

# Starvation: Orissa nailed

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

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BHUBANESWAR, Sept. 4. — The probe report on the Kashipur "starvation" deaths has exposed the Orissa government's failure in implementing the Food-for-Work schemes and a slack PDS system.

In his report, the special relief commissioner, Mr Hrusikesh Panda, has said the deaths were due to "food poisoning". The report nailed the government on the Food-for-Work schemes and the PDS system.

Mr Panda said the deaths were due to food poisoning. Laboratory tests would determine the nature of poison, Mr Panda said. Mango kernel is eaten almost by all families in the area. Unhygienic habits probably caused the infection, the report said.

Mr Panda said villagers used dirty utensils. Some villagers said they had to eat the kernel, which was at least four days old because they did not have any food. The kernel, kept for days, ferments and produces intoxicants, Mr Panda said. That may have led to the "food poisoning".

But the report does not mention the words

"starvation" or "hunger". It has brought to light the government's inaction in many other areas.

Mr Panda, who toured the affected areas of Kashipur and Koraput, said the foodgrain quota under the Food-for-Work programme had not reached the area. The Antyodaya Anna Yojana had not begun in the districts. There is only one doctor for the Kashipur block, the report said.

These findings have negated the government's tall claims of prompt relief measures, several Food-for-Work programmes and medical teams in the affected districts.

Relief work has been affected by feuds between contractors, the report said. A sum of Rs 15 lakh was sanctioned under the Food for Work programme but labourers are not available.

The government has failed to check money lending in remote tribal areas, the report said. Land reforms have not been implemented.

**Orissa plan allocation:** Orissa got a Rs 3000 crore annual plan outlay even as Mr Navin Patnaik lobbied hard for more Central aid, a report from New Delhi said.

- Editorial: Deaths in Orissa, page 6
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THE STATESMAN

# They call it starvation deaths but it seems more like murder

■ To find who's guilty, look at the overflowing PDS, list of schemes and hungry villagers

SUBRATA NAG CHOUDHURY  
KASHIPUR, (ORISSA), SEPTEMBER 2

**T**WO more died here today, a young man and a woman, taking the toll to 21 in the last 30 days. You can keep arguing—as bleeding hearts did in Parliament and on TV this week—over what to call these deaths: Starvation? Hunger? A mystery mango gruel? But travel across these villages and it becomes clear: if you call it murder, you won't be way off the mark.

To find out who's guilty, follow the trail of one death, look a little bit to the left and the right.

On Monday, 35-year-old Raghunath Majhi of Musripadar village complained of a stomach ache. There was no food at home so he did what tribals have been doing here for years: they store the inside of a mango seed in an earthen pot and, when times get tough, they soak it in water to remove the bitterness, then drink the gruel. His wife Anala says she took him to the nearest primary health-care centre. There was no doctor there—there hasn't been one for as long as the villagers can recall although there is a doctor's post sanctioned by the government.

The attendant at the centre wanted Rs 160 for a bottle of saline drip. As per rules, she should have got this for free. Landless, jobless—only a fifth of the land in the hilly Kashipur block can be cultivated



These villagers in Kashipur will get their lunch when a VIP comes visiting. Reuters

and most of it is owned by big landlords—the wife couldn't pay. So she sold the goat and the hen, her only assets. By the time he got his drip, Anala's husband was dead.

Walk for five minutes from this health-care centre—where Majhi died—and you will see the Panchayat office that doubles as the local Public Distribution System outlet. It's overflowing with rice.

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**EXPRESS  
EXCLUSIVE**

## What got buried with the bodies

■ There are eight schemes to provide "food security" from Andhra's 10-lkg monthly rice quota to Emergency Feeding Scheme. The Indian Express contacted 13 of the 21 families where deaths occurred. Not one of them is a beneficiary.

■ District administration calls deaths food-poisoning but chief medical officer N. Subbarath Reddy says: "Our claim is based on circumstantial evidence and not medical findings."

been done, not one report is "ready."

■ Marigo kernel is blamed for the poisoning. State Chief Secretary calls it "a nutritious food."

■ Local PDS outlet overflowing with rice but there are no buyers. Reason: Most villagers don't have necessary BPL cards; those who do don't have the money.

■ Told about failure of schemes, District Collector says: "So much feeding of the poor isn't good."

# Floods swallow 9000 villages in Orissa

FROM DEBABRATA MOHANTY

**Bhubaneswar / Jajpur, July 19:** Torrential rain in the upper catchment area of Mahanadi and the surging water from Hirakud reservoir have inundated more than 9,000 villages in Orissa.

The surge has killed 38 people and affected more than 60 lakh in many coastal areas and interior districts. A third round of more devastating floods is expected tonight.

With authorities continuing to release water from the Hirakud dam, the flood situation in the coastal districts threatens to spiral out of control. By 3 pm today, 5.46 lakh cusecs flowed out from 33 sluice gates as against an inflow of 4.56 lakh cusecs.

Though the water level at the reservoir stands at 626.65 feet, the authorities are trying to flush out more water as another cloudburst is likely in the upper catchment

area of Mahanadi over the next 24 hours.

The rainfall has been so severe that between June 1 and July 18, the state received an average rainfall of 806.55 mm as against an average of 422 mm for that period.

"The situation has turned worse than expected. It is the most devastating flood in the history of the state.

But the government is doing its best as far as relief and rescue operations are concerned," said revenue minister Biswabhusan Harichandan here today.

Forecasts predict that the flood situation will worsen tonight as a record amount of 16 lakh cusecs of water is expected to pass through the Naraj barrage, flooding more areas in the coastal district. There has been more than 30 breaches in major embankments so far.

The Naveen Patnaik administration has been caught on the wrong foot as a large number of

marooned people were left to fend for themselves. Yesterday, the state government had claimed that the heads of the gram panchayats had been asked to provide relief at the local level.

More 300 people have been starving at Daleisahi village in Jajpur district for the past three days. The village has been completely cut off from the mainland by the overflowing Birupa river. The villagers have been forced to take shelter on the road connecting Daitari to Paradip.

Balaram Dalei (55), head of a 10-member family in the village, had a tough time procuring food. This morning, Dalei and two other villagers went to the local panchayat office at Balichandrapur only to return empty-handed. "I have just taken just a handful of chira (flattened rice) since this morning. Though we have some rice there is no fuel to cook. We have not seen any government of-

ficial since Monday," said Sunakar Dalei. Others like Prahlad Routray had a few thin arrowroot biscuits "donated" by an NGO this morning. The administration has failed to rush relief to villages like Daleisahi, located along the highway, in the flood-affected Kendrapara district. The army has also been deployed for rescue operations.

## Trains cancelled

Nizamuddin-Bhubaneswar Hirakud Express has been cancelled from Nizamuddin on July 19. Bhubaneswar-Nizamuddin Hirakud Express will remain cancelled from Bhubaneswar on July 21. Nizamuddin-Puri Utkal Kalinga Express has been cancelled from Nizamuddin on July 19. Puri-Nizamuddin Utkal Kalinga Express will remain cancelled from Puri on July 22. Alleppy-Bokaro Express will remain cancelled from Alleppy on July 21.



Flood-hit houses in Puri. (AFP)

RELEASE OF WATER FROM FLOODED HIRAKUD DAM MAY CAUSE HAVOC DOWNSTREAM

# Orissa faces yet another deluge of troubles

By Rajaram Satapathy  
The Times of India News Service

BHUBANESWAR: A serious crisis is building up in Orissa with the rise in the water level in the Hirakud dam threatening the safety of the reservoir itself.

The reservoir can at best store water up to 630 feet. But by Wednesday, the water level had already touched 628.35 feet. Chief secretary D.P. Bagchi said 51 of the 64 sluice gates had been opened for faster release of water from the reservoir.

"We know the gravity of the flood situation downstream. But there was no way out. The safety of the dam is paramount," he said, adding, "We are trying our best to reduce the water level of Hirakud to 625 feet. But it seems impossible so soon."

Although the flood water levels in the Mahanadi system have fallen slightly, they are likely to rise further near Cuttack and other areas on Thursday, the day when the released water from Hirakud is expected to arrive, he said. He described the situation as "still critical" and hoped that the worst might be over before the new moon on Friday, when there will be high tide in the Bay of Bengal, blocking the discharge of water into the sea.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister has sanctioned Rs 100 crore as assistance to Orissa. Union minister Pramod Mahajan, briefing the media after a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, said Mr Vajpayee had promised "all possible help" to the state. He said the PM was in touch with chief minister Naveen Patnaik, who had sought Rs 200 crore in central help.

