movement regime, devised by the governments of India and Myanmar, in 2018, under which people living within sixteen kilometres of the border could cross over without travel documents. Again, it would impact the Zo community, members of which live on both sides of the border. The chief ministers of both Mizoram and Nagaland have condemned the move.

The Caravan sent questions to the union home ministry, the Indian Army, the Manipur Police, the BJP, Biren Singh, Sanajaoba and Korounganba Khuman, the Arambai Tenggol chief. We did not receive a response.

A senior army officer described the Kangla Fort event as “complete anarchy,” telling me that it was a “show of political power by one community alone.” The idea of a single force controlling the state scared him, but that appeared to be the exact intention of the militia—Arambai Tenggol wanted to make a spectacle at Kangla Fort and catch eyeballs. The militia’s detractors told me that the event was effectively an announcement that the BJP endorsed the militia, which would cushion the criticism it received from the Meiteis in the valley, and that Arambai Tenggol was now the supreme authority in the state.

The public had certainly elevated the militia to the status of heroes. “The

mood was electric, because this was happening for the first time,” a woman in her late thirties said of the events outside the Kangla Fort on 24 January. She recalled the public screaming “Arambai Tenggol *Na Yaifare*”—long live the militia—when its cadre passed by. “We were all so proud of our men and that they were able to get even the CM to do what the people wanted,” she told me. In a remark characteristic of the paranoia that marks the valley, another supporter of the militia told me, “If not for the Arambai Tenggol, by now the Kukis would’ve reached Imphal.” They no longer believe that this war is about poppy. “We were fooled by the statements of the CM,” they said. “This is actually about our land being snatched by people from Myanmar.”

ARAMBAI TENGGOL LEADERS target the youth with their social-media activity—they regularly make reels, proudly brandishing their weapons, with dramatic music playing in the background. Their content includes lewd insults and provocations targeted at the Kukis. Their activities have captured the imagination of residents of the valley, who view the militia as gutsy. The craze is such that videos of children dressed in the militia’s attire, with messages such as “Future AT,” are circulating on social media.

Meitei leaders have repeatedly said that the Kukis are heavily armed and have access to “sophisticated weapons”—it was majorly due to this thought that the militia has appealed more to the youth than to civil-society organisations. In many instances of violence, and even confrontation with the armed forces, far more than any other group, the militia has succeeded in positioning itself as the ultimate defenders of the valley, particularly from Kukis. All of this has made many young men pick up arms.

Consider the story of 33-year-old Nongthombam Michaeldev, the youngest of six brothers in a middle-class household in the Imphal Valley. He had appeared for a few competitive exams in recent years and was preparing for more, while helping his brothers set up small businesses to sustain the family. Bijen Singh, his older brother, told me

that the civil war changed his brother’s aspirations.

Around the time that Arambai Tenggol faked its dissolution in the end of May 2023, Bijen said, his brother came across the militia and was taken by it. For three months, the militia maintained a low profile but was recruiting people and setting up bases across the valley. Then it began to become more and more public about its activities. On 30 September, thousands of Arambai Tenggol supporters and members rallied from the Thau ground to the Kangla Fort to pay tribute to those who had died in the war. When they reached Kangla, Michaeldev and others who participated in the rally pledged an oath of allegiance to the militia and

“Kangla was orchestrated to show the centre that [Biren Singh] can’t be rendered inconsequential,” an intelligence officer said. “And, if it were to come to that, he can run his own parallel government in Manipur.”

officially joined it. “Michael told me he had to join the fight in protecting our motherland,” Bijen said, adding that his brother also seemed keen to understand the tenets of Sanamahism.

Michaeldev would often disappear for days. He left his home for the last time in January. His mother searched for him frantically, even visiting the office of Arambai Tenggol’s Unit 19, which is located close to their house, but could not find him. Later, the family found that, on 30 January, Michaeldev and another recruit, Maisnam Khaba, had died in a gunfight that had taken place in a “buffer zone,” which security forces are supposed to guard, close to the border with the Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi district.



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Khaba's backstory was similar to that of Michaeldev, only he came from a poorer background. A graduate in arts who was interested in fitness and body-building, Khaba was awaiting his college results when the war broke out in May. He had plans to prepare for competitive exams but did not find much time, as he started volunteering at a relief camp close by. This is where, his father told me, he first came in contact with others who were joining Arambai Tenggol. Eventually, in the month of August, he joined Unit 14 of the AT. "Khaba was talking to me about building up the house just weeks before he got killed," his father told me. "Look at our house, we barely have basics to survive."

A few days after they were killed, on 2 February, hundreds from the valley made their way to Mahadeva Hill to attend the burial of the two men. The location appeared to be carefully chosen, ac-

ording to a police official, as it had been attacked by the Kukis in January. I had to disembark from the car I was in two kilometres away from the site, as a barrage of vehicles that were heading there had caused a traffic jam. Two SUVs with a sticker of the Arambai Tenggol's Unit 37 on their windshields and no number plates, drove past me, with one of its passengers, a man in full camouflage, spraying water with leaves on me from a golden-coloured vessel. Many people heading to the funeral were wearing black uniforms or camouflage with Arambai Tenggol nametags—and, at times, their unit numbers—and held Salai Taret flags. Several were armed with weapons, ranging from single-barrelled and double-barrelled guns to automatic rifles.

We climbed up a small hillock and descended down on the other side, where pits were dug up for the burial, flanked by armed men. Next to them

ABOVE: The scene outside the Kangla Fort in Imphal on 23 January 2024. The central forces protecting the fort disappeared from the site overnight before the Arambai Tenggol administered an oath to legislators the next day.

BELOW: Hundreds from the valley made their way to Mahadeva Hill to attend the burial of two members of the Arambai Tenggol, on 2 February, who had died in a gun fight in a buffer zone.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Meira Paibis have set up checkpoints at the entrance of the Meitei foothill villages, to protect the men in these militias.

was a small group, with Korounganba at its centre. After some rituals, a gun salute was carried out, following which the two men were lowered into the pits. Korounganba walked out, surrounded by the militia's cadre, who were clearing the path for him and looking around with alacrity, as if expecting an attack.

Within the valley, there was no critical voice that could publicly question why the Arambai ventured into a buffer zone, leading to the killing of two young people. The only narrative that was circulating was of "Kuki terrorists" and their continuing deeds of violence against the Meiteis. When I asked Senjam Bidyapati, the vice-president of the Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board, about the violence perpetrated by Arambai Tenggol, he said, "The boys were doing whatever needs to be done to protect the motherland—Kangleipak." He denied that they were attacking Kuki villages and insisted that they are only "on the defensive."

"Everybody is Arambai Tenggol," the wife of one of the commanders told me. "Every family will have one member now. Young kids want to join them too." The woman's words appeared to resonate across the valley. Khaba's father told me he fears that his other son might also turn to picking up arms now. "I want to join Arambai Tenggol myself now," Bijen told me, adding that he wanted revenge for his brother's killing. "The state and central forces are useless in protecting Meiteis."

A PROMINENT POLITICIAN IN MANIPUR was one of the people who told me that Arambai Tenggol had managed to extort them as well. "Your report means nothing here, ma'am," the politician told me, while refusing a request for interview. "I don't want to talk to you and lose my life. Forget freedom

of speech, there is no democracy here anymore." Throughout our exchange, they repeated the same refrain: "When a gun is placed in front of you, the only thing you can do, if your life is dear to you, is shut up." Most of my attempts to talk to leaders of opposition parties in Imphal ended the same way. Some told me that, though they were opposed to Arambai Tenggol, they had to keep quiet in these circumstances. One of them said their silence was in the interest of the "morale of the public."

The militia has spread terror in the valley, as have other groups. All groups seem to feed into each other's activities, leading to a total collapse of law and order, with Arambai Tenggol emerging as the most popular player, and the UNLF(P) a close second. There are very few unarmed local groups, such as the Langsai Thouna in Kakching district, where the youth has managed to fight off the clutches of the militias.

The support for Arambai Tenggol and its fear is such that even Meiteis who would like to register their protest against them are silent. In December 2023, reports surfaced that Akhu Chingangbam, a popular musician, had been abducted by unnamed men. A source who knew about the matter told me that Arambai Tenggol had picked Chingangbam up at gunpoint for posting messages critical of the BJP on social media and beat him, after which they forced him to post on Facebook that he was okay. Chingangbam fled with his family after the attack. He refused to comment on the matter.

Bablu Loitongbam, an internationally renowned human-rights activist based in Imphal, was also critical of Arambai Tenggol and Meitei Leepun, another radical organisation. In an interview with *NewsClick*, in May last year, he said that the organisations had "injected" militancy into



GREESHMA KUTHAR FOR THE CARAVAN



the minds of people and were destroying churches in the valley. “They have articulation like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,” Loitongbam said. In October, his house was vandalised.

Similarly, Brinda Thounaojam, a former police officer, had also made critical remarks about Arambai Tenggol, following which, in October, her house was vandalised. “She had then apologised for her remarks, saying she had been misled by a video,” NDTV reported. Later, in December, after she criticised Biren Singh, the Meira Paibis ransacked her house. One of Thounaojam’s close associates told me that, earlier, the former cop was not bothered with the backlash that came her way, as she knew it was coming from the establishment. “It was only when most Meira Paibi associations went against her that she had a loss of heart,” they said.

Thounaojam and Loitongbam have since been quiet. Like Chingangbam, they did not respond to my request for a comment.

In very few cases has Arambai Tenggol paid for its actions. In February this year, the Federation of Civil Society Organisations issued a press statement that the militia had physically assaulted its vice-president. The statement strongly condemned the militia. But by the end of the day, a handwritten note circulated online that an agreement had been reached between the parties.

Arambai Tenggol has repeatedly been accused of extortion. In the earlier phases of insurgency in the state, militias used to regularly extort individuals, and even government organisations, by sending them notices. A senior bureaucrat told me that, under the previous Congress government, this practice was “slowly weeded out as banned

groups also faced pushback along with delegitimisation in the valley.” This form of extortion has allegedly started again, with similar demands being made to government officials.

A senior government official told me that there is an “understanding” between the chief minister and legislators to “raise funds to support AT units in their constituencies.” The officer added, “Many politicians are supporting AT because they also want to use that as leverage to protect their own interests, as there is severe infighting within parties.” Another intelligence officer told me that state legislators have been directed to “look after” the Arambai Tenggol members in their constituencies.

Other groups, including the UN-LF(P), have also been accused of extortions and other crimes in the valley. According to an internal message sent



by an army officer, “Since the day UNLF(P) has joined peace talks, it is projecting its image as guardian of Meitei community and stopping other [groups] to extort money from their strong hold areas.” This includes the KCP—the handful of extortion cases that have been registered in Imphal have mostly been attributed to this group. Another senior army officer told me that the UNLF(P) has also surveyed periphery areas and established their holdouts in strategic locations across the buffer zones. But the UNLF(P) also enjoys popular support—in March, protests erupted in the valley after three of its cadre were arrested.

Several of these groups work in confluence with each other. The Meira Paibis have set up checkpoints at the entrance of the Meitei foothill villages, to protect the men in these militias. A member of the group told me that this

was so that they could tip off armed groups within the villages whenever any security forces approached. Even when forces have apprehended militants, the Meira Paibis have been successful in freeing them on multiple occasions. “We will save fifty percent of the men,” one of the women at these checkpoints told me, speaking about fears that those who have taken up arms now might face a similar fate as they did in earlier phases of insurgency. “Thirty percent will kill each other. Twenty percent will be killed in encounters by the state.” She added, “This has happened, and it will happen.” This breakdown was the consensus among all the Meira Paibis I met at the checkpoint.

On 15 July, according to a press release by the United Naga Council—the apex organisation for Naga tribes in Manipur—Arambai Tenggol shot dead

Lucy Maring, a woman in her fifties, after Meira Paibis handed her over to the group. The militia immediately denied any involvement, claiming that it was no longer an active organisation and regurgitated its claim of being a cultural organisation. The Meira Paibis would certainly not let any blame come to the militia. “We the mothers, the Meira Paibis are there to protect the men who join the Arambai Tenggol,” the Arambai Tenggol commander’s wife told me.

Other groups also appear to want to protect the militia. When five Meitei Muslims were shot dead in Lilong on 1 January, the PLA claimed responsibility and said it had to resort to violence when locals did not cooperate in letting it take away a drug-trafficker. But an army officer confirmed Arambai Tenggol’s involvement in the killings. “By now, there is an understanding in place that whenever the Arambai Tenggol

would face an issue like this, banned outfits would take the fall for it," they told me. No arrests seem to have been made in this case.

Inversely, Arambai Tenggol's presence appears to act as a shield for underground insurgents from outlawed groups. According to a government official, whose husband is an Arambai Tenggol leader and whose brother is a UNLF cadre, the men spread across the border are a mix of several militant groups. But, she added, when asked to identify themselves, irrespective of which group they are from, the men say Arambai Tenggol as it is not a banned organisation. "We need to use AT as cover because of this," she told me. "We are still worried that they would be eventually targeted, like it happened in the past."

Due to the aggressive support that the militias enjoy, many crimes are going unreported, according to residents I spoke to. Biju Samom, an Imphal-based editor, told me that the civilians who face such extortion threats would rather pay up than endanger their own lives by speaking to the media. "The mushrooming of various groups has made it even more difficult, as businesses

"We the mothers, the Meira Paibis are there to protect the men who join the Arambai Tenggol," the Arambai Tenggol commander's wife told me.

are subject to extortion by multiple groups at the same time," Samom told me. The only times when extortion attempts are highlighted is when collectives or groups come together, such as when petrol pump dealers shut down their outlets from 16 to 18 February, citing extortions and abductions by armed groups. Even in such instances, FIRs appear to be seldom registered.

There have also been instances of Naga women being slut-shamed, molested and kidnapped for ransom, during which they have been subject to violence—the victims in some of these cases have had to take a settlement amount. Pantibonlieu Dongmei, a human-rights activist from Manipur, said settlements would only lead to more such incidents happening. "These are bad precedents," she said, "especially in the middle of a crisis where so many men are roaming around with weapons."

Any media reporting on such cases is seen as an affront to Meiteis. "We have no liberty to report most of what is happening here," Samom said. "We stand targeted with threats when we do."

WHILE THE VALLEY IS ENTRENCHED in the illusion that Arambai Tenggol is protecting them, the hill districts do not seem to have any group or state support that they can count on. "Sometimes we don't even know what we are doing anymore," Kimneijou, a social worker from Haipi, told me. "We are up against the state, with absolutely no backing. I can't even say we are on the right track. There is a complete breakdown of law and order. And, while we try to stay alive, we take it one day at a time."

The expansion of Arambai Tenggol threatens the Kuki community the most, in both the valley and in the hills. Many partially burnt or vandalised properties of Kukis in Imphal now bear an Arambai Tenggol unit number on their gate. Some of these properties have been turned into a hide-out for its members, residents living in adjoining areas told me. They added that the militia has taken over almost all the cars left behind by the Kukis.

The militia now seems to have access to buffer areas in the Kuki hills. In early June, Meitei mobs burnt down one side of the Satang ridge at Khamenlok, a Kuki village in Imphal East district. In those days, I had travelled past the other side of the ridge, through the village of Satang Kuki, at least thrice. Its residents feared they would be targeted next, even though the ridge separated them from the mob that was wreaking havoc at Khamenlok. To get to Satang Kuki itself takes more than four hours from Kangpokpi town, not because of the distance but because of the abysmal roads. Back then, I thought it was impossible for the village to be attacked as the terrain was difficult and it would also involve circumventing a buffer zone many kilometres away, which had a heavy deployment of central forces. The only way to get to Satang Kuki was by foot.

All Meitei insurgent groups, residents told me, had a formidable presence across the hill regions in earlier phases of insurgency, when they were being hunted down by the armed forces and, eventually, by the police commandos. The hills gave them refuge and protected them from being killed or arrested. "We are all worried of course, but nothing had happened up until now," Letkhohao Guite, the chief of Satang Kuki, said. "Only in December, when UNLF(P) started setting up their base camp, did I realise that trouble is going to knock at our doorsteps soon." Men from Satang Kuki, who had been guarding the village from the ridge, stood and watched with binoculars as the camp was set up at Shantipur, a couple of kilometres away. "All we could do is stay steadfast and more alert than usual," Mamang, an arts graduate who, along with his brother, has been on the front-line since May, told me.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Many partially burnt or vandalised properties of Kukis in Imphal now bear a Arambai Tenggol unit number on their gate.

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OPPOSITE PAGE:
A sign along the highway from Imphal to Moreh, in the Kuki-dominated Tengnoupal district.

Finally, on 27 January, there was gunfire at the ridge. One of the volunteers was shot dead. Mamang told me that the attackers had managed to walk across several ridges to sneak up on the volunteers. The remaining volunteers chased the attackers away, he added. When I reached Satang Kuki, in the second week of February, residents told me that the UNLF(P) base is built on land that is under the Satang Kuki hill, which would come under the ambit of AFSPA, but the central or state forces had still not arrived.

Mamang told me that the attackers knew the terrain well and were trained, which convinced Kukis that they were from the Manipur People's Army, the UNLF(P)'s armed wing. "We didn't see any Arambai," he said. But, according to both army and police officers, the attackers were members of Arambai Tenggol—the UNLF(P) has now started facilitating the entry of the young militia into previously inaccessible areas. The officers added that the men from the groups burnt down properties, and mowed down a church with a bulldozer in Khamenlok. A video of the attackers at the church from an Arambai Tenggol member's Facebook account subsequently went viral as well, but the account was soon deleted.

A similar plan had led to the death of Michealdev. He was among the Arambai Tenggol cadre who, along with the MPA, had reached Koutruk in Imphal West, the buffer zone close to Kangpokpi, at the end of January. According to two officials in the army and police, before the officers in charge could stop them from violating the buffer zone, armed Kuki men reached and a gunfight ensued. Michaeldev and Khaba were killed, and the rest of their contingent fled. The two officials told me that Meitei residents of Koutruk had pleaded with Arambai Tenggol and the MPA to not venture into the buffer zone. Residents themselves told me that they have been trying to stop such altercations even at the cost of being threatened, just so that they do not have to flee their villages and end up in relief camps. In the next two weeks, there were many instances like this across the buffer zones.