Defence helicopters continued air-dropping food packets for an estimated five lakh people marooned in more than 7,000 vil-



IN TROUBLED WATERS: Villagers use a boat to navigate through flooded Deland, 50 km east of Bhubaneswar, searching for a dry and safe shelter on Tuesday.

lages for the second day on Wednesday. District authorities are working overnight to evacuate people to safer areas. The chief secretary has appealed to the people not to return home as the "flood threat" is not over. All major rivers in the state, including the Mahanadi, its tributaries, the Bramhani, Baitarani and the Subernarekha, continue to flow

much above danger levels at several places.

Mr Bagchi said two dredgers had been pressed into service in Chilka lake to clear the weeds for quicker discharge of water from the Daya and the Bhargavi rivers.

The toll in the current flood in the state has since increased to 34, with five more deaths reported on Wednesday.

Mr Bagchi said several towns like Banki, Athagada, Athamallik and Jharsuguda had been cut off from the rest of the country as the connecting roads had been washed away. Train communication between Howrah and Mumbai and Sambalpur and Anugul had been disrupted, with the tracks being washed away at a few places.

# Naveen drops three 'tainted' ministers

FROM DEBABRATA MOHANTY

**Bhubaneswar, July 9:** Orissa chief minister Naveen Patnaik today axed three ministers, two from the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and one from the BJP, on charges of corruption.

Patnaik said the charges against public works, housing and parliamentary affairs minister Nalinikanta Mohanty, health, family welfare and women's development minister Kamala Das, and rural development and higher education minister Prasanta Nanda were credible.

However, he declined to specify the charges levelled against the ousted ministers.

While Das and Mohanty were ministers of Cabinet rank, Nanda was a minister of state with independent charge.

"My government stands for transparency and trust. We were voted to power on these issues,"

Patnaik told newsmen.

Earlier, a brief statement issued by the chief minister's office said the Governor had accepted the request to "relieve" the three ministers of their responsibilities as ministers.

Though Patnaik did not disclose exactly why he removed the three ministers, it is believed that Nanda and Das had to go as they were involved in "corrupt deals".

However, Mohanty, who is also the working president of the BJD, was possibly dropped for his supposed proximity to Orissa Gana Parishad president Bijoy Mohapatra. Both hail from Kendrapara district.

Police pickets were set up in front of Patnaik's residence and the BJD office here in anticipation of protests by Mohanty's supporters.

A dejected Mohanty said his ouster from the Patnaik ministry was "unceremonious" and some-

thing he could not have anticipated.

"It is the chief minister's prerogative to retain or remove a minister. But he should have spoken to me before taking the decision," the BJD leader said, sitting below a framed picture of him being sworn in on March.

Mohanty promised to "bare" his heart at a press conference tomorrow. "Just wait and watch," he said when asked what his next step would be.

The other two ministers who were ousted, however, refused to speak to the bevy of newsmen who thronged their residences here.

Mohanty's removal has come as a surprise, but Patnaik's decision to relieve Nanda and Das of their ministerial portfolios has sparked muted jubilation among a section of members of the ruling alliance. The Patnaik ministry is likely to be expanded soon.

# Govt soft on Chauhan despite Khalistan call

Amit Sharma and  
Manish Tiwari  
Chandigarh, June 28

THOUGH JAGJIT Singh Chauhan still has Khalistan on his agenda, the Indian government seems to be giving him the kid-gloves treatment. The ruling BJP also seems to be sympathetic towards the separatist leader, though party general secretary and spokesman Maya Singh said that the BJP had no understanding with Chauhan. But Punjab Congress chief Amarinder Singh is categorical: he wants Chauhan behind bars.

And Congress leaders are planning to meet President K.R. Narayanan to discuss the Chauhan issue.

Singh says that Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal is

trying to court militant sections within the Sikh community to counter the Akali Dal's dwindling support from Hindus and moderate Sikhs. "Badal knows that he has lost the support of the people in the State, so he has engineered Chauhan's return in connivance with the Home Ministry," was Amarinder Singh's accusation.

But Chauhan is unfazed. He still wants Punjab to be renamed Khalistan to pave the way for setting up a separate state. And he will not hesitate to take up the issue with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee whom he 'respects' a lot.

Chauhan said that he was specifically quizzed by officials who had whisked him away from the Indira Gandhi International Airport about his views

on Vajpayee. "I told them that I hold him in high esteem and would not hesitate to meet him for renaming Punjab Khalistan," Chauhan said.

"Let me first get the name (of the state) changed to Khalistan. Once I accomplish this task, I will pursue other avenues for the establishment of Khalistan," Chauhan said.

The former Punjab minister, who was in exile for 22 years, said that though the situation in Punjab has become normal, Congress and Akali leaders have not understood the real idea of what Khalistan means. "For them, it still is a slogan to strengthen their vote banks by exploiting the socio-religious sentiments of the Hindu and Sikhs," Chauhan said. He also said that that the Akali Dal and

the Congress had used Bhindranwale and the Khalistan movement for electoral gain. "I am back here to remove misconceptions about Khalistan. I will do all I can to establish Khalistan through talks, debates and by mobilising public ideology," Chauhan said.

He accused Akali leaders of mounting a campaign against the Congress, which had made a 'scapegoat' of Bhindranwale, in the wake of Operation Blue Star to cash in on the 'negative' vote. But despite Chauhan's rhetoric there is a perception that he is politically irrelevant. His arrival in Chandigarh is being seen as a media event which will be forgotten in short order, just as Zaffarwal's homecoming proved to be.

*With inputs from New Delhi*

# I don't support violence, says Khalistani leader

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE *MS/6*

CHANDIGARH, June 27. — "I still stand by the demand for Khalistan, but I don't approve violence," Mr Jagjit Singh Chauhan said tonight on his return to Punjab after spending 22 years in London.

Mr Chauhan arrived in New Delhi last night in a British Airways plane.

He was reportedly interrogated by IB officials today before he left for Punjab in Shatabdi Express.

He reportedly alighted from the plane in a wheel chair, but in Chandigarh, he came out of the train on his own.

Though journalists jostled at the station to have a glimpse of the separatist leader, there was no crowd, not even radical Akali leaders, to receive the self-styled president of the National Council of Khalistan. A lawyer, known for fighting the cases of militants, was among a group of people seen accompanying Mr Chauhan.

Mr Chauhan has been facing arrests warrants at Punjab and Haryana High Court, but his counsel claimed he doesn't face any case anywhere in India. His fresh plea for an anticipatory bail was rejected by the court today. Sources said three sedition cases are still registered against him — one was filed 1981 and the rest were filed in 1983.

The Khalistani ideologue didn't rule out entering politics, but said he wouldn't join any



Mrs Charanjit Kaur, wife of Jagjit Singh Chauhan, who returned to India a week ahead of her husband. — PTI

political party. He is, however, ready to hold talks with anyone, including the chief minister, Mr Parkash Singh Badal.

He was the finance minister in the earlier Akali government, headed by Mr Parkash Singh Badal, from 1977 to 1999. He left Punjab in 1980 on an education visa and in 1982 his passport was impounded.

Thereafter, he led various anti-India activities from London. He was accused of unfurling a Khalistani flag and distributing "Khalistani currency".

"Yes I had raised Khalistani slogan when I was still in Jalandhar in 1977. We had an office in Dilkhusa Market. Abroad, I had distributed a Khalistani map, currency and opened embassies. But you've

*57-8*  
to understand this was all symbolic. I had even met Indira Gandhi and explained to her my concept of Khalistan. I'll explain in detail later what I envisaged by Khalistan."

About his grilling by the IB, he said: "I didn't feel harassed. It's the intelligence personnel's job and they asked me questions as you are doing now."

About his stand on the violent Khalistani movement of 1980s, Mr Chauhan said: "Several Indian news magazines are witness to my statements against violence, even during the height of militancy...No violence will be allowed in Punjab."

There was much confusion at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport over Mr Chauhan's arrival. The foreigners' regional registration office was ignorant about it. An official later said: "None of us knew about it. In fact, this is a big news for us if he has really arrived".

The assistant commissioner of police, headquarters and vigilance, IGI Airport, Mr RC Gaur, said: "When there's a warrant against any passenger, it is the immigration officials who are told to arrest the passenger."

The British Airways expressed inability to disclose details about Mr Chauhan's arrival. A BA official said: "We hand over details of the passengers to authorities soon after the arrival of the flight".

# Sikh separatist leader Chauhan returns, held

REUTERS  
CHANDIGARH, JUNE 27

**K**HALISTAN protagonist Jagjit Singh Chauhan returned to India late Tuesday night after a 21-year-exile in Britain. Authorities detained him on Wednesday on his arrival from London where he lived for two decades in self-imposed exile, his lawyer said.

"Chauhan has been detained by Intelligence Bureau officials in Delhi," Chauhan's lawyer, Ranjan Lakhanpal, said.

Chauhan, who has said he believes in achieving a separate Sikh state through non-violence, told an Indian newspaper in a recent interview he wanted to return home to see relatives and friends.

A medical doctor who became Punjab finance minister, Chauhan is wanted by authorities in Punjab for promoting separatism. Chauhan's passport was revoked on the grounds of "spreading secession" while he was in Britain and he was given one-way travel documents, ear-

lier this year, to travel to India.

Chauhan left India 20 years ago for London where he formed the Council of Khalistan to campaign for a separate homeland for Sikhs that would embrace Punjab and Punjabi-speaking areas of neighbouring states.

Recently another Sikh separatist, Wassan Singh Zafarwal, returned to India from abroad and was arrested. Zafarwal, who has said he wants to enter politics in the Punjab, is still in detention.

Earlier, there were reports that Chauhan had gone into hiding after his anticipatory bail application was dismissed by the Punjab and Haryana High Court today.

On his journey to India from Britain, Chauhan, had travelled as a sick passenger on a British Airways flight and come out of the Indira Gandhi International Airport on a wheel-chair.

Earlier, fearing his arrest on his return, Chauhan had moved the Punjab and Haryana High Court. However, the High Court today dismissed his anticipatory bail ap-

plication on technical grounds that he had not signed the prayer.

Meanwhile, at their Mohali residence, Chauhan's wife claimed that leaders of all shades in Punjab had "all through maintained contact with him".

"All politicians either Akali or Congress during their trips to London always made it a point to meet and interact with my husband," a jovial-looking Charanjit Kaur said here. Kaur said despite difference in ideologies the leaders interacted with him "for hours".

"They used to discuss even non-political and domestic issues," she remarked.

In yet another development, the Congress today declined to comment on Chauhan's return saying it is for the government to take a view as it has all the relevant information.

"We as a political party have not taken a view on the return of Chauhan to India. It is for the government to take a view as it has all the information", party spokesman S Jaipal Reddy told reporters.

INDIAN EXPRESS



# Badal volte-face: N-plant may not be built at Drolli

YOGINDRA MOHAN  
PATRAN (PATIALA), JUNE 13



IT'S a remarkable about-turn: after declaring for months on end that a nuclear power plant would be set up

at Drolli village near Patran, Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal has announced that the plant may not be set up there.

Till date, the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB), in the face of virulent opposition by locals, has maintained that a 450 MW nuclear power plant would be set up at Drolli once the Nuclear Power Corporation (NPC) gave its approval.

However, Badal has said the Punjab government had not made any budgetary provision for a nuclear power plant, nor had the PSEB communicated to the government about its location. Surveys being conducted by the Atomic Energy Department for the location of a nuclear power plant could be routine, said Badal, adding that no decision had been taken.

Perhaps, Badal needs a mem-

ory check: on March 3, he had urged the Prime Minister to grant a nuclear power plant to Punjab, adding that a committee of the NPC and the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board had already visited the state. The only site the team examined was Drolli.

Opposition to the proposed nuclear plant had gathered steam ever since the villagers of Drolli formed a *sangharsh samiti* in January. By April, 24 of the surrounding villages had joined the struggle, which was supported by the Congress.

The PSEB's own site selection committee zeroed in on Drolli after checking out nine sites. In January, PSEB chairperson G.S. Sohal had said, "After examining several sites in the state, we have finally settled on Drolli. I visited the village last week and an NPC team is expected to examine the site within the next month."

A January 10 press release by the PSEB clearly stated that "the site selection team constituted by the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) to identify suitable location for the setting up of the state's first nuclear power plant, had chosen Drolli village near Patran in this district for the purpose."

# Sikh hardliners to declare Bhindranwale a 'martyr'

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

AMRITSAR, June 5. - Controversy over the Sikh radicals' programme to declare slain militant leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale a martyr has come to a head in Punjab. On the eve of 17th anniversary of Operation Blue-star, radical organisations are insistent that Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhism should declare Bhindranwale a 'quomi shaheed' (community's martyr). Analysts interpret this insistence as an effort by hardliners to resuscitate their diminishing clout in the community and keep alive the symbols of 'Sikh persecution' at the hands of the Centre.

The mainstream Akalis, particularly the moderates, led by ruling Akali Dal president Mr Parkash Singh Badal, on the other hand, are keen to avoid a showdown and have been ignoring the utterances of hardliners. Akal Takht Jathedar (chief) Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti who has not yet

replied to the hardliners' communiqué, yesterday cancelled his engagements and rushed to Chandigarh to confer with the moderate Akali leadership over the issue. He was learnt to have asked the radical leaders to postpone their programme of declaring Bhindranwale a martyr at Akal Takht by themselves.

However, hardliners are believed to have stuck to their stand. "We are determined to perform *ardas* (prayer) at Akal Takht as per our announced programme and if we are stopped, *akhand paths* (Sikh religious prayers) will be performed in every village of Punjab. Ours is a peaceful programme and our belief that Sant Jarnail Singh should be declared a martyr is firm," said Mr Kanwarpal Singh of Dal Khalsa, a prominent radical organisation.

Dal Khalsa, Khalra Action Committee, Sikh League, Punjab Human Rights Organisation and Sikh Students Federation, the prominent ones amongst the nine headline bodies, are organising re-

ligious programmes in different gurdwaras of Amritsar and are likely to march to Akal Takht in the Golden Temple complex tomorrow to perform *ardas* (prayer) and declare Bhindranwale a martyr. Akal Takht has already refused permission to Sikh Students Federation (Gill faction) to conduct religious programme in this regard at Akal Takht. If the administration or the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee try to prevent the programme and any unseemly situation results, it is sure to strengthen the hardliners and accord them legitimacy, which is exactly their gameplan. Today, police was present, in uniform as well as in mufti all over Amritsar, specially the Golden Temple complex, housing Golden Temple, Akal Takht and SGPC offices besides numerous religious buildings. Top police officials were huddled in a conference late in the evening to formulate security measures for tomorrow.

With ruling Akali Dal (Badal) raising

emotive slogans in Majitha by-election a few months ago and passing resolutions in Punjab Assembly condemning Operation Bluestar and November 1984 Sikh Massacre, hardliners fear that their relevance is being imperiled. Having ensured the arrest of Wassan Singh Zafarwal, an 'icon' of militant movement and chief of Khalistan Commando Force, Mr Badal has been repeatedly stealing the thunder from hardliners. Hence, the latter's effort to raise an issue which would corner the Akali moderates and set a shrill agenda which moderates may not be able to counter. However, highly placed state government officers confided that utmost restraint had been ordered in dealing with any situation that may arise tomorrow.

Meanwhile, the press in Amritsar today boycotted a press conference of Akal Takht Jathedar. Reporters walked away in a huff as they were kept waiting for almost two hours without any briefing.

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18 JUN 2001

## 'SAINT' ANTONY'S CROSS

Keeping the ministry lean and clean

THE swearing in of AK Antony as Chief Minister of Kerala was on expected lines for it was he who led the seven-party UDF to an overwhelming victory. K Karunakaran's offer to shoulder any responsibility, an euphemism for seeking yet another term in office, was met with a firm 'no, thank you' by Sonia Gandhi, who, however, had to concede his supplementary demand to make his only begotten son, K Muraleedharan, the KPCC president, and send daughter, K Padmaja, to the Rajya Sabha at the first available opportunity. Antony's most embarrassing problem of accommodating K. Balakrishna Pillai, leader of the Kerala Congress(B), convicted and sentenced to undergo five years rigorous imprisonment under the Prevention of Corruption Act, was solved by the Governor, Sukhdev Singh Kang, former Chief Justice of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court, by making it clear that he would not administer the oath of office to a convicted member of the Assembly. Pillai was able to contest the 10 May Assembly election taking advantage of a misinterpretation of Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act which exempts convicted sitting members of legislature from disqualification. The exemption is only up to the end of the term of the assembly of which he is member or a judicial reprieve, whichever is earlier. The bar to a convicted criminal standing for election applies because at some point he ceases to be a member of the old Assembly and at that point he is debarred from contesting. Antony has not been so lucky in keeping KM Mani, leader of the Kerala Congress (M), who has also been named in the graphite case in which Pillai was convicted, from his Cabinet. Antony's problems will start at the time of completing his ministry. Ideally the number of ministers should not exceed 14, one-tenth of the 140-member state Assembly. Having criticised the LDF for its extravagant ways, Antony will have to keep his Cabinet lean and trim.