While Meitei groups seem to be coordinated in their operations, the situation in the hills is the opposite. The older leaders of the SoO groups

The hill districts do not seem to have any group or state support that they can count on. "We are up against the state, with absolutely no backing," Kimnejou, a social worker from Haipi, said.

are training the younger men in guerrilla warfare and other strategies that are necessary to navigate the difficult terrain that they are up against. But, contrary to popular perception that has been relayed by the media and politicians in Imphal, officers from the central and the state forces present in the hills told me that SoO groups have a small role to play in the mushrooming of armed Kuki men from villages in the periphery areas. For young men, joining a SoO group is like a death knell—the agreement with the government results in a situation that they will forever be labelled as militants

Unlike the faith that Arambai Tenggol enjoys in the valley, Kukis do not trust the SoO groups in the same way they did in earlier phases of insurgency. Many of the groups that were powerful for over a decade, especially after the BJP and Biren Singh extended support to them, are now dodging widespread criticism, often being accused of not being good leaders. Villages are increasingly discussing corruption among the SoO leaders, along with neglect of the hill districts, despite the groups' immense influence over elections. A civilian was shot dead in early June and two more were beaten to death in the second week of March, over an altercation with members of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (Unified), a SoO group, in Kangpokpi. This resulted in a public standoff between the militant outfit and village volunteers, who, according to witnesses, said they would shoot the militants dead if they do not back off—such an incident was unprecedented in the hills.

The silence of most of the legislators, under directions from the BJP, is also not helping matters in the hills. Most legislators have barely been seen in their constituencies. The state and union governments have refused to even acknowledge that the community has been a victim of a long-drawn persecution campaign.

In fact, before the war, the residents of the hill districts were hoping that the insurgency would end once and for all. In my conversations with residents across Manipur, I found that extortions, killings and the absolute lack of democratic space was more of a problem in the hill districts than in the valley, where the challenges were much different for civilians. Many young people in the hills thought that SoO leaders should not represent the community nationally, considering they were in talks with the home ministry but not elected representatives. In the last year, Imphal has constantly dehumanised Kukis, pushing more and more of their youth in the hills to pick up arms. The aftermath of the war has undone the natural shift of the community away from insurgency.

Terming what is happening on the ground as "radicalisation," a senior army officer told me that,



by the end of the war, these armed guerrillas in the Kuki hills would emerge more powerful than the existing SoO groups themselves. This could result, they said, in “a new form of insurgency, if India continues to be biased against the community.” While the situation in the Kuki hills would still be under scrutiny, if the situation in the Imphal Valley continues as it is, the radicalisation by Arambai Tenggol and similar militias would go unchecked.

Meanwhile, as Imphal prepares for the general election, Arambai Tenggol has forbidden any campaigning in the valley. The Meira Paibis are backing this order, and night patrols are being organised to keep this in check. The internal politics of the BJP also continue. Manipur has two Lok Sabha seats, Inner Manipur and Outer Manipur. Ranjan Singh, the MP from Inner Manipur, had criticised the BJP for failing to maintain law and order at the beginning of the war. The *Imphal Times* reported, in March, that, according to its sources, the BJP high command was creating

pressure on Biren Singh to contest one of the two seats in Manipur, which would lead to his resignation as chief minister. But the party ended up fielding another candidate from Inner Manipur. For the Outer Manipur seat, the party has decided to not field a candidate but back the Naga People’s Front, which it opposes in Nagaland.

There appears to be no resolution in sight for Manipur. Even on 12 and 13 April, an army officer told me, there was a fresh incident of firing between the Arambai Tenggol and Kuki volunteers in Phailengmol, located at the border of Imphal East District’s Moirangpurel area and Kangpokpi District. Two Kukis died on the spot after their bunkers were bombed. The officer shared videos that were circulating in Manipur, of their chopped up and desecrated bodies. On the second day, Robin posted on Facebook, “Heartiest Congratulations” to “Moirangpurel Team.”

“The government is sleeping,” Khaba’s father had told me. “I am worried that the real war is yet to come. Maybe it’ll get worse.” ■



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Church and State

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The UP Police and Sangh's persecution of Christians



/ RELIGION

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY TUSHA MITTAL

ON A FEBRUARY MORNING LAST YEAR, Sujit Yadav, a Christian pastor, drove across the wheat and potato fields of Uttar Pradesh's Jaunpur district to the home of a congregant, in the village of Bhalwahi. Around six worshippers had gathered on the first floor, and more were to arrive soon, for a weekly prayer meeting. Sujit had barely begun to sing the first hymn when a group of around ten men wearing saffron scarves barged inside. "Stop this now, stop all this," they yelled. "You are doing religious conversion. Come, we'll deal with you."

The men were members of the Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the right-wing outfit Vishva Hindu Parishad. One of them caught Sujit by his collar.

"They dragged me down the stairs to the ground floor and beat me brutally," Sujit told me. "They hit me with the kara between my eyes and my ears. The whole area turned black." The men said that they would kill him and make his body disappear. Then they called the police.

When the police arrived on the scene twenty minutes later, they told the Bajrang Dal cadre to bring Sujit to the police station. Sujit was made to sit on a motorcycle, sandwiched between two men. "They kept hitting me," he said. "The one behind me was hitting me with his hand, and the one in front of me was hitting me with his head." On the way, he added, they stopped in a field and beat him some more. As they

passed the town's market, the Bajrang Dal men shouted to onlookers, "Look! We've caught someone who converts Hindus."

At the police station, the men accused Sujit of getting foreign funding and luring people to convert to Christianity by offering them money. They searched a bag they had seized from him. It had a Bible, a blank notebook in which he meant to write prayers and four yellow rings. "See, he has a Bible," the men said, implying that he was using this to convert people. "See, he has rings of gold." Sujit told me he had bought these for his sisters to wear to a wedding—they were worth ₹25 each. He recalled that the police summoned a goldsmith, who



declared they were made of cheap local brass.

The Bajrang Dal men soon filed a formal complaint, accusing Sujit of carrying out illegal conversions and “spreading superstition.” They added that they found “cut hair, brass rings and Christian literature.” On the basis of this, the police registered a first-information report under the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Act. The FIR lists three Bibles, a notebook and the rings as items recovered from the spot. Sujit told me they were sealed and stored as evidence, to be presented in court. He denied possessing any “cut hair.”

The Hindu groups and the police seize whatever they find on the site—Bibles, hymnals, pictures of Jesus, musical instruments and posters stating the Ten Commandments—as “evidence” of wrongful conversion.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A cross painted on the pulpit, in a half-constructed prayer hall in the home of Bharat Masih, lies covered with a black plastic sheet. The police has threatened and forced the Masih family to shut down their Christian worship services. After Bharat’s son was briefly arrested by the police, they now hide markers of their Christian faith for fear of persecution.

At the police station, Sujit said, no one was willing to listen to his version of events. “Top leaders of the Bajrang Dal were present there, like the Bajrang Dal district coordinator, so the police themselves couldn’t say anything,” he added. Sujit only managed to deny that he was forcibly converting people. “I only pray for people,” he recalled telling the police.

By 10 pm, Sujit was sent to jail. “I couldn’t sleep,” he told me. “I was in so much pain.”

SUJIT IS one of hundreds of Christians who have been arrested in Uttar Pradesh on accusations of unlawful conversion, simply for practising their faith. Across the state, priests and worshippers are being jailed, beaten, threatened and intimidated, by both Hindutva groups and the police. They are even being forced to shut down their worship services. Over a months-long investigation, across four districts, and interviews with over seventy people, I found the Sangh Parivar—whose political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party, controls the union and state governments—waging a systematic campaign to erase all markers of Christianity in the state.

According to the United Christian Forum, a group that tracks atrocities against Christians, 1,314 Christians were arrested in India in 2022 and 2023. This persecution is rooted in the Hindu Right’s portrayal of Christians as outsiders who practice a “foreign” faith and are luring unsuspecting Hindus by offering them material benefits. Even though Christians comprise only 2.3 percent of the population, the Hindu Right routinely raises the bogey of demographic change, suggesting that the Hindu population is in danger of rapidly declining due to conversions. Since 2017, eight states have either updated older laws or enacted a new set of anti-conversion laws. An outcome of persistent lobbying by the Hindu Right, these laws give state and judicial sanction to this false, but enduring, narrative. Anti-conversion laws are being challenged in the Supreme Court.

Under the anti-conversion law passed by the Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh, religious conversion by “force,

fraud, undue influence, coercion, allurements” is a criminal offence. However, the definition of what constitutes influence or allurements is broad, and Hindutva groups often engage in fabrication. It is now easier to demonise any collective gathering of Christians as an attempt to fraudulently convert Hindus. Critics have pointed out that the law is framed in a manner that presumes guilt and places the burden of proof on the accused.

Uttar Pradesh leads all states in both attacks on, and arrests of, Christians. According to the UCF, 311 Christians were arrested under the state’s anti-conversion law in 2023. The year before, that figure was 173. “The anti-conversion law has really benefitted us,” Dinesh Chandra Pandey, a senior VHP leader in Ghazipur, told me. “Before this law, when we could catch them, it would take a lot of effort for us to prove things. But, after this law, now they have to prove that they are not doing wrong.”

A pattern is visible across the state. Hindutva groups raid prayer services, accusing the pastors and worshippers of converting people either by force or by offering them incentives such as cash, jobs, education, healthcare, houses, motorcycles, jewellery and even “girls for marriage.” The vigilantes sometimes break property and assault the worshippers, and then themselves call the police, who promptly arrive on the scene and pick up the Christians. The groups and the police seize whatever they find on the site—Bibles, hymnals, pictures of Jesus, musical instruments and posters stating the Ten Commandments—as “evidence” of wrongful conversion. Members of the Hindutva groups then file a formal complaint, and the police lodges FIRs and makes arrests, often without any apparent independent investigation.

A deeper look into such FIRs revealed glaring illegalities in the police process and showed how the Hindu Right is systematically exploiting the law. According to the UP anti-conversion law, only an “aggrieved person”—someone who alleges that they were forcefully threatened or given inducements to convert—or their blood relative can file a police complaint. I exam-

ined 134 FIRs and found that, in 64, the complainants were third parties—not aggrieved persons or their blood relatives—including nine in which police officials themselves filed the initial complaint. In effect, nearly half the FIRs flout the very law they invoke.

For instance, the complainant in the FIR against Sujit is a man named Satya Shukla, the Jaunpur district coordinator of the Bajrang Dal. I met him at a tea shop in the town of Badlapur, along with members of various other Hindu-tva groups. Shukla claimed that they had “caught” between two hundred to three hundred cases of “conversion” in Jaunpur over the past eighteen months. “There must not be a police station in the district where there aren’t a few complaints and FIRs registered in our name,” Shukla said. “We take the administration’s help and get legal proceedings done.” When I asked if anyone had ever tried to personally convert them, all of them said no. “We are famous in this area, so they won’t try it with us,” Shukla said. Daya Shankar Tiwari, the VHP’s deputy district head for Ghazipur, similarly bragged that he had himself filed 21 complaints in the district, which he claimed was the highest by a single person. He also denied that anyone had tried to convert him. This makes all their complaints legally inadmissible, yet the police continues to register FIRs and make arrests based on them.

Emailed questions to the UP police about such FIRs, and other allegations, went unanswered. Pawan Updhayay, the station house officer of the Mohammadabad police station in Ghazipur, said he had not registered any such FIR himself. But he added, “Once the FIR is registered, it can be that during the investigation you find people who will allege illegal or fraudulent conversion.” When pressed that registering the FIR is itself legally void, he added, “I can’t speak on this.”

But the number of legally void FIRs only tells half the story. The Hindu Right appears to be the key driving force behind many of the other complaints too—even those FIRs that are legal on the surface are suspect, appear to be fabricated and link back to the Sangh Parivar.

I tracked down the complainants in 20 cases across the state where the FIR mentions their name but not their affiliation or identity. In 15 such cases, the complainant turned out to be a member of the Sangh Parivar. One of them was an FIR filed in Bijnor, in which the complainant, Rajan Chandra, accused Christians of offering him incentives to convert and threatening him if he did not. The FIR does not state his identity, but he turned out to be a Bajrang Dal office-bearer in Dhampur district. Chandra spoke of how he had raided Christian worship services and, in one case, recovered over fifty Bibles. When I asked if anyone had tried to convert him, he laughed. “How can they do it with us?” he said, contradicting his own police complaint. “They hear our names and run when they know we are from the Bajrang Dal.”

Members of the Sangh Parivar I spoke to emphasised the role of the police in assisting them and acting swiftly on the “information” they provided. The effect of this has been expansive and chilling—the very practice of Christianity has been criminalised in Uttar Pradesh. Many Christians told me that they were afraid of being arrested for simply owning a Bible. Several pastors said they do not carry their Bibles with them on the road any longer. Worship primarily takes place in home-run prayer halls, as there are no established big churches in the area—many of these halls have been forced to shut down. Four pastors told me that the police had asked them to sign a written undertaking that they would stop conducting services.

Almost all the pastors I met were worried that physically gathering a congregation could attract the ire of the police or the Sangh Parivar. “There is fear everywhere,” Sujit said. “All the churches are shut. Pastors are not going to preach out of fear.” Most are now only conducting prayers online or over the phone.

Many of those conducting or attending Christian worship services continue to be Hindus formally, have Hindu names and have not officially changed their religion. Several Dalit men and women, especially, have turned to Christianity as a way to counter caste

oppression. Others have been attracted to Christian worship services in the belief that they will be relieved of their troubles, or healed from their diseases, and are attending prayer services of their own free will.

Several people recounted lines of questioning from the police that betrayed a communal and casteist mindset, and showed how the state is policing thought and belief. Poonam Yadav, a worship leader in Azamgarh’s Jahanganj, spent over a month in jail after the police raided her service and accused her of performing illegal conversions. When she was locked up in September 2023, Poonam was three months pregnant, and also had an eighteen-month-old child. She recounted a policeman asking her during the questioning prior to her arrest, “Why do you worship Jesus? What benefit do you get? Go to Bageshwar Dham”—a Hindu pilgrimage site in Madhya Pradesh. “You’re a Yadav but you’re behaving like a Harijan lower caste.” Since her release on bail, she and her brother, a pastor, have stopped conducting worship services. “If you do this again, we’ll arrest you,” Poonam recalled a police official saying. “And this time we’ll never leave you.”

My interviews made clear that the police and the Hindu Right’s grouse is not merely “illegal” conversion but the very presence of Christianity in India. “Who was Jesus?” Daya Shankar Tiwari said. “Everyone knows. He was the illegitimate child of an unmarried woman. That’s why he was hung on a cross. He died. And today people worship him.” He further lamented that despite having “four hundred gods and goddesses in the Sanatana Dharma,” people were drawn toward Jesus.

What is happening in Uttar Pradesh is a window into what results when laws are made to further a Hindu majoritarian state, when these laws are enforced by a police force clearly biased toward one community and when that community has the political patronage to get the police to do its bidding. It is a microcosm of what a Hindu state would look like and bears the signs of the Hindu-first republic already in effect. Here, if you do not follow the state-backed religion, even praying together is dangerous.



ABOVE: Sujit Yadav, a pastor, in his home in Jaunpur, where he had begun to build a prayer hall. The construction was halted after the police forced his father to sign a written undertaking that he will not run a home-church. Last year, Sujit said, the Bajrang Dal accused him of performing illegal conversions and brutally beat him. The police arrived but arrested Sujit instead. He has now stopped preaching. “There is fear everywhere,” he said.

“Before this law, when we could catch them, it would take a lot of effort for us to prove things. But, after this law, now they have to prove that they are not doing wrong.”

ARRESTS IN ANTI-CONVERSION CASES in Uttar Pradesh are not merely the result of an organic legal process but, rather, the outcome of extensive lobbying by the Hindu Right. Members and leaders of the Sangh Parivar I spoke to detailed their modus operandi and spoke of how they put pressure on the police when needed, how they exert their political influence to get Christians arrested and how much the anti-conversion law has helped them in this quest. These conversations showed that, for the Sangh, the idea of Christian worship was itself anathema.

Several Sangh members spoke of how they first secretly send a couple of their workers to join a worship service and record the proceedings, before informing the police and carrying out a raid. “The government is ours,” Dinesh Chandra Pandey, the senior VHP leader in Ghazipur, told me. “We don’t do everything ourselves. We go the spot, yes, but, instead of taking the law in our own hands, we immediately inform the police. We get things done through them.”

Pandey said that, even though the police mostly assist the Hindu groups, officers are sometimes reluctant to register a case. In such cases, he said,

the groups “put pressure” on the police. Daya Shankar and Kanchan Tiwari, the Ghazipur district head of the Durga Vahini—the VHP’s women’s wing—detailed two such examples from raids they had led. In one case, Kanchan recalled, the station house officer of Badesar was not registering the FIR, because he said there was no evidence of illegal conversion. She told him, “We have found Bibles in such a large quantity and you are saying no proof was found.” She then elaborated on how they got the police to yield to their demand once the VHP’s organisational strength was activated. “We left a voice message in the VHP group that the SHO is not listening, all of you do something quickly, put pressure,” she said. “We put the SHO’s number in the group,” she told me. “Many people called and abused him, and only then did he register the FIR.” The Badesar police station did not respond to emailed questions seeking comment.

Several pastors described how the Hindu groups refuse to leave the police station and stay put until an FIR is lodged and the Christians are locked up. Abraham, a Ghazipur pastor who was arrested in November 2021, told me that the vigilantes remained in the police station till almost 11 pm. “Send them to jail in front of us,” he recalled them saying. “Whatever FIR needs to be done—do it in front of us.” Abraham said that the police was considering filing a smaller case, in which he could have got bail immediately, but got a phone call. He recalled hearing, “Ministerji has called. We will have to jail him.” The matter had become a big issue, with local news outlets running stories that a “conversion” case had been busted.

Pandey described other modes of influencing the police. For instance, he said that Sangh cadre would surround the entire police station—often fifty to a hundred people. “We put pressure on the administration, and we even have contacts with the Intelligence Bureau and vigilance officials,” he said. “They all come and get involved.” He claimed that Christian groups sometimes try to exert their own influence to get people released, through their contacts in “convent schools,” but they are unable to succeed, “because we have so much heft.”



ABOVE: Members of various Hindu Right groups at a tea shop in the Badlapur town of Jaunpur, including Satya Shukla, district coordinator of the Bajrang Dal, and Pramod Sharma, the president of the Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Gaurav Mahasabha (Right to Left). They claimed that they had caught between 200 to 300 cases of religious conversion in the district. “We won’t let any churches be made, not even with permission,” Sharma said.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Mrityunjay Baranwal, the Jahanaganj deputy coordinator of the Bajrang Dal, at a sweet shop his father runs. He said that the VHP honoured him with two bright saffron scarves for filing complaints against Christians and getting them arrested. He maintains a file with newspaper cuttings about supposed “conversion” cases he had busted.

At times, he said, Sangh members do not even have to come forward as complainants for the police to register a case. “We give the information. Those police officers who are nice, with a Hindu mindset, they file the complaint themselves and say, ‘We got the complaint from an informer.’” Gaurav Raghuvanshi, the Bajrang Dal’s deputy coordinator of the Goraksh province, a geographic unit created within the Sangh’s internal mapping, which includes Azamgarh district, also praised the police superintendent, Anurag Arya, for being active and prompt in such cases.