The treasury is empty and deep in the red. The Indian Union Muslim League, major partner in the UDF having 16 MLAs, is insisting on three more Cabinet berths. The Kerala Congress(M) wants one more. The Congress, which won 63 seats, has four groups. If each group is given two berths, its share including the Chief Minister, will go up to nine. Unless Antony asserts himself and firmly puts down the growing demand for ministerial berths by UDF partners, he will end up having an unwieldy Cabinet. Kerala is going through a severe financial crunch. Antony will need all the skills and co-operation of the constituent parties to pull the state out of the mire into which the LDF have led it.

THE STATESMAN

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# ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS DEFEAT OF THE LEFT IN KERALA

## Missing the wood for the tree

The Left Front suffered one of its worst defeats in Kerala last week. The leader of the front, the CPI-M has concluded that defeat was the result of an alignment of the communal forces. N. Madhavan Kutty rubbishes the argument, says the reasons for the defeat lie elsewhere

**T**HE preliminary conclusions drawn by the CPM State leadership on the calamitous results of the Assembly poll smack of self-defeating political casuistry. They refuse to recognise that the unambiguous verdict reflected the popular sentiment against the Nayanar Government and V.S. Achuthanandan's lack of appeal as the LDF's chief ministerial candidate.

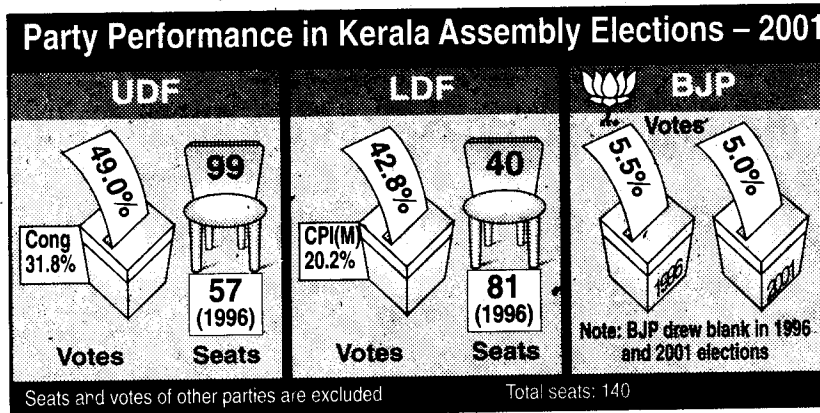
The CPM leaders have every right to believe that the LDF was the victim of an unprecedented gang up of inimical forces and the transfer of the BJP votes to the UDF candidates in several constituencies. But they have not bothered to ask themselves the simple question why the ruling front turned so many people into its enemies and why the front's fortunes should be so pathetically tied to the BJP's electoral tactics. And why, though they do not admit it, thousands of politically uncommitted people who voted for the LDF last time had crossed over to the UDF.

Some of the CPM leaders have gone to the extent of drawing an odious parallel between the LDF rout and the ouster of the 1957 EMS Ministry following the anti-communist liberation struggle. First, nothing that the



A.K. Antony being sworn in as chief minister of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram on Thursday

Nayanar government did in the last five years can even be remotely called radical to merit such an analogy. In fact, the Nayanar Government and the LDF had tried to appease every caste-communal organisation though in the process they might have ended up alienating all of them. Secondly, if the liberation struggle was partly whipped up and wholly sustained by the vested interests, the voting out of the Nayanar Government was a legitimate registration of political protest. Finally, the comparison amounts to an admission that the Left movement in the State stands where it



stood more than four decades ago, that it was unable to prevent a repeat of 1960.

Similarly, the regular LDF charge of the transfer of the BJP votes to the UDF also raises as many questions as

it answers. To begin with, the open BJP support for, say M V Raghavan in Thiruvananthapuram West, or the tacit last-minute transfer of the RSS votes to the UDF candidate, as it happened in Kozhikode-II is nothing new.

It is as old as the infamous 1987 - Bepore-Badagara model.

The ascription of the permanent king-maker's role to the BJP is in a way an indirect admission by the CPM leadership of its abject failure to develop strategic alliances against it in the State. The only time it looked like groping for one was when sections within the party mooted reaching out to the IUML. But, if you remember that, it was nipped in the bud by a doctrinaire VS Achuthanandan.

Also, there is nothing more politically ludicrous than to count out as the LDF's permanent enemy any citizen voting for the BJP or the PDP or following the instructions of the NSS or the SNDP Yogam as the CPM leadership seems to suggest. The idea of choosing between a greater and lesser evil is an ideological construct that ordinary voters are not bound to follow. In their daily life, the choice is more often between an operative and a non-operative evil.

Fallacious arguments and grand conspiracy theories are not going to take the CPM anywhere. The defeat of the LDF was not as adventitious as the CPM leadership is now making it out to be. The Lok Sabha and panchayat poll results were clear pointers to the slide. But no corrective step could be taken nor any restraint exercised to mollify the electorate. The front was so out of touch with reality that it was not able to even sense the size and severity of popular rebuff when it eventually came.

The electoral behaviour of the two party bastions of Thalassery in the North and Varkala in the South alone is enough to reveal the party's plight. In full play in these constituencies were two mega currents that ultimately sealed the LDF's fate across the State: an erosion of the traditional support for the party among Muslims in Thalassery and among Ezhavas in Varkala. I know that this is going to be hard on Achuthanandan, but again the alienation of both sections was mainly on account of him. Here was the very political centre of gravity of the State shifting and the Left had no clue.

# Antony is CM, Muraleedharan KPCC chief

By Our Special Correspondent

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MAY 17.** Mr. A.K. Antony was today sworn in the 18th Chief Minister of Kerala. Mr. Antony's United Democratic Front colleagues, numbering seven, were sworn in Ministers along with him. The Governor, Mr. S.S. Kang, administered the oath of office and secrecy to the Ministers-designate at Raj Bhavan, which was attended by thousands of party workers.

But the day's highlight was the installation of veteran leader, Mr. K. Karunakaran's son, Mr. K. Muraleedharan, as president of the

Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee within an hour of the swearing-in. The induction was in fulfilment of the pre-election promise of the Congress president, Ms. Sonia Gandhi, to amicably settle the row over CLP leader and KPCC president.

The UDF leaders sworn in along with Mr. Antony are Mr. P.K. Kunhalikutty of the IUML, Mr. K.M. Mani of the Kerala Congress(M), Ms. K.R. Gouriamma of the JSS, Mr. Babu Divakaran of the RSP(B), Mr. M.V. Raghavan of the CMP, Mr. T.M. Jacob of the Kerala Congress (Jacob) and Mr. Ganesh Kumar of the Kerala Con-

gress(B). Except for Mr. Kumar, all others are legislative party leaders of their parties.

Mr. Antony, Mr. Raghavan, Ms. Gouriamma and Mr. Divakaran took a solemn affirmation, while the others took oaths in the name of god. Mr. Jacob, whose right hand was injured in the post-election violence, had to affix his thumb impression on the attestation papers after the swearing-in.

Mr. Antony's entire Cabinet would be sworn in only after the UDF deliberates on its size. Similarly, portfolios have not been finalised, though the UDF high-power committee began discussions. The UDF convener, Mr. K. Sankaranarayanan, told *The Hindu* that the committee would sort out the issue without any hitch.

## Swift move

Mr. Muraleedharan's appointment as PCC chief was a foregone conclusion. But what was surprising was the swiftness with which it was implemented.

The incumbent, Mr. Thennala Balakrishna Pillai, was asked to resign Wednesday night, rather abruptly.

The formal announcement of Mr. Muraleedharan's induction was made by the AICC general secretary, Mr. Ghulam Nabi Azad, at a press conference at the KPCC headquarters at Indira Bhavan.

Mr. Azad also announced that all groups in the party in Kerala had been dissolved and the AICC would neither recognise groups nor encourage such activities in the future.