Sangh Parivar members in Azamgarh, Jaunpur and Ghazipur all echoed that Adityanath’s presence at the head of the state government had made the police effective on this issue. Raghuvanshi said that Adityanath ranks districts on how well they perform on the administration’s priorities. “Whatever issues Yogiji wants

to resolve, he ranks police stations on them.” He claimed that Azamgarh had emerged on the top in catching “conversion” cases. Pandey added that no police officer would dare to be seen not acting in such a case. “Yogiji is so strict on this issue that, if he learns an officer is not assisting on a case of religious conversion, there will be immediate action against him.” Emailed questions to Adityanath and the Sangh Parivar went unanswered.

Several of the FIRs I examined appear to be strategically worded. Many of them urged the police to arrest Christians using the bogey of possible “public disorder,” and some imagined public anger. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, a lawyer explained the legal significance of this. “The anti-conversion law could be passed by the state only under the garb of a public order problem,” they told me. “They have claimed that religious conversions are leading to a public order issue and hence the anti-conversion laws are needed.” Accordingly, the Hindutva groups first create a conflict-like situation. “The public-order problem is created by them and then the state uses that,” the lawyer said. “The violence by them precedes and then cases are registered against the pastor.”

Ajay Sharma, a complainant in a case in Ambedkar Nagar district and a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Mahasangh, admitted to indulging in violence himself. Speaking of a raid on a worship service, he said, “We called more cadres to the site. When we became forty–fifty people, we created a ruckus. We beat up people and shooed many away, then we called the police officer, who sent three–four vehicles of police force.”

Raghuvanshi stressed that the Sangh’s work did not stop at getting an FIR registered. “VHP has a legal cell,” he said. “We work in every court. Our lawyers track what is happening.” Pandey echoed this. “The government lawyers are also ours, because they are BJP appointees,” he said. “We tell them to stay active on this and ensure that people don’t get bail from the district court, so that it instils fear in them.”

Raghuvanshi told me that they sometimes have trouble getting residents to

“Who was Jesus?” Daya Shankar Tiwari said. “Everyone knows. He was the illegitimate child of an unmarried woman. That’s why he was hung on a cross. He died. And today people worship him.”

complain. “They don’t want to create an enemy in the village,” he said. “So we have to train our workers and send them there.” At other times, he added, the VHP has to “ready” local villagers and teach them what to do, and prepare them mentally and logistically. “We have to back up the one who will stand against Christians. We also have to prepare them for opposition.”

The VHP’s Dharma Prasar Vibhag, Raghuvanshi said, was created specifically to stop conversions and conduct *ghar wapasi*, or homecoming, the Hindu Right’s term for reconversion to Hinduism. He estimated that, over the past eighteen months in Goraksh, they had filed almost a hundred complaints against conversions and conducted over three hundred *ghar wapasi* in the Goraksh province. VHP members also spoke of how they hold weekly prayer meetings or deploy workers to “awaken” people. “We tell them that we are Hindu, we have to stick together,” Pandey said. “If any Christian comes to you, shoo him away.”

Ashok Agarwal, a senior VHP leader of the Goraksh province, spelled out the organisation’s overall role and motivation. “Because of religious conversion, the population of the people who really think in the nation’s interest is reducing,” he told me. “When they convert to a different religion, they neither think about Hindutva nor about India. If, in the coming years, the number of people following other religions increases, India will be finished. That’s why it is essential to stop this immediately. We can’t allow any laxity in this matter.”

Agarwal admitted what is really the nub of the matter: votes. He rued that an increase in the population of minorities may lead to their political empowerment. “If this continues, they’ll elect their own *pradhan*, they will want their own legislator,” he said. “This is the thinking of both Muslims and Christians. Everyone wants to finish off Hindus—that is the main point. They want to capture political power.”

Others framed the existence of Christianity as a threat to national security. Kanchan Tiwari worried that the country would once again be colonised, while a Hindu Jagran Manch leader said that Christians “are con-

trolled by foreign nations, so it can create a problem for our country.” Several leaders also claimed that Christians are hypnotising people by giving them drugs that, they claimed, had been recovered from the spot. They were often talking about the water or oil used to anoint worshippers.

There was no dearth of conspiracy theories either. “Young Hindu girls are sent to Kerala in the name of learning stitching,” Daya said. “There is a big sex racket going on there. These girls are then sent to Italy and Syria and through them they earn money which is then funnelled back to lure people into Christianity here.”

“We won’t let any churches be made, not even with permission,” Pramod, the

president of the Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Gaurav Mahasabha, told me. He issued a veiled threat to the police. “We are working in the whole state,” he said. “We aren’t going to sit still. We request the officials to support us but, if they don’t support us, we have no one but our brothers. We will keep at this. We are not going to step back.”

ON 6 FEBRUARY 2022, Vikrant Singh arrived at a worship service in Azamgarh. He wrote in a police complaint, the next day, that Ramesh Verma, a pastor, had invited him. Upon reaching, Singh alleged, Verma offered him inducements to convert to Christianity, such as free education for his children and a monthly dole. He further claimed that



Verma said “objectionable things about Hindu religion and gods and goddesses” to the congregation. Singh told the police that, when he opposed this, Verma “gave terrible mother–sister insults and threatened to kill me.” He then “secretly” called his friend, and others soon arrived at the spot. “Somehow we saved our lives and escaped.”

The FIR does not mention that Singh is the Lalganj district head of the Hindu Jagran Manch. Like the other complainants I met, he contradicted the FIR by denying that anyone had ever tried to convert him. Singh told me that it was part of his group’s modus operandi to record Facebook Live videos of every Christian worship service they raid, so as to have credible “evidence” to give the police. The video he recorded while raiding Verma’s service, still available on Singh’s account, also clearly establishes that the FIR was based on a lie.

Verma said that the police presented the Bibles to the judge in a sealed bag, saying, “This is the culprit, and this is what we found.”

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE: Daya Shankar Tiwari, the Gazipur deputy district head of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, with Kanchan Tiwari, the corresponding head of the Durga Vahini. Both have raided Christian worship services together.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: “If, in the coming years, the number of people following other religions increases, India will be finished,” Ashok Agarwal, a senior VHP leader in Azamgarh said. “That’s why it is essential to stop this immediately. We can’t allow any laxity in this matter.”

That morning, Verma had planned a special communion service in the tin shed where he conducted his weekly services. Verma had put together a plate of buns and a jar of grape juice, meant to serve as wine. At around 11 am, he began the service, speaking from a makeshift pulpit with a Bible in his hand. Around a hundred worshippers, mostly women, had gathered. The congregation had just finished singing hymns when a couple of young men in saffron scarves arrived on the scene. “What is happening here?” one of the men asked.

“Prayer is going on,” Verma said.

“Prayer to whom?” Singh retorted.

“To god.”

“Which god?”

The men then pointed the camera towards two books. “See, there is a Bible here, and here is a New Testament,” they told their viewers, holding up the books. “What are you teaching our mothers and sisters?” one of them asked. “I am telling them about god, brother,” Verma replied, his voice shaking. Singh interjected. “You are telling them about god by giving them Bibles? By giving Bibles in everyone’s hands?”

The men locked the compound and stopped anyone from leaving. They asked Verma to step outside. They asked for his name and address, and accused him of performing illegal conversions. Verma denied the charge. “Then what is this in front of me?” Vikrant’s colleague said, pointing to the Bible and New Testament. At this point, one of the worshippers came forward and told the men that all of them had come of their own free will. “They may be coming of their free will, but you are speaking against Hinduism,” Singh replied. He told his colleague to call the police.

The video cut off soon after the police arrived. Verma told me that the police asked him whether he had permission to conduct the service. Like many other pastors in the region, he had sought legal permission and registered a trust, under which he was authorised to gather worshippers, conduct prayer services and even teach the Bible. The trust’s by-laws clearly state these terms. It was unclear, then, what permission the police were referring to. Despite his insistence that he had permission, Verma said, the police asked

him to go with them. The Hindu Jagran Manch cadre, meanwhile, collected around fifty religious books and, with the help of the police, wrapped them in a large red towel.

Verma said that a large crowd of Hindus, “with tilaks on their forehead and saffron scarves,” had surrounded the police station when they arrived. Others were sitting inside talking to the police. “They won’t let us leave you,” Verma recalled a police officer telling him. Singh filed a formal complaint, based on which the police registered an FIR. Verma was presented before a magistrate the next day. He told me that the police presented the Bibles to the judge in a sealed bag, saying, “This is the culprit, and this is what we found.” He was jailed for three months. “In a free country, one should have the right to read any holy book,” Verma told me, “but they are treating the Bible itself as evidence of a crime.” The Allahabad High Court granted him bail in April 2022.

Verma, a former motorcycle mechanic, said that the FIR was a total fabrication. “I don’t know who Vikrant Singh is and had never seen him before in my life until that day. I don’t even have money to offer him.” He also denied saying anything against Hinduism.

Now out on bail, Verma has stopped conducting community prayers with large congregations and only goes to the homes of individual worshippers when he is really needed. “Who knows who is watching?” he told me. “One neighbour can make a call, and the police will be here.” Beside him on his bedside was a small purple glass bottle with a roll of paper in it—it had all his forthcoming court dates.

Verma described a persistent sense of fear, further heightened by the belief that the police and the state administration were partisan. “We are the target of Hindu right-wing groups like the Bajrang Dal and the RSS,” he said. “The saffron scarf is the license that ‘I am the guardian of the Hindu dharma and I can do anything.’ It doesn’t matter what papers or permission we have. We might have all the paperwork, and yet they can accuse us of doing conversion whenever they want, get us jailed, beat us up, do whatever they want with us—

even kill us. They can do anything with us because the police are with them. The police does whatever the Hindu groups tell them to do.”

I asked Sashi Mauli Pandey, the SHO of the Kotwali police station in Azamgarh, where Verma’s FIR is lodged, if the police were telling Christians they needed permission for prayer services. “There is no such issue in my area,” he claimed.

Several other FIRs follow almost the identical wording as Vikrant’s FIR and appear to be copied. One FIR filed against Poonam Yadav, in the Jahanaganj police station, claims that the complainant heard about illegal proselytisation and insults to Hinduism, and went with a friend to listen to Yadav’s sermon. “When our religious sentiments were hurt, we protested,” the complaint continues. “First they tried to lure us with money and tried to convert us. When we refused, they insulted us and threatened to kill us.”

The complainant, Mrityunjay Baranwal, introduced himself to me as the deputy coordinator of the Bajrang Dal for the Jahanaganj block—an affiliation that had not been disclosed in the FIR. Baranwal told me, beaming with pride, that he had filed three such complaints himself, digging up newspaper reports that mentioned the cases. Tucked inside the plastic file that contained all the relevant case documents and reports was a blue New Testament, which he had seized during a raid. Baranwal claimed that the VHP had twice honoured him for his role in catching Christians, “once at the block level and once at the district level, in a hotel.” He showed off the two saffron scarves he had received at these ceremonies.

Yadav denied all the allegations in the FIR. “I have never seen him,” she told me, referring to Baranwal. “The police told us, ‘This person has filed a complaint against you.’ That’s how we got to know his name. We later learnt he is from the Bajrang Dal.”

In two other cases, the complainant was a fruit-seller named Jitu Sonkar. When I contacted him, Sonkar called me to his stall in Azamgarh’s Kartarpur area. He was visibly nervous at being interviewed. When I asked if he was affiliated to any Hindu group, he denied

it. Sometime later, when pressed about his interest in the issue of religious conversion, he said he had formed his own group of ordinary people who bust conversion cases to protect Hindu religion. I asked him who else was in this group. He named Gaurav Raghuvanshi, the Bajrang Dal leader I had met, and Arvind Modanwal, who turned out to be the VHP’s *nagar karyadhaksh*, or a city head. Sharad Sharma, the VHP spokesperson for Uttar Pradesh, denied allegations that the members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal are disrupting Christian prayers, vandalising property, beating up pastors and filing fabricated FIRs. “No incident like this has come to our knowledge,” he said. Referring to the specific charge of violence by VHP members, he said, “This is not part of our culture, we don’t do these things.” However, he added, the organisations were opposing illegal conversion wherever it was going on.

MANY OF THOSE who have been attacked for adopting Christianity are Bahujans who turned to the religion to escape caste oppression in Hindu society. On 30 July 2022, Indra Kala, a Dalit resident of Azamgarh district, was preparing a grand celebration for her son’s ninth birthday. Her family’s meagre income—from a convenience store they ran in one room of their two-room house—did not allow for such festivities regularly, but her only child had requested a birthday party for the first time. On an empty ground outside her home, in the village of Vishnupura, a red and white tent had been set up. A pineapple cake had been bought. Most of the village had been invited. As a practising Christian, she also decided to hold prayers for her son and called a few pastors from her neighbourhood to bless the child.

During the celebration, around ten men, wearing saffron scarves, barged



in and accused Indra Kala and other Christians of carrying out religious conversions. “The Hindu groups were abusing us in the most foul language and saying, ‘You should worship Hindu gods and goddesses,’” Indra Kala told me. She said that the men ransacked her shop and called the police, who got there within minutes. “The police surrounded us on all sides,” Santosh, a pastor present on the scene, recalled.

The police accused Indra Kala of illegal religious conversion and insisted on taking her and five other Dalit women to the police station. “Come and say you were only celebrating the birthday, nothing will happen,” she recalled the police told her. “When we reached the police station, the Hindu groups were already there, drinking tea with the police. They were saying, ‘What can the administration do? The police is in our hands. We will make sure you are not let go.’”

At the police station, Indra Kala was accused of running a “gang” that converts people to Christianity. A man named Ashutosh Singh, a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, lodged an official complaint against her, on the basis of which an FIR was registered. This FIR also did not mention his RSS membership. Singh alleged that he had received information that “Christianity was being propagated” in the “Harijan *basti*” of Vishunpurgar. Indra Kala and her friends, he added, were “insulting Hindu religion” and “praising Jesus Christ’s grace.” When

Singh’s “religious sentiments were hurt and I protested, then first they tried to induce me with money and convert me, and, when I refused, then using foul language, they threatened to kill me.”

The six women were arrested under the anti-conversion law. Indra Kala told me she spent thirty days in jail, before being released on bail. She said she had never met Singh and had no idea who he was. Indra Kala denied saying anything about Hinduism and shrugged when I asked about the accusation that she had offered Singh money. “We don’t have enough to eat ourselves,” she said. “How will we bribe others?”

Indra Kala continues to face threats from Hindutva groups. At one point, she said, they told her neighbours, “If we see them, we will kill them.” She heard stones being thrown at her house one night. Another time, while she was on a motorcycle with her husband, a car forced them to crash. Indra Kala recognised the people in the car as the ones who had been at the police station. She has now moved out and rented a tiny room, packed with one bed, all her belongings and a small kitchen. She does not tell anyone where she lives. “I am scared for my child’s life,” she said.

“They want us to worship Hindu gods and goddesses,” Indra Kala, who began believing in Christianity two years ago, told me. “We are Chamar. They don’t want us to celebrate. They want us to be their slaves and keep being their slaves. That is the main reason they are going after us.”

Amarjeet Ram, a Dalit resident of Ghazipur, worked as a labourer before becoming a pastor in 2007. He lives in the village of Balapur, where his family of five lives in one room with a thatched roof, brick walls and three wooden cots. One sack of wheat, clothes and a few pieces of brinjal lay scattered in the room. “People from the lower castes are oppressed to ensure that they stay down and don’t rise higher,” Ram told me. “We thought, once we believe in Jesus, we will live with freedom, we will be free, we won’t be under anyone’s suppression.”

On 30 July 2023—exactly a year after Indra Kala’s celebration was disrupted—the police raided Ram’s home during a prayer service, based on one of Daya Shankar Tiwari’s 21 complaints. Ram told me that the police chanced upon a register he had maintained of the monthly contributions, of ₹100 each, his congregation made to a mutual-aid fund. The police accused him of receiving outside funding and paying people to attend services. They seized the register as evidence.

Ashok, a worshipper present at Ram’s service that day, told me that he was taken to the police station along with 12 other worshippers. He recalled that all 13 denied receiving any incentives to attend Ram’s services and told the police they were present there on their own free will. But Ram said, “the police buried those statements.” Ashok further claimed that the police then extorted money from the worshippers and threatened to jail them if they did not pay up. He told me he paid ₹3,000 to the police to secure his release. Several other pastors told me that when Christians go to the police station to speak in favour of the fellow accused, and insist that they are attending services of their own accord, they are shooed away.

Daya Shankar said that the police had registered an FIR in this case only after Hindu groups applied pressure. Several senior VHP leaders had made calls, he said. “We kept sitting at the police station till 9 pm and refusing to leave until they register the FIR.” Ram was jailed for 15 days and has stopped running his worship services after his release on bail. “Even the worshippers are scared to come now,” he said.





The accusations that rural pastors in Uttar Pradesh are getting foreign funding appear ludicrous when one visits their homes. On 28 June last year, Poonam Bind, a woman who led prayers in Azamgarh's Narwari village, was arrested on charges of illegal conversion. The night before a raid on her worship service, the roof of her home collapsed due to the rains. When I met her on a late evening, she sat under a makeshift thatched roof covered with plastic sheets, her goats behind her. Clothes hung on a line inside the room. One bulb provided all the light. Brijesh Pandey, the deputy district president of the NISHAD Party, a BJP ally, had filed the complaint against Bind. Bind told me that the police also accused her of receiving outside funding and inducing people with money to convert. She spent two months in jail.

Many Christians told me that they felt compelled to hide the markers of their faith, not just out of fear of the Sangh, but also of the police, who spoke in the same language as the Hindu

Right. The family of Bobby Dev, a resident of Jaunpur's Nigoh village, had begun constructing a large prayer hall in their home. On 23 September, the police searched his home and accused the family of performing illegal conversions. "These kinds of books should not be seen in the house," Dev recalled the police saying when they found the Bibles. After instructing the family to shut down the prayer hall, the police took Dev to the station. He said that they told him to leave his "foreign religion" and adopt Hinduism. "There are many Hindu gods and goddesses," he recalled being told. "Pick any of them."

The police filed a case against Dev under the Arms Act, for possessing a knife. The family said it was a ₹20 knife for cutting meat that the police had seized from their kitchen. The FIR claimed Dev did not have the license to possess

OPPOSITE PAGE: Vikrant Singh, a district head of the Hindu Jagran Manch, raided a Christian worship service in February 2022. He uploaded a Facebook Live video of the raid. In it, Vikrant can be seen questioning a pastor on why he was propagating Christianity. "You are telling them about god by giving them Bibles? By giving Bibles in everyone's hands?" he said.

ABOVE: Ramesh Verma, a pastor in Azamgarh, spent three months in jail on charges of illegal conversion based on an FIR which appears illegal. "The saffron scarf is the license that 'I am the guardian of the Hindu dharma and I can do anything.' They can accuse us of doing conversion whenever they want, get us jailed, beat us up, even kill us. Because the police are with them. The police does whatever the Hindu groups tell them to do."

"In a free country, one should have the right to read any holy book," Verma told me, "but they are treating the Bible itself as evidence of a crime."

such a knife. Dev was released later that night, but the case still persists.

Two weeks later, in October, the police arrived at Dev's home again. According to his father, Bharat Masih, they said that, if the family did not shut down its prayer services, they would charge him for "anti-national activities." They also made Masih write a declaration that he would stop running his home-church.

Masih tried to argue that the family had registered a trust in order to conduct prayer services at their home. He further noted that the Allahabad High Court had directed Jaunpur's police superintendent to "ensure that no interference be made in the prayers of the Christian community at the places of worship." According to Masih, the police overruled their papers, saying, "Get orders from the SP. We don't recognise these court orders. There is pressure from the top."

Several pastors said that when Christians go to the police station to speak in favour of the fellow accused and insist that they are attending services of their own free will, they are shooed away.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A prayer hall in Azamgarh that a Christian pastor built on his agricultural land. Most of the Christian worship in rural Uttar Pradesh happens in these home-run churches as there are few big institutional churches in the area—these informal worship gatherings that are under attack from both the Hindu Right and state police, with many being forced to shut down.

Even though their prayer hall is shut, the family continues to be practising Christians. But they no longer keep their Bibles on their shelves. "For some time, we removed our Bibles from the house out of fear," Dev said. Now, they keep two Bibles hidden inside a black sling bag. "Anytime someone knocks on the door, we hide it in further inside our clothes." In their half-constructed prayer hall, the cross painted on the pulpit lies covered with a black plastic sheet.

Still, the family said, the police continues to harass them. Shani Dev, Bobby Dev's brother, told me that, when the family tried to ask the police if it could hold a gathering for Christmas, they were told to take permission from the district magistrate. Surprised and exasperated, Shani asked the police, "Is praying to Jesus a legal offence?" The police reply stunned him. "Yes, it is," he recalled them saying. "India mein ho, toh Pakistan ka jaijainkar kyon kar rahe ho?"—When you are in India, why are you praising Pakistan?

ARTICLE 25 OF THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION gives citizens the freedom to profess, practice and propagate their religion. While the law aids the Hindu Right, the legal system seems to have failed the Christians of Uttar Pradesh. Even as Christians across the state are penalised for their faith, their assailants always appear to go scot free.

In February 2022, Peter Machado, the Catholic archbishop of Bangalore, filed a petition in the Supreme Court on the persecution of Indian Christians. His team submitted a list of 495 incidents of attacks, arrests or intimidation across eight states. The court asked the union government to verify each incident and file a reply. In its affidavit, the government described several incidents as personal or land disputes, rather than religious persecution.

For instance, the petitioners' list mentions the religious persecution faced by Prem Singh in Jaunpur. It alleges that in October 2021, the police disrupted a prayer meeting and warned the pastor to discontinue his services. In a second incident, it states, in May 2022 incident, villagers physically assaulted him, after which the police

registered a case against him under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, which pertains to "deliberate or malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings." In its reply to the first charge, the government has said that this is simply a personal land dispute between Singh and his neighbour. To the second charge, the government has simply stated the details of the police proceedings against Singh.

Significantly, in its foreword to the entire list of incidents by the petitioners, the government has used the Prem Singh case as a prime example to allege that the petitioners have falsely "given a religious colour" to "trivial disputes between two parties." The foreword further insisted that the Prem Singh case is only a land dispute, and the matter was wrongly "projected as persecution of Christians."

I visited Singh's home in the Katehari village in Jaunpur. He had died in April 2023, but Shekha Devi, his widow, Praveen, his son, and Sikander Singh, his brother gave a detailed account of the harassment and religious persecution he had suffered for years and said they had been threatened multiple times by the police. They acknowledged that there was indeed a land dispute between Singh and his neighbour, but that was a separate matter ongoing since 2010.

In October 2021, the family said that around fifty members of Hindu right-wing groups barged into their home, vandalised and broke property, and wrote "Jai Shri Ram" on the bare walls and pillars. Later that evening, they said the police came, instructed them to shut down their worship service, saying that "there are orders from the top." The police added that they lacked permission to conduct such services. The next morning, the police returned again while a worship service was on in their home, forced them to halt it and took Sikander to the police station. Sikander told me that he had filed a complaint to the district police and administration stating that the family was being threatened.

A few months later, on Christmas eve, the family said the police came at night and told them they cannot celebrate Christmas. The next day,



Singh, along with several other pastors in Jaunpur, was called to the police station. “If some dispute or untoward incident occurs,” during the celebration, “you will be responsible for it,” Sikander said all the pastors were told. On Christmas day, two constables were stationed outside their home to prevent any celebration or worship. The family said the police did not allow any believers to enter and sent back all the churchgoers who tried to come in.

The next year, in May 2022, while Prem was conducting a worship service in the Nari gram sabha, the family alleged that he was brutally beaten by Hindu right-wing groups who threatened that they would kill him. The family said Prem was also jailed for five days. After his release, his family said, they took him to Dehradun for medical treatment. Elaborating on the land dispute, in which Prem’s neighbour and the village head both had filed a complaint, Sikander said even that was partly a result of their outrage that Prem’s family were practicing Christians. “We won’t let you run this church,” Sikander said the neighbours too had often threatened. This year, Prem’s son said, the police prevented them from celebrating Good Friday and once again stationed constables outside

their home. Prior to his death from a heart attack, Prem was under extreme stress and depression due to the constant threats and his inability to peacefully conduct services.

None of this made it into the government’s reply to the Supreme Court. The union home ministry did not respond to my questions about the affidavit.

In many other instances in its Supreme Court reply, the government has simply responded that no complaint had been filed by those alleging persecution and thus no police case had been registered. Already faced with police harassment, many Christians are afraid to come forward and file complaints. Some said that they had even been threatened to not take legal steps. Other Christian pastors told me that when they did in fact file complaints related to attacks on them, there had been little action by the police, even as the police is prompt to act on complaints from Sangh members.

In May 2023, members of the Bajrang Dal disrupted a service at the home of the pastor Anita Rajak in Jaunpur’s Badlapur village. Anita’s husband, Pappu, and son, Ritik, told me that they were brutally beaten up. Pappu said his eardrum was damaged, while Ritik told me he was hit on the head. “My white

T-shirt was stained in blood all over,” the 19-year-old said. They recalled the Bajrang Dal men abusing their family as they were being beaten. “Call him, call your Jesus now, see if he comes to save you,” they recounted the Bajrang Dal said. “He couldn’t save himself on the cross, how will he save you?” The Rajaks said that the police, who were called by the Bajrang Dal, did not listen to the family’s version of events and that, when they arrested Pappu and Ritik, they did not take them for a medical examination, as is mandatory. They said the Badlapur police did not register their complaint against their assailants. Anita, a tailor, added that the police has thrice checked her bank accounts to see if she gets international funding.

Anita’s family then lodged a complaint through the chief minister’s grievance redressal website and directly to the district police superintendent, but no action had been taken.

There are also cases of the Hindu Right being accused of beating pastors in the presence of the police. In October 2021, the police was leading Abraham, the Ghazipur pastor, to their jeep, after a Hindutva raid at a worship service. “Even while the police was taking us out, they were running behind to beat us,” Abraham told me.

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“The police was watching them beat me like mute spectators. They got me out of the police hands and shoved me to the ground.” When Rajesh Rajbhar, another worshipper who was also being taken to the police station, turned around to see Abraham being beaten, the men ran to beat him too, in full view of the police. “They beat me on the back of my head with a plastic pipe,” Rajbhar said.

But the police is not merely turning a blind eye to the Hindu Right’s violence, they appear to be complicit too. Pravesh, a pastor in Azamgarh, shared a chilling account of how the police is itself dealing with those accused in anti-conversion cases. One evening in June 2022, he was leading a prayer on his uncle’s terrace in Bhaiskur village, surrounded by family. Soon, the family heard that the police was downstairs. “My uncle came to me and said, ‘Police is roaming here, you pray a little softly,’” Pravesh told me. The police then barged in, searched his belongings and snatched his Bible. They then dragged him downstairs and shoved him into a police vehicle. They said that someone had filed a complaint against him and that “the villagers are outraged.”

Pravesh recalled being told that they would let him go from the police station in some time. But, soon enough, they began abusing him. Pravesh recalled one policeman asking him, “Why don’t you worship Bajrang Bali?”

“It’s my choice,” Pravesh replied. “I like to worship Jesus.”

“Is Bajrang Bali not strong?”

“If he was strong, would you forcefully make me say things?”

“Fucker, we’ll tell you at the police station.”

At the Bardah police station, Pravesh told me, he was handcuffed and tied to a neem tree. “They started hitting me on my legs and my back with a lathi,” he said. “My legs were so swollen I could not walk.” By then, his family reached the police station, so they released him from the tree and stopped beating him. But that would only last briefly. “You do conversion, you must have a lot of money,” Pravesh recalled being told. The police allegedly began to demand ₹20,000 in cash, threatening to jail him if he did not pay.



By this point, Pravesh was limping and could barely walk. A senior police official saw him and asked what happened. Pravesh told him he was merely praying, and was picked up and beaten. “Why are you hitting him where it can be seen?” Pravesh recalled the senior official telling the constables. “Hit him where it can’t be seen.”

Pravesh’s uncle had spoken to police officials and arranged for lawyers. The police told him that his nephew would

be released in the morning. Inside the lockup that night, Pravesh told me, he was beaten again, this time with a leather belt attached to a wooden handle, made specifically for the purpose of beating prisoners. “It was so strong that my skin was coming off,” he said. By the time they finished this round of torture, his hands were also swollen. “The blood clotted so much that my fingers became tight and wouldn’t close.”



In the morning, a senior police official came to question the prisoners. All the accused were sitting in a row, and the official went in line asking everyone what they had done. As each person answered, Pravesh recounted the official telling his colleagues, “Give him 20 ml, him 25 ml, him 40 ml, him 50 ml.” The official asked him why he was here. “I was praying to Jesus and they picked me up because of it,” Pravesh said. “Give him 50 ml,” the official replied.

Pravesh was promptly taken inside a cell and beaten again. “When they started hitting me, then I understood: 25 ml means hit him 25 times with the leather belt.” As the police hit Pravesh with the belt, they forced him to chant the names of Hindu deities.

“*Bolo Bajrang Bali ki jai, Bolo Shankar ji ki jai,*” he said the police said. When he refused to comply, he added, they repeated, “Why, is Bajrang Bali not strong for you?” Pravesh replied, “If he was strong, would you have to beat me up to take his name?” They beat him some more.

By then, Pravesh was shaking. “My hands had turned black. I couldn’t even clasp my hands together.”

At one point, the police in-charge made Pravesh unlock his phone. “He was checking where I have transferred money, to whom, who called me, who is in my WhatsApp, what WhatsApp groups I am in,” Pravesh said. He was a member of a group called Bible Study Benares. “You run this group to do conversion, you get funding,” they told him, while checking who the other members of the group were.

By 3 pm, Pravesh said, the SHO came to speak with him. “We couldn’t find any evidence against you otherwise we would have shown you,” Pravesh recalled being told. He was instructed not to tell anyone about being beaten, or else he would be picked up again. For good measure, he added, the police gave him another 20ml dose.

On his release, Pravesh’s uncle told him that the police had filed an FIR, in which they falsely claimed that the two of them had a family dispute. Another constable told Pravesh that, in reality, the village head had complained to the police after seeing, and recording, Pravesh pray on the terrace.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Indra Kala threw a birthday party for her son and called pastors to bless the child. By the end of it, she found herself in jail, accused of illegal conversion. After a month in prison, she is out on bail, but she said she still faces threats from Hindu groups. She has now rented a tiny room in Azamgarh, but does not tell anyone where she lives.

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW: In November 2022, Jitendra Ram, a pastor, was holding a thanksgiving celebration for his newly married daughter in Azamgarh’s Saraimaer, when the police barged in and arrested him on the grounds that he had gathered people together to perform illegal conversions. He insisted this was only a get together to celebrate the wedding, but it fell on deaf ears.

LEFT ABOVE: Like several other Christian families, Anita Rajak has also been compelled to hide her Bibles. Once put on the shelf, she now keeps them inside in a yellow plastic bag. “We can’t take it anywhere, it should not be seen, if the Bajrang Dal people see it, they will snatch it,” she said.

LEFT BELOW: After a worship service he was attending in Mau was raided, Abraham, a pastor, said he was beaten by Hindu right-wing groups in the presence of the police, and then jailed. But he believed the Christian community should brave the attacks. “If even Jesus had to suffer, we will have to as well if we walk in truth,” he said. “We will walk with our coffins.”

The police is not merely turning a blind eye to the Hindu Right’s violence, they appear to be complicit too.

“Jesus was also persecuted. We are his followers, if even he had to suffer, we will have to as well if we walk in truth,” Abraham said.

BELOW: Pravesh, a pastor, said, the police picked him up from a terrace, where he was praying, tied him to a neem tree, and brutally beat and tortured him. “*Bolo Bajrang Bali ki jai, Bolo Shankar ji ki jai,*” he said the police asked him to chant. When he refused, he said, they beat him more.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Prem Singh’s family said that, prior to his death from a heart attack, he was under extreme stress and depression due to the constant threats he received from the police and his inability to peacefully conduct services.

Akhilesh Kumar Maurya, the SHO, denied anyone ever being beaten up in the police station or being forced to chant religious slogans. “This is patently false,” he said. Pravesh’s case is also mentioned in the Machado petition. In its affidavit, the government simply replied that, according to the Azamgarh police, no complaint had been received.

When Pravesh returned home, his family worried about him continuing to preach. But, for at least a little while, he remained undeterred. When his mother was troubled, he assured her by illustrating examples from the lives of the apostles. “Mom, Paul was also jailed and beaten,” he told her. He pointed to Bible verses that say Christians will have to face persecution because of their faith.

Pravesh continued to run a home worship service. The first Sunday back, before the worshippers arrived, he made sure to wear a full-sleeve shirt. He knew they had heard of him being beaten. He knew they would ask about it, and he did not want to scare them further. “I thought I’d hide my wounds,” he told me. “But then they touched my hand, and I flinched, and they got to know.” Soon the church members opened the buttons of his sleeve and saw the wounds. “They saw how badly I was beaten and they

started crying and holding each other,” Pravesh said. “The whole church cried that day.” All the believers then got tinctures from their homes. Some got ghee to put on the wounds. Then they all prayed together.

“They want to make India a Hindu Rashtra, so they are oppressing us,” Pravesh told me. “The Bajrang Dal people think it should be our country, in which any other religion is to be crushed.”

Several pastors recalled their rights, which are still enshrined in the Constitution. “It gives us the right and freedom to pray,” Abraham said. He added that the Christian community should not be anxious but attempt to brave the attacks. “Jesus was also persecuted. We are his followers, if even he had to suffer, we will have to as well if we walk in truth,” he said. “We will walk with our coffins.”

The Hindu Right, meanwhile, seems to be gearing up for a longer fight. “For the last four to five centuries, we fought the battle between the temple and mosque,” Daya Shankar Tiwari told me. “Now, in the coming twenty years, we will fight the battle between the temple and church.” ■

This reporting is part of the Coda-Caravan fellowship.

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Against the Current

Ecological destruction in Kinnaur



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PHOTO ESSAY / ENVIRONMENT

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY ASHUTOSH SHAKTAN



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PREVIOUS SPREAD LEFT:

The visible contrast between two sides of the valley, separated by the Baspa dam. On one side, the landscape is marred by roads, construction and landslides, while the other remains untouched.

PREVIOUS SPREAD RIGHT:

Zalam Puri, a resident from the village of Rarang, in Kinnaur, which is known for its temples and monasteries. Today, its residents are also at the forefront of a battle against hydroelectric projects, and the Jangi Thopan Powari project in particular. “In this fight for our way of life, both the youth and the elderly are actively participating,” she said.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:

A series of Google Earth views of the Urni landslide between 2004 and 2022.

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:

The houses of people the photographer met during the research for this project—Ramanand, Sanamjit and Kiran Kumari—on a Google Earth image, to indicate their proximity to the landslide-prone area.

I WAS RAISED along the banks of the river Pabbar, whose once robust flow has dwindled into a mere stream, its vitality drained by the construction of a hydroelectric project. Rivers are polluted, mined and dammed for energy, but very little is done to expand our knowledge about how they work. The pressure on these water systems and surrounding ecology has caused largescale change, and left rivers to be managed in ways that suit corporate development.

This photographic series examines the intricate story of the Sutlej, a river in the northwest Himalayas. The transformation that its surrounding landscape and basin has witnessed over the past fifty years has been dramatic, leading to profound environmental damage and repercussions for communities living near it. Much of this damage stems from incessant construction and hydroelectric projects. According to a *Down to Earth* report from 2021, the Sutlej basin has had fifty-six percent of the state’s total installed capacity, and 142 hydroelectricity projects of 10,031 megawatts are either commissioned, under construction or planned on the Sutlej. As a result, 92 percent of the river will either be part of reservoirs or flowing through tunnels. “Such a cumulative scale of disturbance with the river’s natural state will drastically impact the life, livelihood, and ecology in the Sutlej basin,” the article stated.

Kinnaur, a region nestled within this basin, characterised by cold deserts and a fragile topography, has borne the brunt of this relentless expansion, with 53 planned hydropower projects. The increase in hydropower generation has resulted in the construction of bumper-to-bumper projects on a single river basin; in these, the water discharged from one project’s tail no longer flows into the river, and instead, is diverted to the head of the next project. This method, according to an *IndiaSpend* article, means that “vast stretches of rivers are being transformed into series of lentic (static) water bodies separated by long reaches of dry stream beds.” Consequently, the basin is devoid of its essential flow, resembling a series of disconnected segments rather than a continuous river. This is affecting the already sensitive ecology of the region.

These projects work on a network of tunnels dug in the mountains that enable the flow of water and assist activities such as the removal of muck. Kinnaur is a rain-shadow region that heavily relies on the Sutlej and its tributaries for water for domestic and

irrigation purposes. The creation of tunnels has destroyed the natural capacity of the river, creating dry patches where no agricultural activity can take place. Furthermore, tunneling and blasting significantly disrupts the region’s hydrogeology. As a fallout of previous hydroelectric projects in Kinnaur, springs have disappeared, dried up or experienced a reduction in discharge. These springs formed a major source of irrigation for agriculture—including horticulture and off-season vegetables, which the majority of livelihoods depend on in the region—and their absence has had a drastic effect on lives and livelihoods.

Over ninety-five percent of Himachal Pradesh is prone to landslides. Kinnaur is seismically fragile and vulnerable to cloudbursts, flash floods and landslides, and blasting and tunneling have a high potential for triggering the latter. Last year, Himachal Pradesh endured one of the worst natural disasters in recent memory, with flash floods and landslides leading to hundreds of deaths; and a March 2023 news report noted a six-fold increase in the number of landslides over the previous two years. Experts attributed several other factors, besides climate change and high-intensity rainfall, as possible causes, including cutting hill slopes for construction, blasting for tunnels, hydroelectric projects and mining, unscientific construction, depletion of forest cover, and structures obstructing the natural flow of streams.