While the new Chief Minister and his Cabinet colleagues held their first meeting at the Secretariat, a customary function held soon after the swearing-in at the

KPCC office, which was swamped by Karunakaran supporters, celebrated the appointment of Mr. Muraleedharan.

Soon after the formal announcement was made, Mr. Muraleedharan, along with Mr.

## On an austere note

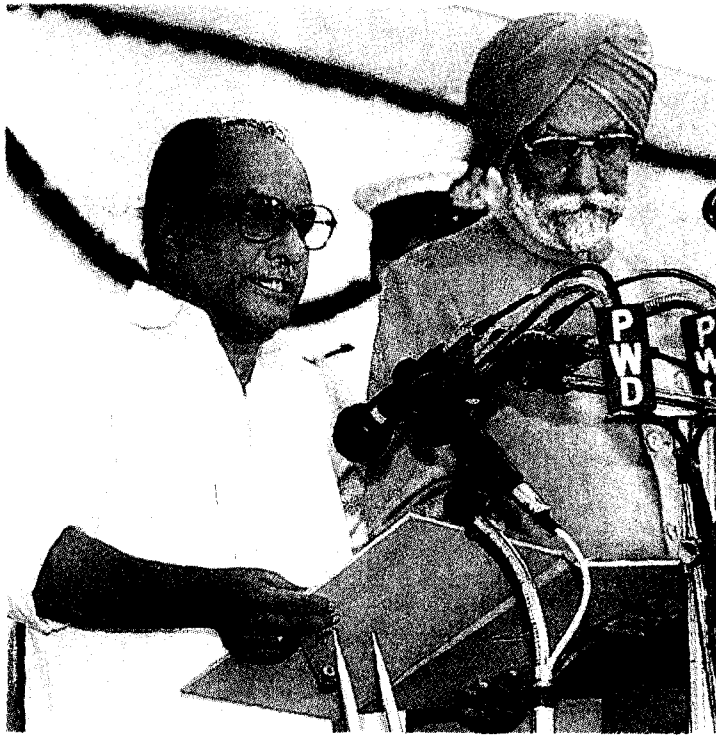
**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MAY 17.** Within hours of assuming charge, the Antony Government today decided to impose austerity measures from the ministerial level to overcome the "acute financial crisis bequeathed by the Marxist-led Government". At its first meeting, the Cabinet decided to put an end to extravaganza and unnecessary expenses.

As the first measure, it was decided to return the two Benz cars used by Ministers to the Tourism Department and not to buy new cars. The ministerial bungalows would not be spruced up and the new Ministers would have to put up with old curtains and carpets. The Chief Minister, Mr. A.K. Antony, said the next meeting of the Cabinet would discuss the State's financial situation, including the need for a white paper. — UNI

Karunakaran, and his sister arrived in separate cars to a raucous welcome by their supporters.

PTI reports from New Delhi:

The Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, congratulated Mr. Antony and "sent him a letter of felicitation", a PMO spokesperson said.



The Kerala Governor, Mr. S.S. Kang, administering oath of office to Mr. A.K. Antony in Thiruvananthapuram on Thursday.

— Photo: C. Ratheesh Kumar

THE HINDU

18 MAY 2001

**KUALA LUMPUR BARTER / KERALA FARMERS RESENT PM'S DEAL**

# 'Palm oil flood will drown coconuts'

By K.P.M. Basheer

**KOCHI, MAY 17.** The railway-project-for-palm oil deal struck by the Prime Minister, Mr. A.B. Vajpayee, with Malaysia during his Kuala Lumpur visit has come as a rude shock to Kerala's coconut farmers who are reeling from the decade's lowest price for coconut oil.

The deal envisages supply of \$1.8 billion (over Rs. 8,000 crores) worth palm oil by Malaysia for a railway project, secured by the Indian Railway Construction Company (IRCON), over five years. This barter means roughly 14 lakh tonnes of palm oil will be pumped into India annually for the next five years, say oil experts.

Kerala's coconut farmers feel that they are being made to suffer for IRCON to win the Malaysian railway project. The heavy import of cheap palm oil is sure to depress the price of coconut oil further. Already, Kerala's rural economy, heavily dependent on coconut and rubber, is in a shambles because of the price tumble continuing for the third year in a row. The record low price of coconut was a major factor in the rout of the Left Democratic Front Government in the recent Assembly elections, though the State Government had nothing to do with the prices.

The cheap palmolein (refined palm oil) flooding the Kerala market for some years now is generally believed to be the chief cause for the coconut farmers' distress. Coconut oil is the Keralite's main cooking medium, but the availability of palmolein at almost its half price has led to the shrinkage of the market and a drastic fall in the price. For this, the

farmers blame the liberalisation and the WTO regime.

## Anti-palmolein drive

The proposed imports at reduced duty are likely to wipe off the gains made by a grass-root-level 'boycott palmolein' initiative launched in the State last year. The initiative, first started at Koorachund in Kozhikode district, had quickly spread to other districts and villages. A couple of districts had even declared themselves palmolein-free. Such a boycott — a first in the country — was hailed as an example of people's resistance to liberalisation and globalisation. The initiative is said to have boosted the consumption of coconut oil by regaining those customers who had opted for the cheap palmolein.

One positive fallout of the anti-palmolein drive was the discovery of new uses for coconut. For instance, tender coconut was promoted as an alternative to bottled soft drinks. And this summer, the sale of several brands of soft drinks came down with several college students shunning bottled drinks.

The price of coconut has been a political weapon for the two rival political groupings — LDF and UDF. The farmers and their political backers have for long demanded that the Central Government raise the duty on palm oil (and palmolein) imported from Malaysia and Indonesia — world's largest palm oil producers.

They point out that within the WTO framework the Centre can raise the import duty by several percentage points. That it did not choose to do so is regarded as the BJP-led Cen-

tral Government's indifference to lakhs of farmers in a State where the BJP could not produce a single MP or MLA. The former LDF Government's perceived failure to effectively lobby with the Centre to get the import duty raised cost it dearly in the Assembly election.

It is when the demand for a hike in the import duty on palm oil has reached a crescendo in Kerala that the Prime Minister struck the Kuala Lumpur deal. Bowing to persistent demands from his hosts for a cut in the import duty, Mr. Vajpayee announced early this week that the duty would be "revised".

Mr. Omar Abdulla, Minister of State for Commerce, who accompanied the Prime Minister, later told mediapersons that "revision", in fact, meant "reduction". (The duty now is 75 per cent on crude palm oil and 85 per cent on palmolein. The Malaysians want this to be brought down to 45 per cent, on a par with the duty on soya oil.)

Significantly, the Prime Minister's offer goes against the spirit of the 'Kumarakom package' he had offered Kerala while on a year-end vacation at the backwater resort. The package had promised to strive for remunerative prices for Kerala farmers, particularly rubber and coconut-growers. Politicians and the media then said this would mean a drastic raise in the import duty on palm oil and a cut in the import of rubber. The coconut farmers had hoped that the prices would go up.

The Kuala Lumpur deal has dashed those hopes.

THE HINDU

18 MAY 2001

THURSDAY, MAY 17, 2001

10-12 ✓  
**THE NATURAL CHOICE** 17/5

THE DECISION BY the Congress(I) Legislature Party in Kerala to elect Mr. A. K. Antony to head the United Democratic Front (UDF) Government in the State was only natural. It may be true that a formal announcement to this effect had to wait for the "approval" of the choice by the Congress(I) president, Ms. Sonia Gandhi. This seemed necessary only in order to ensure that Mr. K. Karunakaran was seen as endorsing the decision. The Congress(I) high command, after all, could not have glossed over Mr. Karunakaran's standing within the party and the fact that a section of the newly elected MLAs were known to be his camp followers in the faction-ridden State unit. But then, there was hardly any doubt even during the runup to the polls that Mr. Antony was going to head the new Government in the event of the UDF romping home. Apart from the fact that Mr. Antony was chosen by the high command as Chief Minister in place of Mr. Karunakaran (in the wake of dissidence against the "leader" in 1994 when the UDF was in power then), the fact that he continued as the Leader of Opposition throughout the five years when the Left Democratic Front was ruling the State had rendered him the natural choice.

Given these facts, one would expect Mr. Karunakaran and his supporters in the Congress(I) Legislature Party to give a quietus to all the acrimony that marked their attitude towards Mr. Antony and those in his camp. It could indeed be a difficult agenda given the public display of factionalism in the State unit that was witnessed at the time of selection of party candidates for the polls. But then, Mr. Karunakaran cannot afford to persist with his own agenda within the party and still hope to keep the Congress(I)'s fortunes alive in the

State. And such feuds within the party, are bound to cast a long shadow on the quality of governance of any dispensation. In this sense, strife within parties is not necessarily an internal affair. For this very reason, Mr. Karunakaran and Mr. Antony owe it to the people of Kerala to bury the hatchet and focus on governance. And this prescription applies with equal force to all the outfits in the ruling combine. The Congress(I) high command too will have to draw its lessons in this regard. Ms. Sonia Gandhi and her aides at the top will have to resist the temptation to keep Mr. Antony in a permanent state of insecurity by way of encouraging dissident activity — among the factors that contributed to the weakening of the Congress(I) in many States — and entertaining leaders who represent against the Chief Minister to the high command at regular intervals.

All these are essential not merely to ensure that the Congress(I) is not decimated in the State but more importantly to ensure that the concerns of administration are addressed by the political leadership. And Mr. Antony has a difficult task ahead in this regard. The State's finances are even otherwise a shambles due to factors that are inherent to Kerala's developmental imperatives and aggravated further in the context of the lifting of all restrictions on the import of several items as prescribed by the WTO regulations. Mr. Antony and his team cannot afford to resort to rhetoric in this regard and will have to find ways to get out of the crisis. Similarly, one would expect the new regime to learn lessons from the experience with the decentralisation campaign and carry forward with some of the positive aspects of the idea rather than look at the exercise in a partisan manner. Mr. Antony has a full agenda ahead.

**THE FINEL**

**17 MAY 2001**

# Drug racket bares skeletons in Mumbai's public hospitals

By Ranjit Khomne

MUMBAI: With the arrest of Ravi Mallya and the seizure of more than Rs 10 lakhs worth of medicines from him and his alleged associates on May 9, the Food and Drug Administration has uncovered a major drug racket operating in the city's public hospitals.

Sources in the FDA allege that Mallya was a mere front man acting for senior officials in hospitals run by the government and the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). The sources said that a syndicate of doctors, nurses, ward boys and pharmacists from these hospitals sold medicines meant for poor patients to middlemen who, in turn, sold them to medical stores.

G.S. Gill, secretary, medical education and drugs, told this newspaper that "it was quite a serious issue". He indicated that he might order an inquiry by an independent authority after getting the FDA report on Wednesday. Municipal commissioner Karun Srivastava, however, said he had no knowledge of any seizures by the FDA but added that he would "inquire into it".

The drugs, bought by the government and the BMC in bulk at a concessional rate, were purchased by mid-

dleman at 30 per cent of the maximum retail price and then sold to druggists. The druggists, in turn, sold the medicines at the printed MRP, even though the drugs carried the stamp 'For use of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai' or 'For Government Use Only'.

Although FDA officials say that pilferage at Outpatients Departments where these drugs are distributed is "minimal at a time", the implications are enormous considering the sheer number of state-owned hospitals.

In Mumbai, the BMC runs 19 general hospitals, 28 maternity homes and 134 general dispensaries, including several major hospitals like KEM Hospital, Parel, B.Y.L. Nair, Mumbai Central, Lokmanya Tilak hospital, Sion, Bhagwati Hospital, Borivali, etc. The state government runs the J.J. Hospital, the St. George Hospital, the Cama and Albles and the G.T. Hospital.

"But if we visit the store-keepers of these hospitals, they show us that their records are intact. The pilferage happens at the OPD and through small thefts," an FDA official said. Meanwhile, FDA officials, led by assistant commissioner T.S. Patil and officials from the N.M. Joshi Marg police station where Mallya is in custody until May 25, searched the premises of Kiran Medical Stores in Dahisar (east). The FDA has already seized drugs worth Rs 35,000 from New Paras Medical near J.J. Hospital and from Swastik Medical Stores.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

J 6 MAY 1988



KARUNAKARAN'S SON MAY BE PCC CHIEF

# Antony to be CM, swearing-in tomorrow

By Girish Menon

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MAY 15. Mr. A.K. Antony will be sworn in Chief Minister of Kerala on Thursday along with leaders of the seven United Democratic Front constituents. The decks for the swearing-in ceremony were cleared when Mr. Antony was unanimously elected leader of the Congress Legislature Party.

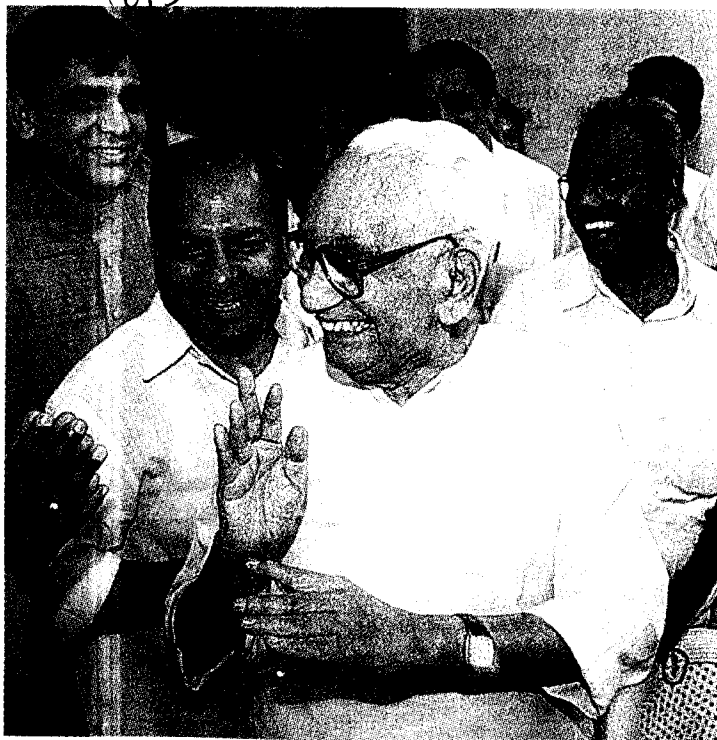
The UDF liaison committee too unanimously elected him its leader. The formal resolution and the letters of various UDF parties are expected to be submitted to the Governor to facilitate his invitation to Mr. Antony.

The selection of the CLP leader proved to be an anticlimax of sorts, belying pre- and post-election speculation that the Congress path towards selecting the Chief Minister would not be smooth. The understanding is that the party high command would nominate a new KPCC president, Mr. K. Muralidharan, Mr. Karunakaran's son, as per the pre-election pact, which led to the factional truce.

## Sonia's role

Nevertheless, the process of electing the CLP leader had its share of drama, with the party president, Ms. Sonia Gandhi, being authorised to take whatever decision she deemed fit in nominating the CLP leader, who would be the natural choice for chief ministership. Ms. Gandhi, in turn, politely returned the matter to the CLP, giving it full freedom to select its leader.

The CLP met twice to complete the election process. Earlier, the AICC observers — Mr. Ghulam Nabi Azad, Mr. Motilal Vora and Mr. Ershad Mirza — held an informal dialogue with the newly-elected party MLAs. At least 10 Karunakaran supporters said that the high command should make the announcement regarding the CLP leader and the PCC president. The CLP met at 4.30 p.m. and unanimously adopted a resolution, moved by Mr. P. Sankaran — a Karunakaran supporter — authorising Ms. Gandhi to nominate the CLP leader.



**HAS THE ICE MELTED? Senior Kerala Congress leaders, Mr. K. Karunakaran and (behind him) Mr. A.K. Antony, who was elected the CLP leader, share a lighter moment after the Legislature Party meeting in Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday.** — Photo: C. Ratheesh Kumar

The AICC observers and senior leaders then spoke to Ms. Gandhi, who, in turn, authorised the CLP to make the choice. The CLP met again at 5.30 p.m. and Mr. Kadam Sivasadan — a Karunakaran supporter — proposed Mr. Antony's name, which was seconded by Mr. Aryadan Mohammed, Mr. Vakkam Purushothaman, Mr. G. Karthikeyan and Ms. Savithri Lakshmanan.

The CLP passed another resolution, moved by Mr. K. Sankaranarayanan, expressing profound thanks to the people of the State for giving the party a two-third majority and Ms. Gandhi for having led the party from the front.

According to KPCC leaders, Mr. Muralidharan's nomination as PCC president is expected to materialise in a couple of days.

## Chennithala unhappy

The other anti-Karunakaran groups, particularly the one led by

Mr. Ramesh Chennithala, have expressed dissatisfaction at the decision on the PCC post. Mr. Chennithala and Mr. G. Karthikeyan, leader of another faction, met the AICC observers and Mr. Antony and conveyed their objections to the move.