The scale of industrial development in Kinnaur has not gone unchallenged. From 2021 onwards, the “No Means No” campaign has seen large protests in the district, including against the proposed Jangi Thopan Powari hydroelectric power project. More recently, similar protests have erupted in other regions of the Himalayas and especially in Ladakh, aimed at curbing unchecked industrial development and safeguarding the fragile ecology of the Himalayan region.

Through the photographs in this ongoing project, titled “A River Runs Through It,” which I began work on in February 2022, I present an intimate view of the river system and the various topographical and cultural changes it is undergoing. I see a river as a living, breathing story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Beside the statistics and data, machines and projects, countless stories emerge from this basin—tales of people, narratives of a vulnerable landscape and the whispers of rocks and trees—and a river runs through it all.

BELOW: Tunnels near a hydroelectric power project close to Panwi village, in Kinnaur.



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RIGHT: A boy in Rarang rests on rocks while taking a break from work.





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ABOVE: A monk lived in this cave, near the river, for around twenty-five years. A little over a decade ago, he chose to leave and live with his partner. After a year, he returned alone and stayed here until his death. Today there is a broken lock on this door.



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ABOVE: Workers building a wall near Pooh, in Kinnaur.

BELOW: Remains of a bridge in Batseri, in the Sangla valley in Kinnaur, after a landslide killed nine tourists in 2021.



CENTRE: Cracks inside a house in Urni, as a result of a landslide.



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ABOVE: A meeting point of the Sutlej and Spiti rivers, in Khab.



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LEFT: Motongch, in Akpa village, talked about the significance of the Sutlej to Kinnaur, likening its importance to the Ganga. She said that traditional funeral ceremonies are conducted along the banks of the Sutlej. Due to extensive damming, numerous dry patches have emerged along the river.



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ABOVE: A torn billboard on the national highway in Tapri.



BELOW: Yogeshwar Negi wears a garland of chilgoza seeds, in Rarang. These garlands are common at Kinnauri weddings and religious ceremonies, a cultural practice rooted in the region's scarcity of flowers. Thousands of chilgoza trees were felled during the construction of a hydroelectric power project nearby, which he says is a major loss for both ecology and culture.



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OPPOSITE PAGE: The site of the thousand-megawatt Karcham-Wangtoo hydroelectric project reveals a discernible transformation in local topography.

BOOKS

BREAKING THE MOULD

Masculinity and the family in contemporary Indian fiction



/ LITERATURE

AREEB AHMAD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SHAGNIK CHAKRABORTY

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AT THE LAUNCH OF HIS LATEST BOOK, *Sakina's Kiss*, Vivek Shanbhag said that masculinity “is like water. A hairline crack is enough for it to seep in and be all over the place.” It is true that it would have been a lost battle to try and single out the parts of the novel—translated from Kannada by Srinath Perur—that address masculinity in isolation from the rest of its themes, the concept being too slippery and omnipresent to isolate without being contrived. The narrative, which revolves around a middle-class married couple, Viji and Venkataramana, begins with people repeatedly showing up to their Bengaluru apartment and inquiring, suspiciously, about their daughter, Rekha, who is out of town. Venkataramana, the first-person narrator, is livid at their appearance.

I cannot stand such groups of boys.
They roam around aimlessly instead

of studying and waste their parents' money. They have no respect for elders or for rules and are a menace to society. The sight of them always sets off a small fury within me: the defiant way they carry themselves, those T-shirts and pointy hairstyles, their apathetic expressions. But when I try and put a finger on why I should feel that way, I cannot come up with a definite reason and it leaves me flustered.

Despite Viji's reaction being calmer, Venkataramana decides that, although he is content to defer to his wife and daughter on most things with no bearing on “the real world,” in this instance, “as the man of the house, it was my duty to step forward and take care of it.” This declaration, on which the first chapter ends, sets the tone for what follows—ominous, because these visitors signal trouble on the horizon, but

also contradictory, because the more the novel ventures into the narrator's inner world, his insecurities and habits, the more the notion of his unshakeable authority is unravelled.

Reading *Sakina's Kiss* as well as other writing published over the last five years illuminates how recent fiction has introspected on the ways in which generation gaps, globalisation, changing social mores and political shifts, gender norms and roles, caste and class all contribute to the shaping of masculinity and family dynamics. *Half the Night is Gone* by Amitabha Bagchi is a treatise on brotherhood and estrangement. Anubha Yadav's *The Anger of Saintly Men*, the story of three brothers growing up in north India in the 1990s, explores how young boys are moulded into men in the Indian household. Aruni Kashyap's short story “His Father's Disease” revolves around a mother's despair



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at her son's queerness, which she sees as being a legacy of her husband. *My Father's Garden* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a triptych of novellas, follows a young doctor as he "negotiates love and sexuality, his need for companionship, and the burdens of familial expectation." *Fern Road Boy* by Angshu Dasgupta follows the coming-of-age journey of a young boy who struggles to replicate the ways of masculinity around him.

While examining the role of "traditional" masculinity politics in the context of the 2014 general election, Sanjay Srivastava called attention to "power relationships within the contemporary gender landscape, where certain dominant ideals of manhood affect women, different ways of being men, as well those identities that may not fit either gender category." This sort of engagement, he wrote, "is an exploration into the naturalization of the category 'man' through which men have come to be regarded as ungendered and as the 'universal subject of human history.'" Contemporary nonfiction and academic studies have looked at the many sites on which these dynamics play out, including religious organisations, festivals, gyms, cinema, caste, the media and muscular nationalism.

If the fiction considered here uses the family as a microcosm to look at where we are today, it also throws open a range of questions about the power relationships in this institution. How is virile masculinity put to service in policing women in the guise of protecting them? What gendered expectations are foisted upon men and how does proximity to "male" attributes also determine proximity to power and violence? How is queerness seen as a threat to masculinity and coded as an illness? What do these stories reveal about fractures in the traditional roles of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, and the tendency to view women in relation to the men in their lives?

SAKINA'S KISS REPEATEDLY CONFRONTS the juxtaposition between the narrator's posturing and his often agonised inner world. "I am not at all conservative," he tells Viji during their first meeting. "I don't believe in caste and all that. I

think women are the equal of men in society." When Viji later ribs him about this performance, he guesses that he had been trying to impress her but did not have a fully formed opinion and welcomed the wateriness of the liberal line. "I suppose I thought it was the kind of thing that young women who considered themselves modern liked to hear," he recalls. "Had I known the term then I might even have called myself a liberal. But even without having heard that word, I had some experience of the strange satisfaction and sense of superiority that comes from denouncing caste and rituals. To be frank, I don't know what I really believed."

Venkataramana recalls that he began consciously self-fashioning after feeling embarrassed in the presence of his colleagues, with their seamless English, veneer of modernity, imitation of the West and tendency to sneer at anything local. "For someone like me, who came from a village, the office had become a place of silent dread," he says. Realising that imitating them was the easiest strategy to get ahead, he was drawn to self-help or "personal growth" books as a way to navigate workplace conversations and his feelings of suffocation and alienation, a guilty pleasure that he bonds over with Viji early into their marriage.

But soon after, a chasm opens between them, and as the book traces Venkataramana's relationships with his wife and daughter, it contemplates the various points at which the cracks began to creep in. Sometimes this is done in a heavy-handed way, underscoring that the inequality between them stems from gender—"Perhaps it was when Rekha was born. Nothing else tests the idea of parity between husband and wife more severely"—when the bare facts, established early, would have been enough: Viji, despite having a full-time job, was lumped with all the child care, housework and cooking, and barely got any sleep.

The older Rekha gets, the more she challenges his opinions, from his ideas about politics to his perception of their marriage having been non-traditional: "Rekha, trying unsuccessfully to control her laughter, silenced me by saying, 'Appa, I'm not a child any more. How is

marrying within the caste some kind of radical act?'" He is threatened when he thinks she is being coopted by other people, other men in particular. When she appears to be enthusiastic about her English teacher's ideas and book recommendations, for instance, he tries to emulate her classroom discussions at home. "I had to become even more broad-minded to counter his influence," he tells the reader. "We started talking at home about things like patriarchy, the myth of sexual purity, the shackles of marriage and so on. There is nothing more frightening than the prospect of one's children, especially girls, coming under the sway of outsiders."

But these feeble attempts only lead to more unbridgeable gaps in understanding, and he senses that his daughter is trying to pick fights and has "begun to attribute some of my opinions to my being a man." As he starts feeling that they have definitively lost any semblance of control over Rekha's life, the language begins turning passive—"Her twelfth standard went by while I agonized that she had yanked the reins out of my hands"—and he begins to find "the idea of handing over her responsibility to a husband strangely comforting," hoping to relegate the responsibility for her to another man and be done with it. At other points, the book relies, somewhat overbearingly, on metaphor to indicate how things are spinning out of his control. Conversations about feminism are "landmines," he seethes like a "dormant volcano" and trying to get along with his family is "like covering burning embers with ash—every compromise was another fistful of ash, but the fire inside burnt on."

Eventually he is left floundering in every scenario. There is his daughter's disappearance and, when she returns, her candid refusal to indicate where she has been; the nature of her work for a political magazine, which alarms him immensely; his anxious cooking up of twisted, extreme scenarios in which she was molested; his wife's evident discontent; his ineffectuality when there is a break-in at home; and, finally, the secret, festering guilt he nurses over his father's family having tricked his mother's brother, as well as his partner, out of property. As the next generation rejects

him, he knows he has passively carried forward the previous one's murky legacy. Even self-help books can no longer guide him on what to do, and he submits a poignant realisation about his past reliance on them: "Now the books feel like a desperate attempt to cover up defects within me, to compensate for something inside that was broken."

It might seem that Venkataramana is headed for an implosion, but it is more of a whimper. He takes to petty, spiteful behaviour instead. When Viji and Rekha rail against a candidate from their constituency sermonising about women's clothes, Indian culture and harassment, he draws a perverse satisfaction from keeping television debates about this on all night, creating an uneasy, charged atmosphere at home. He envisions himself, when provoking his family, as "a ringmaster who ignores the roars of a lion and continues to prod it with his stick to show off his dominance." Meanwhile, at the office, his colleague says, "I have two daughters. You should see the clothes they wear. ... My wife takes their side, and if I bring it up, they all pounce on me together. Now that a political party is saying openly what I cannot say at home, my vote is definitely for them." The politician wins the election.

In the final pages of the novel, memories leap relentlessly at him, and Venkataramana returns to an instance from the beginning of the book. Viji had told him categorically, when he sidestepped the biases of the men who came to ask after Rekha, that he was only concerned because it involved his daughter, not because he was incensed that they had tried using their political connections to decide who a woman should be friends with. "You would have no problem if it was some other young woman they were doing this to," she told him. "I don't know who you are sometimes. It's like there's another man inside you, waiting to get out." She might have been right, he thinks. There is someone else. Maybe he is responsible for the small acts of cruelty.

THE FIRST LINE of *The Anger of Saintly Men*, launching into everyday crassness, leaves little to the imagination:

"Papa spread his legs and started scratching his lund and kanchas like he always did when anxious." Through this scene, Anubha Yadav sets the tone for the rest of the novel. She is not interested in hiding behind polite euphemism, in a book that, according to the author Jerry Pinto, "seems to be composed of secret dispatches from the private lives of Indian males." Instead, it offers a frank, if unsentimental, exploration of masculinity.

The scratching is a careful performance—meaningless if it is not witnessed—and he appears to draw pleasure from the discomfort. His wife usually ignores his "scratchy-dog pose" but, when there are relatives around, she stares at him till he stops. It is a challenge to his authority, a reminder of propriety. "When Papa wanted to prove that he was the boss," the narrator adds, "he would stare back and scratch even more furiously just to spite her, his kanchas rising and falling

If the fiction considered here uses the family as a microcosm to look at where we are today, it also throws open several questions about the power relationships in this institution.

inside the collected folds of his white pyjama." It becomes evident that this display is a way of grinding against his circumstances: he is forced to rely on various relatives to house his family over the year, since his earnings are not enough to keep them going, leading to a situation where they "were neither guests nor permanent dwellers. We were unwelcome and we knew it. We exaggerated the meaning of any routine courtesy or accidental kindness extended towards us." The mother takes on all the household responsibilities in order to have the family impinge less, while the father is away most of the time, ostensibly job-hunting but without any visible success. The father's feelings of emasculation can only be countered by an aggressive projection of his virility, and, although they rebel now and again, he rules over his family members with an iron fist.

While the younger sons manage eventually to escape, Sonu is trapped

with him even after marriage, resigned to a stunted adulthood. "There is never a day when I feel like a father or a husband," he rues, "on almost all days I am still my father's son." The birth of Sonu's daughter is a source of disappointment for his father, who sends the couple for an illegal sex-determination ultrasound when Sonu's wife becomes pregnant once more. She twice conceives daughters, and her father-in-law compels her to undergo abortions both times.

The fourth pregnancy, after many years, results in a son, who grows up and gets a girl pregnant in school. The girl's father shows up at the tuition centre where Sonu works, to ask for money. Sonu immediately goes home and thrashes his son, but his father puts an end to it, dismissing the whole thing as a "silly mistake" and laughing it off. "You are in a hurry to be a man, are you?" he says. "He hasn't even got his beard and look at him." Sonu's mother

also joins in the giggling and compares her grandson to her middle son, before scolding Sonu for beating "the poor chap for nothing last night." Papa orders him not to give money to the girl's father but, in a moment of rebellion, Sonu secretly hands him what he can spare. Riding on the momentum of his actions, he decides to move out of his father's house but then reneges on this momentary impulse, because he has grown too complacent to rebel now.

Another figure useful to consider in the novel is Sonu's school friend, Tokas, who vanishes one day before his daughter's fourth birthday. After a few months, he informs his family that he has renounced the material world to become a sanyasi and has dedicated himself to the service of Krishna. His apparent abandonment of traditional masculinity is actually not a rejection at all, since it is in line with caste-Hindu beliefs about the four stages of life. "After the initial shock, some of

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them praised his sacrifice,” Sonu recalls. “The house where a boy becomes Bhagwa, leaves home to be in the service of Lord Krishna was seen as auspicious. We acquired a special status in our community now.” This sentiment, though, is limited to those beyond the ambit of Tokas’s immediate family, which feels more cursed than blessed.

These novels unravel the traditional positions of fathers as the heads of families, focussing on the man conceivably meant to behave as provider and protector—both in terms of bodily as well as social security—but demonstrating instead the cracks in his person and, by extension, in the patriarchal set-up. *Sakina’s Kiss* questions the interaction of broader political and economic legacies with the institution of the family. As Shanbhag recently said in an interview with the journalist Jahnvi Sen, the novel addresses the backlash to women’s increasing awareness and authority, and questioning of masculinity as a result of globalisation. “The rise of all that we see of the right wing—that’s what my novel is trying to say—is a response to this challenge.” In *The Anger of Sainly Men*, the fact that the father struggles to play the sole provider turns into a study of how he nevertheless continues to retain power, and of how his beliefs and actions reverberate dangerously in the lives of the next two generations.

AMITABHA BAGCHI’S *Half the Night is Gone* is also concerned with generational legacies and family history but focusses more on wealth and capital. It has a nested narrative—the narrator, Vishwanath, is a writer, working on his latest novel. His parts are epistolary, with letters addressed to his editor, his brother, his son’s ex-fiancée and his wife. Most of the book is taken up by his novel-in-progress, which is loosely based on his life, especially his relationships with his father and brother.

The novel opens with the exploits of Mange Ram, the champion at the local akhara who has wrestled ever since he was a little boy and is portrayed as being at the apex of masculine achievement: “On carefully staged ceremonial occasions, he presented living evidence of the superhuman possibilities of the

human body, a body whose presence was an endless source of fascination.” But it is his employer, Lala Motichand and his family, who are at the centre of the narrative. Motichand has two sons, Dinanath and Diwanchand. There is also Makhan Lal, an illegitimate son he had had with a woman in Agra, who teaches at a school Motichand started. Makhan Lal’s parentage is a secret, but people are quick to figure it out. While Diwanchand dotes on his elder brother, Dinanath is always a little reserved, especially since his brother was a sickly child who refrained from physical activity and he felt ridiculed by association. He starts blaming him for the death of their mother, since she fell ill after her second pregnancy. Diwanchand, meanwhile, continues to hero-worship his brother.

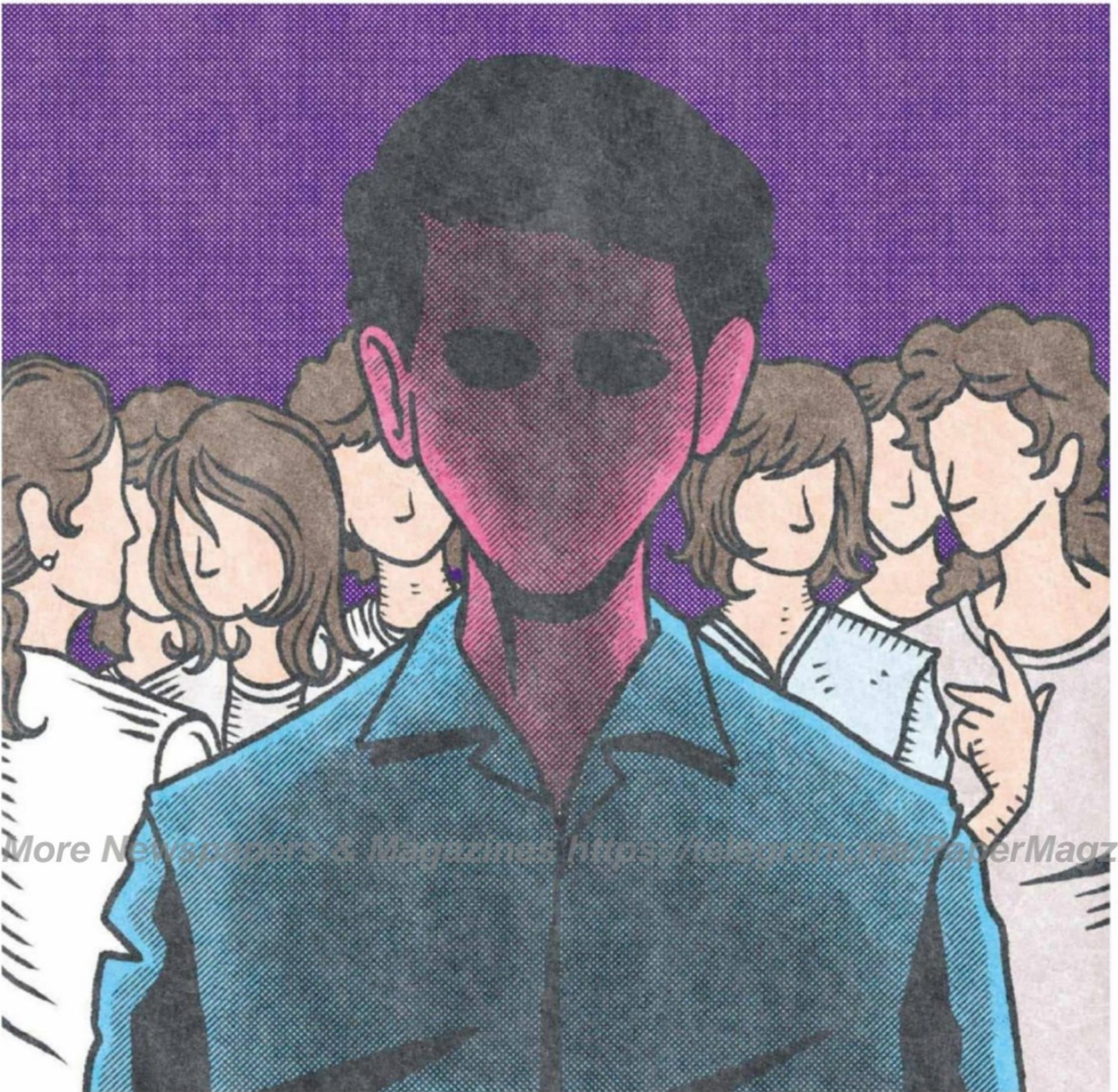
The story does not devolve into the familiar trope of brothers fighting over their inheritances but instead closely examines their layered relationship. They are at odds with each other, especially since Dinanath is angry at Diwanchand for abruptly disappearing to Varanasi and cutting all ties, and reunite only when their father is dying. They have both mellowed—one realising his error in lashing out at his little brother for his mother’s death, the other having renounced who he was. Between them is also the third brother, the one they never knew. Diwanchand is especially struck by this. “What did that mean: half-brother?” he wonders. “Did half the brotherhood come through one parent and half through the other? Why had Pitaji hidden him from us? Maybe he could have been the playmate, the confidant, that I never had when I was younger, the person who was not separated from me by a wall of anger.” Motichand’s death becomes an impetus for uncovering family secrets, but the reunion is bittersweet. While the passage of time might have dulled the edge of anger and enabled some redemption, it has also rendered the chasms and scars permanent. The hold of the past remains strong.