In the meantime, the other UDF partners met and elected their respective leaders. They are Mr. P.K. Kunhalikutty, (IUML), Mr. K.M. Mani (Kerala Congress-M), Ms. K.R. Gauri (JSS), Mr. Babu Divakaran (RSP), Mr. M.V. Raghavan (CMP), Mr. T.M. Jacob (KC-Jacob), and Mr. R. Balakrishna Pillai (KC-B).

The UDF high-power committee is expected to finalise one more important issue relating to the size of the Cabinet. As for Congress ministers, it appears that Mr. Antony would exercise his prerogative to select his own team.

THE HINDU

25 MAY 1996

# Landslide win for UDF in Kerala

HT Correspondent

Thiruvananthapuram, May 13

THE CONGRESS-LED UDF today wrested power from the LDF in Kerala riding a strong anti-incumbency wave and winning 99 of the 140 declared seats, a comfortable two-thirds majority in the Assembly.

The LDF, with 40 seats, suffered one of the worst drubbing in the recent past. The one remaining seat went to rebel Congress candidate M A Wahid.

The prominent winners included CWC member AK Antony, Politburo member VS Achuthanandan, Kerala Congress (M) chief KM Mani, convicted former Minister R Balakrishna Pillai, sex scandal accused former Minister Neelalohithadasan Nadar and Mercy Ravi of the Congress.

Among the notable losers were Speaker M Vijayakumar of the CPI(M), Deputy Speaker CA Kuriyan of the CPI, BJP state president

41-9 19/5  
C K Padmanabhan and five LDF ministers - Education Minister P J Joseph of the Kerala Congress-J, Irrigation Minister V P Ramakrishna Pillai of the RSP, Revenue Minister K E Ismail of the CPI, PWD minister T K Hamsa and agriculture minister, Krishnan Kaniyamparambil of the CPI.

The BJP contested 117 seats but concentrated on ten seats. It drew a blank even in Mancheswaram where the state BJP president C K Padmanabhan was defeated by Muslim League sitting MLA Cherkalam Abdullah.

In Cherthala, CM-in-waiting, A K Antony, trounced his LDF rival C K Chandrappan of the CPI by 5,500 votes.

But Antony could not maintain his 1996 lead of 8,383 votes over Chandrappan. In Malam-puzha, the only Politburo member in the fray, V S Achuthanandan, defeated his nearest rival Satheesan Pacheni of the Con-

gress by a margin of over 4,680 votes. In the 1996 Assembly election, Finance Minister T Shivadasa Menon had won the seat by over 18,000 votes.

A notable feature of this election was the huge victory margins in several constituencies.

In the 1996 Assembly polls, there were about 30 seats where margin was lower than 3,000 votes. This time, the margin is above 10,000 votes in about 30 constituencies, mostly in favour of the UDF.

Those elected with high margin included UDF candidate in Malappuram Dr M Muneer of the Muslim League who trounced his LDF opponent by over 36,000 votes, former Industry Minister P K Kunjalikutty of the same party in Kuttipuram who retained his seat with a 26,000 margin, and K M Mani of the Kerala Congress-M in Pala who won by over 22,300 votes.

The wave for the UDF was decisive with its candidates making deep inroads in LDF strongholds in central and south Kerala. In Thrissur district, the UDF captured 12 of the 14 seats. In Kollam, it captured nine of the 11 seats, and in Thiruvananthapuram, won 11 of the 14 seats.

However, in north Malabar, the LDF managed to contain the UDF wave to an extent in the Kannur and Kasarakode districts. In tribal-dominated Wayand, it was a clean sweep for the UDF, which won all three seats.

**Record 10th win for Mani:** KM Mani, veteran of many a poll battle, today breezed into the Kerala assembly for a record tenth time in succession, from his home constituency of Pala, adds PTI.

Founder general secretary of the Kerala Congress, Mani defeated Uzhavoor Vijayan of NCP by over 22,000 votes.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

14 MAY 2001

## POLL SCENE IN KERALA

8/5 119-12

EVEN WHILE THE political scene in Kerala has been a battle ground between the Congress(I) and the CPI(M), the outcome of polls in the State has depended on the ability of either of the two parties to rope in smaller outfits into their fold. While some such outfits even claim to be mere social platforms — the Nair Service Society (NSS) and the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) — there are also such parties as the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), the Indian National League (INL) and the various factions of the Kerala Congress (all of them having close ties with the Church) playing a critical role in determining the poll outcome. And this is what renders the May 10 Assembly elections scene in Kerala a complex mosaic.

The run-up to the Assembly polls has been marked by problems within the two leading formations. If the Congress(I) was caught in the public display of animosity between Mr. K. Karunakaran and Mr. A. K. Antony, the CPI(M) too is not free from internal squabbles. Take for instance the factions within the party in Kerala with the "important" leaders in the State unit having apportioned the party organisation among themselves at all levels. This is not just a recent development. The trouble within the CPI (M) began with the defeat of Mr. V. S. Achuthanandan in the last elections at Mararikulam, considered a Left citadel; after having managed to establish himself within the party and after having ensured the exit of a large number of his own "comrades" from the party, Mr. Achuthanandan is now contesting from yet another bastion of the Left, Malampuzha, far away from his old constituency. That the Left Democratic Front (LDF) has gone overboard in projecting Mr. Achuthanandan as the chief ministerial candidate (and kept out almost all the senior leaders including several members of the Nayanar Cabinet from the elections this time) has to do with the social make-up of Kerala too. There is no way that the Left could persist with denying the top

position to a member of the Ezhava community that has been its traditional support base.

The Congress(I) too has a similar problem. A mere perception that Mr. Karunakaran is no longer the "supreme" leader of the party in Kerala would lead to an erosion of the party's support base. The fear of a section of the party's traditional support base leaving the fold (as it happened to the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and in Bihar) must have led the party high command to mollify Mr. Karunakaran even if that meant changing the party's candidates midstream in at least three Assembly segments. This, however, could not but have had an adverse effect on the Congress(I) organisation, which by all means is now a preserve of Mr. Antony and his camp followers. This factor seems to have blunted the decisive edge of the Congress(I) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) in this election thought they retain the advantage thanks to the anti-incumbency factor. In a State where victory margins have remained very low, anti-incumbency sentiment could indeed be a significant factor.

Be that as it may, there are issues beyond partisan political considerations that are being brought to the centre stage in the course of this poll campaign in Kerala. One such significant issue is the experience with decentralisation and involvement of the people directly in the planning process. The architect of this campaign, Dr. Thomas Issac, is in the fray on behalf of the LDF. And at another level, there are reports of the PDP, an outfit led by Abdul Nasser Madhani, whose activities in the past have not been conducive to the democratic polity, being brought into the "mainstream" by sections from within the UDF. Similarly, the CPI(M)'s decision to have an arrangement with the INL, a breakaway group of the IUML, has met with opposition from within the LDF. All these are factors that the leading players on the State's political scene must address and even show the will to introspect at least after the polls.

THE HINDU

30 MAY 2001

# Antony wave sweeps isle of friends

FROM VENKATESH RAMAKRISHNAN

**Chertalla, May 6:** It is hardly eight in the morning but the island village of Kuttanchal in Kerala's coastal Alappuzha district is already bustling. By 8.30, a small boat cuts across the backwaters that surround Kuttanchal. As the boat touches the village edge and a short man in white khadi shirt and *mundu* (dhoti) alights, a small crowd rushes forward with one resounding cry: "A.K. Antony *zindabad*".

A crowd of only 100 people is a small show for a leader of Antony's stature. But Kuttanchal has a population of only around 600, including children, and the fact that one-sixth of the population came to receive the Congress leader points to Antony's popularity.

There is a personal dimension to the affection shown by the peo-

ple. Many had known Antony since he was an infant. Those senior to him looked after him and some grew up with him.

Antony was born at Chertalla town, the headquarters of his constituency about 10 km from Kuttanchal. The personal touch is evident from the moment he starts walking through the village. He addresses almost everybody in the crowd by name.

Antony asks one woman how much milk her goat gives and another young man how much toddy he is able to tap and what price he gets for it.

But once he reaches the venue of the public meeting, the old neighbour transforms into a political animal. Antony lambasts the CPM-led Left Democratic Front, saying Kerala had lost its peace under its five-year misrule. He promises a better future if the United Democratic Front is voted to power.