If a man is unable to show emotion besides anger, the book suggests, his relationships, especially with male relatives, will be commanded by the

tyranny of the unsaid. The characters, as well as their narrative, were created by Vishwanath to vicariously examine his relationship with his own younger brother, Jagannath, which unfolds through the letters running alongside the stories in the novel. Vishwanath acknowledges that he blamed him for their mother’s death, judged his career choices and castigated him for his religious beliefs. While he holds onto what he considers to be a benign Hinduism, Vishwanath’s letters bring up the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. At one point, he even holds Jagannath guilty for the demolition, although he was not responsible. He also recalls his frequent appeals to his brother to give up his surname, writing that he has

realised why you continued to write your name as Jagannath Pandey, why you had refused to follow my example when I officially changed my name from Vishwanath Pandey to just Vishwanath. The brahminhood you had preserved in the face of my exhortations to you to repudiate it had come in handy once you reached the US. You had never considered it a mark of shame the way I had. You had embraced it and, even worse, you had used it to earn money and status in the way generations of brahmins before us had.

Here is an old man at the end of his life, late to remorse but nevertheless eager to make amends. These letters provide a glimpse into his psyche as he attempts to be self-reflexive and critical of his actions and conduct, particularly clear in one addressed to Jagannath. “Between you, my dearest brother, and



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The novels' treatment of "side characters" reveals a lot about their exploration of how women fit into family set-ups and the agency they possess, or do not, in their marriages.

me, there stretches this ancient road called brotherhood,” Vishwanath writes. “You have waited for me on this road, and you have called to me so often, but I have not been able to walk this road. I want to walk this road now, with whatever strength have left, for whatever days I have left.” It is a moment that signals the framed narrative’s dénouement and showcases a vulnerable masculinity, one that is able to finally reckon with its shortcomings.

ALL THESE BOOKS have women characters, but they are often at the periphery. The novels’ treatment of these “side characters” reveals a lot about their exploration of how women fit into family set-ups and the agency they possess, or do not, in their marriages. Both Viji and Rekha are central characters in *Sakina’s Kiss*, and Rekha has a cordial relationship with her father’s uncle, Antanna, who is loving and kind towards her. This, Venkataramana notes, is in stark contrast to how Antanna behaved towards women of the previous generation. The briefest mention of his unnamed aunt, though couched in rumour, accentuates his sketch of his uncle as the archetypal patriarch. “There is talk that his short temper had a part to play in his wife’s death,” he recalls. “Fearing his reaction, she apparently kept quiet about a lump in her breast until it was too late.” There is precious little about her life, except that she was a vessel for Antanna to offload his rage over the minutest of details and take out his anger at his sister-in-law, Venkataramana’s mother, who was not under his control. “After his wife died, he began directing his anger towards the changing times and a world in which everything was going to the dogs. That world gave him more than enough opportunity to complain about women.”

In *The Anger of Saintry Men*, Sonu’s friend’s father is having an affair with a “dark, short, and stumpy” woman who “hardly seemed like the affair-type”—the descriptions underscore how fairness, which is inextricably linked to caste and class status, is reified in India. Anju, another character, is sent off to live with the family after her affair with a boy from an oppressed caste is discovered. In their view, the

boy’s wealth cannot elide his caste. Anju’s own caste is never explicitly revealed, but the family’s attitude towards the dynamic makes clear they are dominant-caste. Sonu catches Anju kissing his younger brother, and snitches to their mother. Anju is summarily packed off, though nothing happens to the brother, and the mother declares, “Thank God, she has gone, what a burden the girl was, always prancing around with her chest out, looking for new prey like a jungle cat.” This offence is so great that the mother also retroactively victim-blames her for being sexually harassed by the old man at the local flour mill. “Who knows what happened at the chakki?” she says. “Thank god I only have boys.”

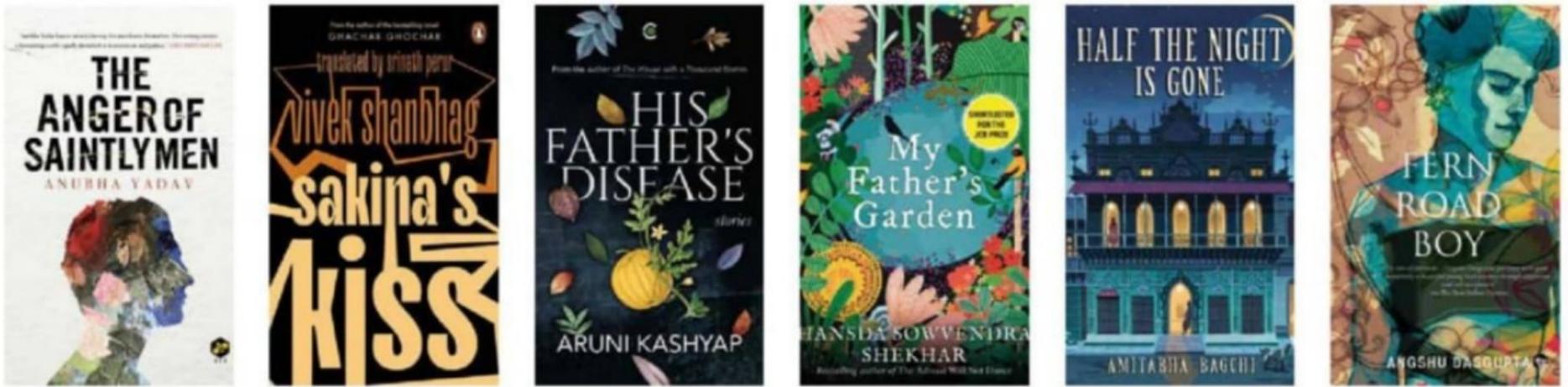
The last letter that Vishwanath drafts in *Half the Night is Gone* is addressed to his wife, Vimla, who only makes an indirect appearance in the novel in his letters to other individuals. Much like the other letters, he is morose about his past behaviour and repentant about treating her like a doormat. Vishwanath has selfishly thought only of himself, concentrating on his career and his writing, palming off the household responsibilities to Vimla but still preventing her from being an equal partner in their marriage. His novel contains numerous married couples, who seem to be perpetually navigating strife of some sort. Motichand had an affair with Lajvanti, Makhan Lal’s mother, and visited sex workers. In a telling section, Lajvanti’s husband laments his loss of power when his wife becomes Motichand’s mistress and develops fanciful airs, making him a laughing stock. He learns, “to his great despair, that, by losing his authority over the one woman the world has assigned to his control, he had landed in one of the few situations in which a man could not escape ignominy by highlighting a woman’s failings.”

Eventually, Motichand abandons Lajvanti, despite continuing to provide for her and Makhan Lal. She lies to her son that Motichand had secretly married her but could not call her home because of his first wife. In reality, “Motichand had simply forgotten about Lajvanti and his child. The same distance and

passage of time that had made Lajvanti build up their relationship in her mind had helped him diminish it in his own mind till it became just one more monthly entry in the munshi’s ledger.” He only remembers her after her untimely death and writes to his estranged son to tell him that his maintenance will continue. While Lajvanti’s character is seemingly there only to flesh out Makhan Lal’s backstory, it is a complex one that takes up space. However, as Supriya Nair’s review of the book pointed out, it does have a “pageant of helpless, largely silent women”—Motichand also has a daughter, who is never really mentioned, for instance, and there is not enough of Vimla’s perspective to know how she feels about her marriage.

HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR’S *My Father’s Garden* opens in media res, as the unnamed narrator, a student and mostly closeted gay man, has a sexual encounter with Samir, his junior at a Jamshedpur medical college. Over the years, he has had discreet sexual relationships with fellow students who portray themselves as straight, avoid intimacy, are aloof in public and pretend to be close friends who are officially seeing women. They are apparently in it just for the physicality of the sexual act, which they dissociate from the attraction of homosexuality and approach in a dehumanising, disembodied way. The narrator indicates that Samir has resigned himself to being a clandestine plaything. “He had many names for me when we fucked. Endearments that made me dizzy; I had learned to find pleasure in self-abasement.”

The book explores how, in the all-male college environment, men are pressured towards boasting about sexual prowess and exploits, demonstrations of physical strength, amount of alcohol intake, using slurs, and owning “macho” motorcycles. In foreplay too, they replicate a heterosexual dynamic, where the protagonist assumes the feminine role—Samir, for example, calls the narrator “jaan,” teases his clinginess and wishes he was a woman. The protagonist demands more closeness, but his attempts at moving beyond inebriated sex are strenuously rebuffed.



Dominating him, making him dependent on their attention, is their twisted way of establishing their superior masculinity.

The first two sections of the book, titled “Lover” and “Friend,” spell out the narrator’s adventures and disillusionment in those relationships, and, in line with the title of the book, the third section explores his relationship with his father. He reveals the “sense of disquiet I felt whenever I thought of my father, and what he would think if he knew what was going through his son’s mind. I loved him, and perhaps he loved me too, though he was never a man to say that to me. But I knew what he expected of me, how disappointed he would be if he ever came to know that his son would not become the man that he thought he should be.”

His father, a reticent man who seems to have cared for his family, has already been disappointed by a failed political career. The narrator’s Santal identity does not really come into play at college, since he is not the only Santal student there, but the later sections of the book explore the discrimination his father and grandfather faced, and how their political ambitions were thwarted as a result of their identity. Ultimately, the father retreats into his garden, his refuge and a reminder of life in his home village. When the narrator has a breakdown over one of his past lovers and self-harms, he packs his bag and goes back home to recuperate. While his father does not really broach the subject and is busy with his garden, they forge a tentative connection and slowly mellow towards each other.

In the titular story of Aruni Kashyap’s *His Father’s Disease*, Neerumoni is upset that her son, Anil, takes too much after his father, down to secre-

tive habits. She had lived happily with her husband until she caught him in bed, one afternoon, with her younger brother. Within this story, homosexuality is a transmissible disease, a cursed legacy passed on from father to son, which disrupts the heterosexual nuclear family. The first time Anil has a man over, his mother sits by the pond and weeps. “He has acquired his father’s disease,” she thought, mourning her only son.”

Both the mother and the son do not acknowledge the “disease,” brushing past it in conversation. However, here, queerness is another form of patrimony that cannot be rejected. According to the mother, Anil only loved one man. A page later, it is obvious that their first encounter was hostile, with this man effectively raping Anil after he visits his home, in rural Assam, with a troop of soldiers, on a seemingly routine check for insurgents. Neerumoni assumes Anil’s abuse is a result of his “womanly” good looks and wishes that he “didn’t have that pair of almond eyes with bow-shaped brows that allowed him to play Draupadi.” This is also similar to how sexual relations are coded in *My Father’s Garden*, where even homosexual relationships follow the stereotypical script of heterosexual alliances.

Anil soon reconciles with the older, “manlier” man, Gurmail, who is married, with two daughters. His mother finds it baffling that her son ends up liking a “man ‘who had committed atrocities upon him.’” When the other residents of the village finally learn that Anil is attracted to men, they are largely nonplussed but continue to see it as a curable illness, assuming that Anil would just have to “take good medical care once he became head-

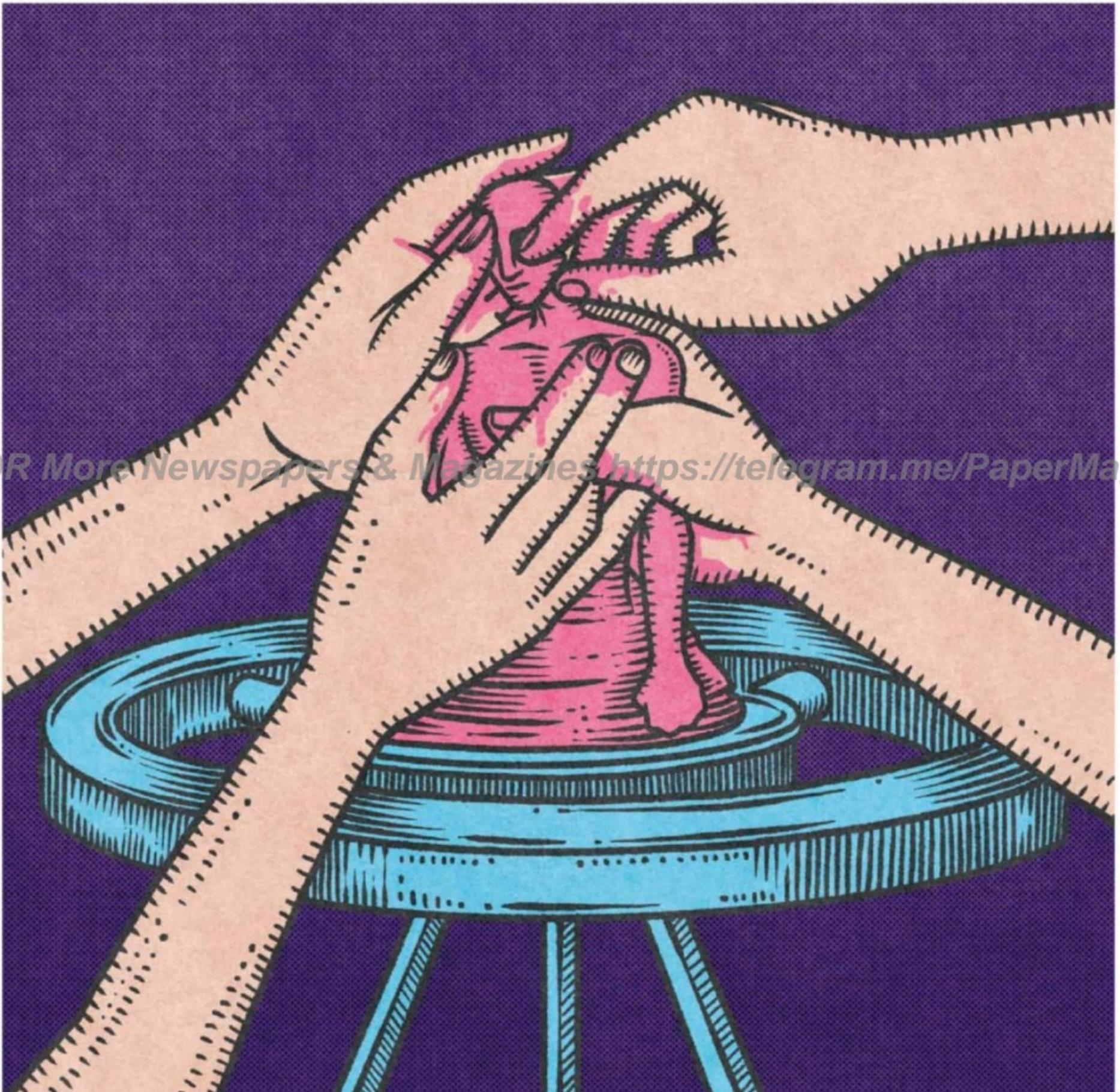
man.” Still, he experiences attempted violence as a consequence—an attack from an armed assailant and, later, his house being set on fire. It is clear that these are measures to eradicate Anil’s supposed illness. His mere presence and what he does in the privacy of his home threaten to destabilise the order of things. While the attempts on his life are unsuccessful, the trope of gay tragedy prevails and Anil chooses to immolate himself.

In both these stories, sons are burdened by their fathers’ actions. It is clear that they will always fall short, or perhaps live up to expectations too well before spiralling into self-destruction. Happiness is not in store for them, especially if they attempt to embrace their queerness. The unnamed narrator of Shekhar’s novel never gets the affection he wants, and his romantic and sexual entanglements, always hidden, barely find any mention in the second and third sections. Kashyap’s protagonist has a better chance at a seemingly loving relationship but it, too, can never be public, and the censure directed at him results in his suicide. Shekhar’s protagonist cannot frankly talk to his father because of the latter’s reticence and the distance between them. Anil cannot do the same because his father is dead, and he is unaware that his father suffered from the same “malady,” making him blind to his mother’s agony. As sons, they have to make do with what they have.

Queerness gets a different treatment in other books, especially when centred around the lives of young boys. The protagonist of Angshu Dasgupta’s *Fern Road Boy*, Orko, has always felt uncomfortable within his body and at odds with his assigned gender, wanting to reject his boyhood since he was

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These novels unravel the traditional positions of fathers as the heads of families. They focus on the man conceivably meant to behave as provider and protector but demonstrate instead the cracks in his person and, by extension, in the patriarchal set-up.



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little. Much like Arjie from Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*—the books, both coming-of-age stories, resonate a lot with each other—he used to wear his friend's frocks and mother's old saris, and apply makeup in secret. Both Orko and Arjie experiment with gender presentation and grow into their queerness, although, in the latter's case, there is the added context of the Sri Lankan civil war, while *Fern Road Boy* limits itself to the domestic sphere and is much quieter on larger political questions.

Orko is quite attached to his mother, an attachment that grows stronger after her untimely death, and his repudiation of masculinity appears to be an attempt to get closer to her. The night she dismisses his desire to wear earrings, he prays to be turned into a girl. He is heartbroken when he does not change: "he ran his fingers through his hair, even before he was fully awake. He was disappointed when it felt familiar: short, rough, bristly near the back of his neck. He felt his earlobes, but there were no holes." This disappointment is followed by a realisation "that he was stuck being a boy. He wasn't going to grow up and be like his mother. He was never going to wear a dress, or a saree. He would never have earrings." On being told that he is a boy because he has a penis, he suggests having it cut off because he does not feel like a boy.

Orko's refusal to stay within the bounds of prescribed gender roles mark him out for ridicule and highlight aberrations that need correcting, as the coach of his football club is quick to point out. He links the taunts and bullying that Orko faces from other boys to his actions. "They don't take you

seriously because you have a disease," he says, accusing Orko of walking like a girl and crying at the slightest provocation. "Start behaving like a man and no one will dare bully you. You'll find that they're nice boys after all." The coach takes it upon himself to fix Orko, making him walk on chalk lines to alter his posture and movement, and violently raping him, which he is meant to silently endure "like a man." This rendering of queerness as pathology carries echoes of *My Father's Garden* and "His Father's Disease." But while, in those cases, there are no conscious attempts to bring the queer characters in line—though Anil does face violence—Orko, because of his young age, is subjected to corrective measures and punitive violence so that he can "develop into a man," through collective coercion.

"I have always wished I was a girl," Orko finally confesses to Brishti, his new friend at school. The pretensions of masculinity he is compelled to put on envelop him like ill-fitting skin, suffocating him and forcing him to be who he is not. The novel underscores the pathos of lost hopes: "He would have a husband—a bearded man, with curly hair. It would be nice if the man wore spectacles, but it wouldn't be terrible if he didn't. They would have two daughters, and he would take them swimming every day. Now, of course, he knows that he isn't going to grow up to be a woman." He has to constantly keep up "a charade of sameness," wondering how long before he is found out, while feeling a persistent lack of belonging in any space.

In these narratives, boys and men are marked out for possessing features considered feminine, making their masculinity suspect for other characters. Anil and Orko are undermined in this way, as is Arjie, cast into a feminine role instead of broadening the ambit of manhood altogether for a more radical definition. For these characters, the rite-of-passage to manhood means losing the simple ease of boyhood and acquiring the hard edges of adulthood, a toll that can be insidiously exacting, despite the privilege and control that masculinity bestows. Violence, physical and sexual, is central to their story—

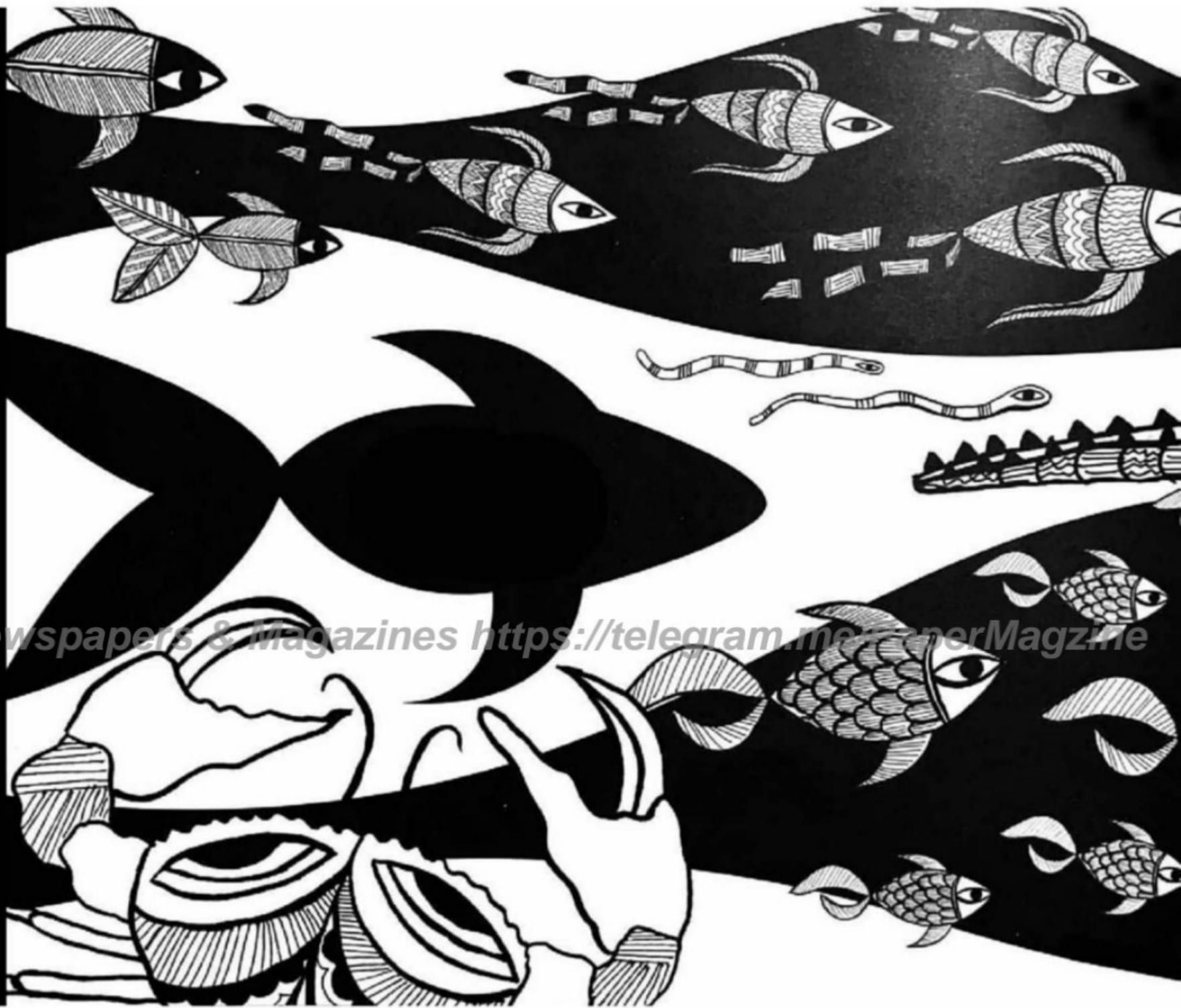
which is also evident in other recent books, including *The Scent of God*, set at an elite all-boys boarding school run by a Hindu monastic order in the late twentieth century. The book suggests, though never explicitly, that the monks, supposedly celibate renunciates, as well as the other male teachers, have been sexually abusing the boys under their care for years. It is a gross perversion of the father-son dynamic that undergirds life at the ashram, where legitimate relationships between students are taboo. The book describes the protagonist as quiet, with a "soft and soft palm, almost like a baby's," and "a delicate face that looked like it had been carefully sculpted." As with Orko and Arjie, here, too, is a certain kind of bodily fragility that is alien to the realm of the traditional masculine.

As the writer and filmmaker Paromita Vohra notes, patriarchy "tells men they are special and entitled to primacy – but it only celebrates those men who succeed by its narrow standards. Life is an exam question with one right and one wrong answer—dominate or be dominated. If you are not the winner, you are obviously the loser, worthy of humiliation." The rigidity of these unspoken rules constricts self-expression, muddying the characters' interactions with other men, while the female characters navigate the violence that comes their way, or, as visible in certain instances, internalise and propagate those rules themselves.

These books deliberate on how men are brought up into masculinity, how they deal with dictated norms and the expectations placed upon them, and how they attempt to rebel against or escape these strictures or become consumed by them. Despite overarching similarities, this process is not uniform, as men from different backgrounds face distinct expectations that are shaped by class, caste, religion or other aspects, and there is no monolithic experience to be had in the first place. Ultimately, these narratives shake our collective faith in the rough sketches we have taken to be concrete blueprints for sexual identity and gender expression, and the ideals of masculinity and femininity, providing us a way to rethink family, community and belonging. ■

Familiarity and Hope

READING SANTAL AND NISHNAABEG CREATION STORIES



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/ COMMUNITIES

HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOSKI JAIN

ABOUT A DECADE AGO, when I worked in Pakur, a district in Jharkhand's Santhal Pargana, I often took the train from Howrah, in West Bengal. On one of those journeys, a co-passenger and I got talking. I could tell that they were not Santal, but they knew Santali. We spoke in English, but, upon learning that I was Santal, they asked, "*Hod kanam?*"—Are you a Hod?

"Hod" is a Santali word that means people. When we say, "We are Hod," we do not just mean that we are people; we mean that we are Santal. To non-Santals, we usually introduce ourselves as Santal. Among other Santals, we are just Hod. In my childhood, I often heard fellow Santali-speakers call our language "*Hod rod*" or "*Hod adang*"—the language of the Hod. Over time it grew clearer for me that Santals saw ourselves as *the people*. The fact that we describe ourselves, our community, with a word that means "people" shows that we see this earth as our own and ourselves as its only human inhabitants. In a way, perhaps subconsciously, we assert that we were the first people on this earth.

Santals make up the third-largest indigenous community in India. As I learnt more about fellow indigenous peoples in the country, I came to know that the community known officially as Gond, the second-largest indigenous community, prefer to be identified as Koitur. In an essay for this magazine, Akash Poyam noted that the term "Gond" is an "outside imposition." The word Koitur, in Gondi, also means "people." I marvelled at this similarity in the languages of two of the country's largest indigenous communities and at how, over centuries, we have held the belief that we were the first people on this earth.

I recently read *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*, by the academic and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. The book, first published in Canada by Arbeiter Ring Publishing, in 2012, before

adivaani republished it in India, two years later, explores the Nishnaabeg language, intellectual traditions, creation stories, celebrations, processions and protests, and contemplates the community's place in Canadian society. Both Arbeiter Ring Publishing and adivaani have published works relating to minorities, and the latter has published specifically on Adivasis—books that would either be invisible on the rosters of bigger, mainstream publishers or be relegated to lists of academic titles.

Soon after, I returned to two remarkable books that revolve around Santal creation myths: *We Come From The Geese* and *Earth Rests On A Tortoise*, both published by adivaani in 2013. Written by one of the founders of the publishing house, Ruby Hembrom, and illustrated by the Bhopal-based graphic designer Boski Jain, the books are aimed at younger readers. Through lucid phrasing and gorgeous black-and-white illustrations, they narrate the creation of the earth and of humans. According to

their forewords, they were "written to rescue one of the many stories of the Santal people."

Reading these books, it was illuminating to learn how central the tortoise and water are to the creation stories of indigenous peoples, and also how similar the ideas or imaginations of the indigenous peoples were regarding their—our—origins.

WE COME FROM THE GEESE begins with the lines: "In the beginning there was no visible land. Everything was under water." The words appear in the midst of abstract semicircular patterns, signifying waves in the water. "Thakur Jiv, the Supreme Being was present," says the following page, which contains an illustration of a pair of eyes that reminded me of the eyes in Kathmandu's Swayambhunath complex, or in the paintings of Jamini Roy. "As were the Bongas," the next page says, with seven smaller pairs of eyes against a black backdrop, signifying the ancestral spirits. The book goes on to narrate the creation of humans from clay. The mythical horse Sin Sodom destroys them, following which Thakur Jiv creates a pair of geese in-



stead, named Has and Hasil. From their eggs came humans, who were named Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi—Old Man and Old Lady Pilcu.

Earth Rests On A Tortoise also contains illustrations of the eyes of Thakur Jiv and the Bongas, and it continues the story. The earth is covered with water, and the geese plead before Thakur Jiv: “You have given us life, but no place to rest. Everything is under water.” With the help of Sole Hako, Katkom, Lendet and Tayan—prawn, crab, earthworm and crocodile, respectively—the earth is reclaimed from beneath the surface of water and placed on the back of Kachim, a tortoise, whose “feet are fastened to four corners.” This created an island, on which grew vegetation, where Has and Hasil found a place to rest and breed. The books state that they are adapted from the missionary A Campbell’s 1892 essay “Santal Traditions,” published in the *Indian Evangelical Review*, and described by the late theologian Timotheas Hembrom—Ruby’s father—in his book *The Santals*, over a century later.

In 2012, while I was revising the manuscript of my first novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, I had the opportunity to read *Kherwal Bongsho Dhorom Puthi*, first published, in 1895, by the writer and educator Ramdas Tudu “Reska,” who was awarded a doctorate by the University of Calcutta the same year. Tudu was born, in 1854, in the village of Kaduwakata, which, today, is part of the East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. Over a telephone conversation, Sripati Tudu, an assistant professor at the Institute of Language Studies and Research, Kolkata, told me that the word “Kherwal” is a term for the various clans among the Santals who have, according to the creation stories, a similar origin. “Dhorom” here might not, strictly speaking, mean religion; it is, perhaps, closer to faith. The title, therefore, roughly translates to “A book on the faith and rituals of the Kherwal lineage.”

In a 2022 article, Ruby writes that the first attempt at a textual record of Santal songs and folklore was made by Jeremiah Philips, a US missionary, in 1845—fifty years before the publication of Tudu’s book. “This ushered in the missionary period of documentations and publications, which started emerging from all Santal regions in Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar (Jharkhand), and Assam,” she writes. “These collections included primers, books on Santali language and grammar, common songs, hymnbooks, orders of worship, dictionaries, traditions of Santals, ancient medicinal practices.”

I returned to two books published by adivani that narrate the creation of the earth. Their forewords state that they were “written to rescue one of the many stories of the Santal people.”

However, in a recent conversation with me, she suggested that Tudu’s *Kherwal Bongsho Dhorom Puthi* might be the first attempt by a Santal, rather than Western missionaries, to record our own myths and customs.

In the second edition of the book, published in 1951, the author writes that his “desire to write about Chando Bonga, the Bonga-Buru, how this earth and the people of the Kherwal lineage were created, the lives and sayings of our ancestors, and our faith and customs, and my desire to publish those writings, turned ... life restless for days on end.” Tudu adds that the exercise required him to work “tirelessly, day and night, for twelve years.”

The book was published about forty years after the Santal Hul, led by the brothers Sido and Kanhu Murmu, and about five years before the revolutionary Birsa Munda died in a Ranchi jail. In his introduction to the second edition, the linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes that the book was around seventy pages long and “printed in a thick, Bengali font; even though the language was Santali; with several woodblock printed illustrations.” It is plausible that Tudu wrote his book in Santali, but used the Bangla, or Eastern Nagari, script. Raghunath Murmu, who invented the Ol-Chiki script for Santali, was born in 1905—about ten years after the first edition of Tudu’s book was published.

At the moment, I have returned to reading the sixth edition of the book, published in 2016, in Bangla, by Marshal Bamber, a publisher in Jhargram. The 1951 edition is assumed to be lost and, according to the publishers of the sixth edition, even the Tudu family does not have it. I remember my father telling me that his grandmother, who was unschooled and unlettered, as most Santal women were in the 1940s and 1950s, would regale the children with the illustrations in the copy that our family owned. That spunky old lady

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would spin her own stories from the illustrations. “*Nui do, nui do Marang Buru kanay*”—This one is Marang Buru—she would say, referring to the leading deity of the Santal pantheon. Considering the fact that my grandfather, Ghani Ram Santhal, was a Jharkhand Party legislator at the time, with a probable exposure to happenings in the Santali literary and cultural sphere, I have a feeling that the edition my great-grandmother used to entertain the children was a copy of the 1951 edition.

A rough, abridged translation of the creation myth Tudu narrates would go like this. For aeons, the earth was as it is now, inhabited by humans. However, when humans started disregarding the moral path, Baba Ishwar, the supreme deity, grew angry and created an elephant called Gajamati and ordered it to trample the entire earth. The elephant did as it had been ordered, and the entire earth was flooded with water. Baba Ishwar then held a dialogue with the other deities for twelve years, after which he sat on a mat made of kush grass and created, out of the root of the sirom plant, two birds—Has and Hasli. (There is a slight difference here to *We Come From The Geese*, which specifies that the birds were geese and named Has and Hasil.)

The birds pleaded, “Baba Ishwar, you created us, you gave us life, but in the middle of this ocean, where do we build our nest?” That was when Baba Ishwar asked Marang Buru to summon Horo Raj, the tortoise king, and placed on his back Kari Nagin, the black cobra, twisted around itself so that a stable surface was created, upon which was placed a gold platter. Horo Raj was tied down on all four ends so that he could not move. Baba Ishwar asked Marang Buru to summon Ichag Raj and Katkom Raj—the kings of prawns and crabs, respectively—to dig up the earth from beneath the water. They failed. Finally, it was Ledet Raj—the earthworm king—who was able to gobble earth from beneath the water and excrete it all onto the gold platter placed on the back of Horo Raj. That was where Has and Hasli finally settled down. Baba Ishwar told Marang Buru to spread doob grass, sticky weeds, jujube, sal, banyan and mahua on the reclaimed earth. Plants grew, and the place was named Hihiri Pipiri, and that was where Has and Hasli laid their egg. Two humans hatched from that egg. On the ninth day after their birth, they were named Pilchu Hadam and Pilchu Budhi.

Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back recounts a similar creation myth of the Nishnaabeg, an indigenous

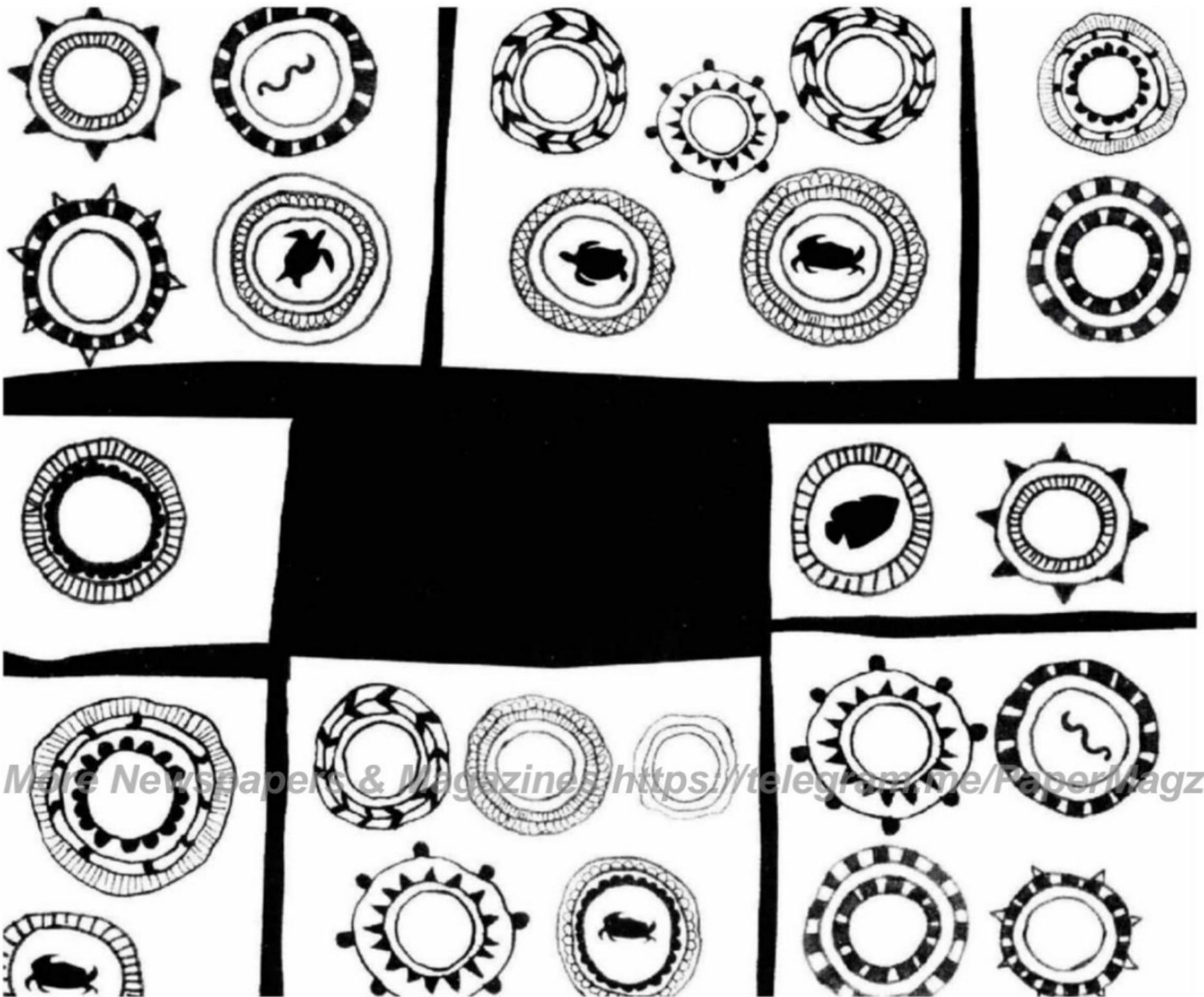
***Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back* recounts the creation myths of the Nishnaabeg, some aspects of which have striking overlaps with Santal creation stories.**

nation in North America that is home to the Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi, Michi Saagig, Saulteaux, Chippewa and Omàmìwinini peoples. Like Hod and Koitur, Nishnaabeg means “the people,” strengthening my notion that indigenous peoples on this earth think alike. The author, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, is from the Michi Saagig community.

Simpson begins the book with a description of a procession of the Michi Saagig people, in June 2009. “With our traditional and contemporary performers gently dancing on the back of our Mikinaag”—the Nishnaabeg word for turtle—“we wove our way through the city streets, streets where we had all indirectly, or directly, experienced the violence of colonialism, dispossession and desperation at one time or another.” This happens in Nogojiwanong, which was later renamed by white settlers as Peterborough, in the Canadian province of Ontario.

My mind immediately drifted to several places here in Jharkhand, whose names have visible indigenous origins but which have, over the years, been corrupted under the influence of the mainstream, non-indigenous tongues. It is true that those names have not been changed entirely, as it was with Nogojiwanong, but neither have they remained what they originally were. For example, the names of Sarjamda, on the outskirts of Jamshedpur, and Patamda, about thirty kilometres away, come to mind. “Sarjam” certainly comes from the word *sarjom*—the Santali word for the sal tree—while “Patam” could be the Santali word *potom*, meaning “covered.” The suffix “-da,” in both names, is likely the Santali word *daak*—pronounced with a silent K—meaning water, with the names of the places then translating to “the water from the sal tree” and “the covered water.” Had the original Santali names prevailed, they would have been called *Sarjom-daak* and *Potom-daak*. The colonised Sarjamda and Patamda have neither the nuance nor the delicateness of those names.

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Later in the book, Simpson narrates “the cycle of creation–destruction–recreation within Nishnaabeg thought.” There was a large flood on the Nishnaabeg lands, which was brought about “not as a punitive act, but as purification designed to re-align the Nishnaabeg with ‘*mino bimaadiziwin*’”—the philosophical concept of leading the good life or following the right path. Several animals floated on a log, trying to find the earth. The Zhaashkoonh—muskrat—dove into the water but drowned, and its corpse floated back on the surface. However, there was a

handful of mud in the muskrat’s paw. Mikinaag, the turtle, agreed to have all that earth piled upon her back, and that was how the “huge island” of North America was created. This part of the Nishnaabeg creation myth has striking overlaps with Ramdas Tudu’s narration of the creation story of the Santals.

IT WAS THE TITLE of Simpson’s book that drew me. Knowing Santal creation stories and the role of the tortoise in our myths, the Nishnaabeg myth of the turtle carrying an entire island had a sense of familiarity. Reading Simp-

son’s narration of the procession in Nogojiwanong was exhilarating: “Our drummers provided the heartbeat; our singers provided the prayers. Settler-Canadians poked their heads out of office buildings and stared at us from the sidelines.”

While I chuckled at the use of the term “settler-Canadians,” I also found an unspeakable pleasure in using the original, Nishnaabeg name instead of Peterborough, wishing for the day when the so-called mainstream, anywhere on earth, would be called what they actually are—“settlers.” My mind

instantly went back to two incidents from my childhood, both from the early 1990s.

My English-medium school, run by a congregation of Catholic nuns, had a certain snobbishness attached to it. One day, it organised a show on the theme “Unity in Diversity.” Children were sorted into pairs, a boy and a girl wearing the regional attire of various communities in India. Whoever directed that show, thankfully, had the astuteness to also showcase the local Adivasi community—there was a girl wearing a longish, red *gamchha* draped as a knee-length sari, and a boy wearing a similar *gamchha* like a dhoti, his torso bare, a cloth tied around his forehead, and a bow and an arrow in his hand. Amid all the colourful outfits, that “Adivasi” pair, in their monochrome, stood out. This could be seen on the boy’s face. He was crying. Not bawling; he just had silent, teary eyes, the kind that suggests someone has been hurt very badly on the inside. I do not remember if that boy and that girl belonged to one of the local Adivasi communities, but I do remember feeling for that boy. I remember how the colourfully dressed participants—and the audience, as well, other children of their age—turned the pair into outcasts.

It was decades before a visible assertion of Adivasi identity became a norm in popular culture and imagination in the place I come from. Now, in this age of Instagram reels and WhatsApp statuses, I can see influencers from the Santal community proudly flaunting the *phuta kacha*, the striped cloth worn by Santals, and animist Oraons proudly waving the red and white striped pennant that has been deemed the symbol of the Sarna faith. The *kacha* is also mentioned in *Kherwal Bongsho Dhorom Puthi*. When Pilchu Hadam and Pilchu Budhi grew older, they were ashamed of their nakedness. Marang Buru requested Baba Ishwar to provide them clothes. Baba Ishwar asked his consort to tear some cloth from her own attire and gave those pieces to the pair. The

How do the concepts and philosophies of different indigenous communities, in such disparate geographies, match so closely?

cloth given to Pilchu Hadam was called *kacha*, while the one given to Pilchu Budhi was called *parhad*.

Since leaving school, over twenty years ago, I have not attended a show of this sort but I am sure that, had it been held today, the children showcasing the local Adivasi community would not have felt out of place. Nor would a teacher have thought of presenting a bare-bodied boy and a girl wearing a knee-length sari as an Adivasi couple.

As I read Simpson’s book, I found echoes of the discomfort that the boy must have felt that day.

I thought about my Ancestors ... of the seeds they had planted so long ago to ensure that we were all there on that day in June, walking down our street together. And if I am honest, I also thought of the shame that I carry inside of me from the legacy of colonial abuse, the unspoken shame we carry collectively as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. It is shame that is rooted in the humiliation that colonialism has heaped on our peoples for hundreds of years and is now carried within our bodies, minds and our hearts.

The book provides an understanding of what the boy must have felt at the event: the overwhelming shame of having to represent a people everyone laughed at. I still remember the misconceptions about Adivasis that people threw at me and my family, memories of which are both troubling and hilarious. In an interview with *The Tele-*

graph, Ruby Hembrom recalled being asked by her non-Adivasi schoolmates if she ate humans or lived on trees. Yet, I would prefer to move on, excusing the ridicule that we received as the ignorance of those who are just too petty to even deserve to be judged by us.

It is not that things have changed for the better now. Social media might have given us Adivasis relatively more visibility, enabling the world to acknowledge our existence, but prejudices remain, especially regarding food habits or the supposed waywardness and recklessness of the Adivasis. I am open to overlooking such prejudices, because there is often no option other than not engaging with those who just refuse to learn. I am one of the few Adivasis in a position of privilege, and my stance may seem irresponsible and stemming from this position. However, I have learnt over time that overlooking such insults is often the best way out. And, thanks to Simpson, I now have a term that I can mutter, as derisively as possible, in my mind as I deal with any instance of prejudice: “ignorant settler!”

This brings me to the second memory that Simpson’s book evoked for me. Some years before the “Unity in Diversity” show, I had an opportunity to be a part of a procession of Santal men to which my father had taken me. My father worked in a copper factory in Moubhandar, a township in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand where I spent my childhood. He was one of the Santal men who had convinced the company management to allow them to build a *jaher*—the sacred grove of the Santals—on land owned by the company, similar to the way temples, churches, mosques and gurdwaras had been allowed to be built on company land. (That land, most likely, would have belonged to the local Santals before the factory came up during the colonial era, with further acquisitions taking place once the factory was nationalised after Independence, so my father and his companions were merely reclaiming

what was once ours, but that question would need a separate discussion.)

Santals celebrate the Baha festival at the advent of spring, most often during the month of March. The word “*baha*” literally means flower in Santali, and different villages fix different dates on which to celebrate Baha. The worship takes place at the jaher, presided over by the *naikay*—village priest. On the morning of Baha, a procession of men and women, wearing kacha, white dhotis and white saris with red borders, accompanies the *naikay* from his home to the jaher, beating the traditional drums and singing Baha songs.

On that day, more than thirty years ago, my father took me for a Baha procession. The *naikay*, like most Santals in the procession, was a worker at the copper factory and lived in a quarter in the heart of Moubhandar. This meant that our procession moved through the township, on its main road, beating the *tamak* and the *tumdak*—traditional drums—and handheld bell metal gongs. I do not remember how many people were there. But, to a small child, every crowd seems huge, and I want to retain the memory of having been a part of that huge crowd, of watching non-Adivasi people stop their scooters and allow us to pass. It felt good. There was no shame or self-consciousness about being there. Perhaps I was in awe. Perhaps we were proud because, unlike that boy and that girl who were made to feel alone, we were a huge number, coming together as a community. Reading Simpson’s vivid account of the heartbeat and prayers in the Nishnaabeg procession, I immediately recalled that significant day from thirty years ago.

In her book, Simpson introduces us to the Nishnaabeg concept of *Aanji Maajitaawin*, meaning “to start over, the art of starting over, to regenerate”—a concept so pure and forgiving that I had difficulty letting it sink in. It involves the regeneration of an indigenous people who have suffered abuse and exploitation from colonists or dominant sections of society. She writes:

Restorative processes rely upon the abuser taking full responsibility for his/her actions in a collective setting, amongst the person s/he violated, and amongst the people both the perpetrator and the survivor hold responsibilities to—be that their extended family, clan, or community ... The survivors would have agency, decision-making power, and the power to decide restorative measures.

Does this not sound too good to be true? And would not the world be a better, more empathetic place if this were to happen? Recently, a journalist at a major Indian news channel, from a dominant caste, made derogatory comments about a political leader from an indigenous community. If we, the indigenous peoples, were to seek a restorative process, would the perpetrator take full responsibility for his actions, before a collective audience of the people he mocked? Would we have the agency and the power to decide restorative measures?

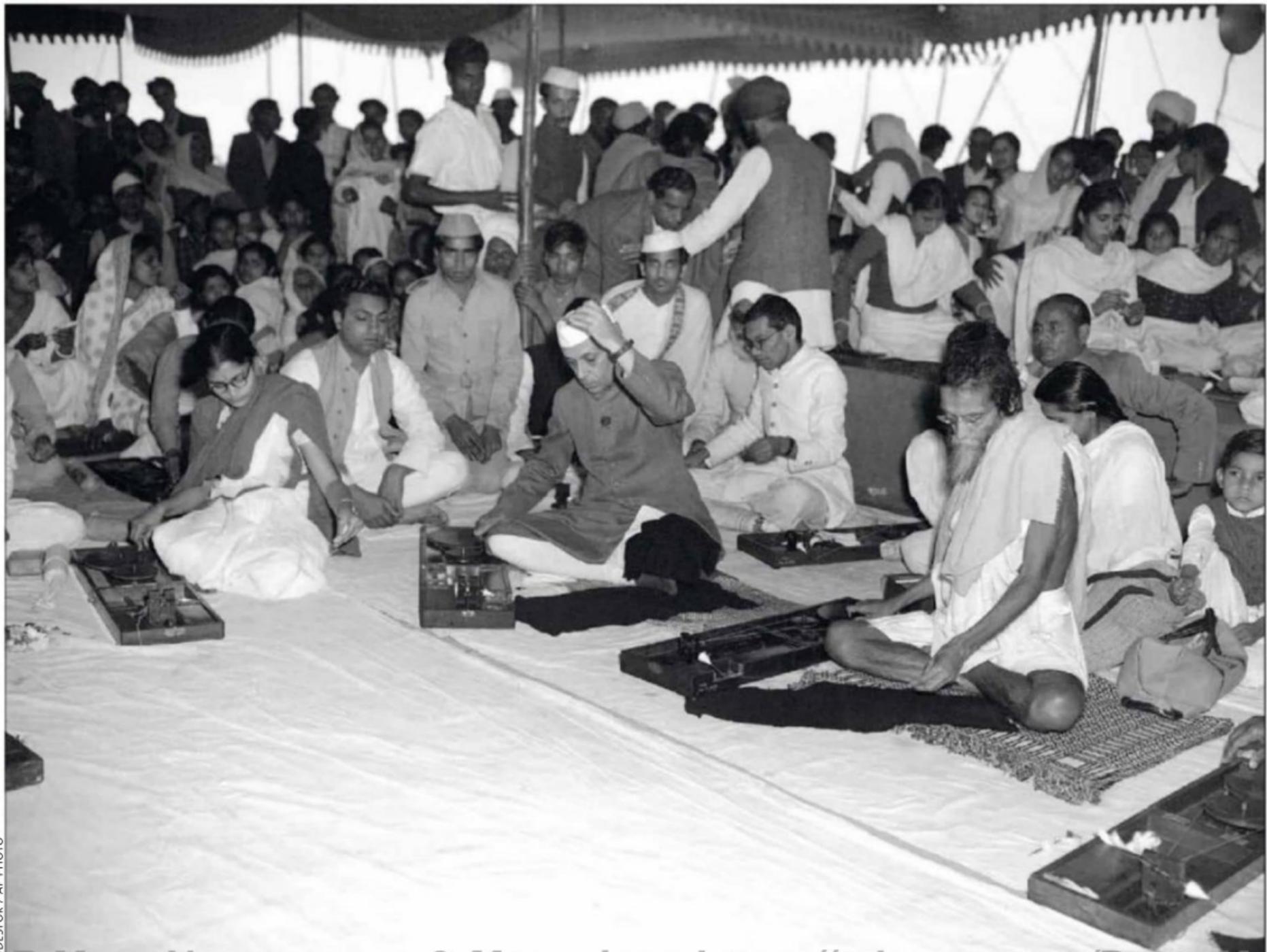
“Imagine government officials, church officials, nuns, priests and teachers from a particular residential school in a circle with the people that had survived their sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuse,” Simpson writes. Imagine that Savarna journalist sitting in a circle of the Adivasis he mocked.

I wonder if the concept of *Aanji Maajitaawin* could become a reality in India. I have seen business houses—usually publishing houses based in Canada and Australia—acknowledging on their websites that their businesses are housed on land that originally belonged to the First Peoples. I wonder whether business houses in India would acknowledge that they have their factories on land that originally belonged to indigenous peoples, instead of displaying flashy and performative initiatives aimed at indigenous peoples displaced from those very lands. I wonder whether a particular corporate house would acknowledge that its coal mines in the Hasdeo Arand are the traditional homes of Adivasis.

I was not entirely prepared, either, to read that the indigenous people of faraway Canada, like the Santals, believed that the earth had emerged from the water, on the back of a tortoise. It did make for an exciting find—enlightening too—but it left me with even more questions. How do the concepts and philosophies of two different indigenous communities, in such disparate geographies, match so closely? The often hazy and elusive origins of myths should not be expected to conform to strict logic, but it would be interesting to explore possible overlaps in the imaginations of two different peoples, though this would demand a different kind of study altogether.

For now, I return to the anecdote about the train from Howrah to Pakur, from which I digressed. On hearing a non-Santal person talking in Santali and observing with some surprise that they knew enough about Santals to be aware of our concept of “Hod,” I switched to Santali and answered, “*Hoi, iyn hod kanan*”—Yes, I am a Hod, a Santal. ■

Editor's Pick



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ON 13 MAY 1956, Vinoba Bhave—seen here commemorating the first anniversary of Mohandas Gandhi’s assassination—arrived in the Tiruvallur district of Madras to launch his Bhoodan campaign in the region. The campaign called for large landowners to voluntarily give up part of their holdings, so that it might be redistributed among the landless.

Bhave, a former aide of Gandhi, was a national political figure with close ties to the Congress high command. He had come up with the idea of Bhoodan, five years earlier, while visiting the village of Pochampalli, in Telangana. Ninety families controlled the twelve hundred

hectares of cultivable land in the village, which also had five hundred landless families. The village’s Dalits asked Bhave to get them some land to subsist on. After he made a public appeal, one landlord agreed to donate forty hectares. Bhave began making similar appeals in every village he visited, refusing to accept food until someone donated land. He asked large landowners to “adopt” Bhoodan as an additional child when dividing their properties.

As he expanded the campaign on a nationwide scale, Bhave set a target of 20 million hectares—a sixth of all cultivable land in the country. By the time he arrived in Madras, after a successful

tour of Orissa, Bhoodan workers had collected a little over two thousand hectares in the state. Over the next eleven months, with the full support of the Kamaraj government, Bhave walked more than four thousand kilometres, covering all but two districts. Having failed to secure anywhere close to his target, he had pivoted to calling for *gramdan*—the gift of a village—in which residents surrendered all their agricultural land to a “sarvodaya panchayat.” During his 409 halts in the state, Bhave managed to secure 253 gramdans. In 1958, the state government passed legislation providing for boards to oversee the process.