Assurances about new industry, employment and fair price for the farmers are made one by one. He glosses over the faction fight between his camp and that of K. Karunakaran, which touched menacing proportions at the start of the election process.

But there is not a word about the BJP, the Congress' principal opponent at the Centre.

The BJP is not politically important enough in Kerala to deserve mention, he says later. He refutes the Left allegation that the UDF has struck a deal with the BJP.

Antony's stay at Kuttanchal was brief but the island village is happy. Kurien, a fish vendor, says: "The very fact that he found time to come and meet us on a day Sonia Gandhi is coming to Chertalla highlights how important we are to him. We will go around campaigning in other villages, too, and see to it that he gets a bigger

majority this time."

Antony points out from time to time that, along with the political initiatives, his personal equation in and around Chertalla has played a role in transforming this communist bastion into a constituency where the Congress and the UDF can win.

Of the 11 elections held here, the Congress and its allies as well as the Left have won five times each.

Once, in 1965, the seat went to the Kerala Congress, which was not part of either front. Antony was the first Congress leader to win from here in 1970, with a 360-vote margin.

This is not a sure seat for the UDF. But Antony has steadfastly refused to migrate to a "safe seat", holding on to what many in the Congress say is an irrational, emotional attachment. This time, however, Antony and his supporters are more confident.

They believe there is a virtual wave in favour of the UDF all over the district and say the Chertalla people realise their MLA will become chief minister. That Antony's majority in the 1996 polls (8385 votes) was the highest-ever for the UDF is a confidence booster. His opponent is the CPI's C.K. Chandrappan, who won the seat in 1991.

Moving out of Kuttanchal, Antony repeats almost the same drill in villages on the other side of the lake. His campaign in Chertalla ends with a huge meeting addressed by Sonia Gandhi.

Antony will not come back to Chertalla before polling day. His campaign for his own seat is over five days before the poll. The prospective chief minister has more important tasks ahead, one of them being his mission to other parts of the state to help colleagues who do not have much rapport with the voters.



AK Antony

THE TELEGRAPH

7 MAY 2001

## AN EMBARRASSING EXPOSE

IT IS AN embarrassment the Congress(I) and its Government in Karnataka, headed by Mr. S. M. Krishna, could well have done without. For a party that had declared a 'war' against the BJP-led NDA regime at the Centre in the wake of the Tehelka expose, it should have been terribly discomfiting to be confronted with a video footage presenting the unedifying spectacle of its own State unit chief, Mr. V. S. Koujalgi, receiving 'money' purportedly as a *quid pro quo* for securing contracts for public works under the Belgaum Zilla Parishad; the alleged transaction is supposed to have taken place when he was an MLA. For his part, Mr. Koujalgi has of course protested innocence, calling it a frame-up by his political rivals. Unlike the Tehelka expose, this was no sting operation by a 'dotcom' firm to bring to light the murky state of affairs in a Government department and the type of players engaged in the dirty game, but was presumably the handiwork of the one at the giving end of the kickback — or someone acting on his behalf — who for whatever reason wanted to get the 'deal' videotaped. In fact, the 'transaction' is the subject of an enquiry pending with the Lok Ayukta, which is in possession of a videotape(s) tendered as a part of materials in evidence. As such, the 'Koujalgi tapes' predate 'Tehelka'.

The fact that the videotapes pertaining to a two-year-old complaint with the Lok Ayukta should have been made public now, even while the case is pending and in the post-Tehelka context, does suggest a political or personal motivation behind the expose. Several theories are doing the rounds about the sort of 'forces' at work and the motives for targeting Mr. Koujalgi. But there is no way the Congress(I) leadership, or the State Chief Minister for that matter, could have wished away the adverse impact of the revelations, given especially that the party was going all out to seize the moral high ground vis-a-vis

the NDA post-Tehelka. Caught as it was on the wrong foot, the party high command had no option but to ask Mr. Koujalgi to quit office. In retrospect, Mr. Krishna however must be regretting his lapse in not having taken the allegation against Mr. Koujalgi seriously and intervened earlier by pushing for necessary correctives. On a different level, the fact that the complaint against him has been pending for two years, with no immediate sign of a conclusive finding, does not exactly redound to the credit of the Lok Ayukta and it has hardly served to inspire public confidence in the efficacy of such institutions charged with the responsibility of bringing to justice the corrupt and the unscrupulous persons in public life.

On the political plane, the post-Tehelka developments, particularly the way the BJP and a majority of its partners in the NDA on the one side and, to a lesser extent, the main opposition party, the Congress(I), on the other side, have responded to the expose, point to a real risk of the national imperative of combating the canker of corruption, which stood exposed in all its alarming dimensions by the sting operation, getting a short shrift. What is on view is an unseemly rivalry between the two camps, with one seeking to paint the other as more corrupt and, in the process, settle political scores. Although it would be unrealistic to expect the corruption-related issues to be kept totally outside the electoral arena, the political parties cannot absolve themselves of the responsibility of cleansing the system — individually within their own respective organisations and collectively at the governmental or administrative level — of the scourge. For all their passionate declarations of commitment to ensuring probity in public life, political parties in general have been found singularly lacking the will to act.

# Proposed Punjab N-plant eating into social fabric

ATUL SANGAR  
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

5-8  
9/11 A

NIAL (Patiala), April 8. — Social support systems have begun crumbling in villages where the nuclear power plant is proposed to come up in Patiala district of Punjab. The Badal government's resolve to go ahead with the project despite opposition has added fuel to fire with political parties fast joining in to encash on the sentiment.

The farming community of the predominantly rural area fall-

ing in the exclusion and the sterilised zones of the project have a mutually dependent relationship with the commission agents. Farmers get loans from commission agents, doubling as money lenders, not only for sowing and harvesting but also for marriages, social functions and construction purposes. These are paid back after harvesting season by farmers. With farmers themselves panicking and unsure of future, even the money lenders are now reluctant to give loans.

Farmers Mr Harnak Singh of

Ghagg and Mr Sewa Singh of Tamboowala village say: "Our sources of funds are drying up... The well-off may be able to fend for themselves but small and marginal peasants survive on the periodic loans from the money lenders which they are not getting now."

Commission agents admit that this is indeed the case. "Yes, the farmers are right but we are helpless. How can we be sure whether our money will be repaid?... We can only trust the well-to-do parties and established landlords," says Mr

Suresh Kumar, general secretary of Arhtiya (commission agents) Association in Patran, whose family has been in the trade for over two decades. Another agent says: "Each arhtiya has about Rs 25 lakh at his disposal and the unsure plight of farmers has put us on guard."

The situation is likely to deteriorate in the days ahead.

While construction and related private schemes have come to a standstill, in many cases even marital engagements have begun to fall through as both farmers and the

9 87a Punjab

arhtiyas) are suspicious about what may be the material and social standing of the other side after the project begins. Mr Gurtej Singh of Tamboowala village complains of his younger brothers proposed marriage falling through because the money lenders panicked hearing that the village would be affected by the nuclear power plant. Mr Pargat Singh says his family as well as others in surrounding areas has stopped all construction activity.

Patiala's Congress MP Mrs Parneet Kaur has emerged as a

vehement opponent of the project. "We will support people's action because this is an anti-people project... Why a nuclear plant when alternatives of hydel power are much cheaper and less perilous?" she asks.

However, even as a movement builds up and panchayats pass unanimous resolutions against the project, Punjab power minister Mr SS Maluka touts it as a major achievement. He told The Statesman on telephone: "Some parties and politicians are trying to mislead people. There is no guarantee about that."

our system. We will launch an awareness campaign. Hand-some compensation will be paid for land acquired and with that farmers will be able to purchase thrice their present land-holding." Mr Maluka conceded that hydel power may be cheaper but says water for such purposes is scarce and adds that in any case nuclear power projects are common in the Western countries. In reply to another query he said: "Well Chernobyls can happen anywhere. There is no guarantee about that."

THE STATESMAN

109 APR 20

In this third summer of drought, people in Rajasthan have no option but to starve to death

# Post-mortem of hunger

BY NILABH MISHRA

**P**ICK UP any death in a drought-hit village in south Rajasthan and you pick up a stark profile of poverty and hunger. Driving into the drought hinterland, the *Hindustan Times* stumbled upon three deaths in three different villages of just one panchayat — Medi in Kotada tehsil of Udaipur district.

The panchayat has 5,000 tribal voters. The average landholding is not more than two to three *bighas*. In years of severe drought the tribals either migrate to adjoining Gujarat to work in the fields or try to live off the fast dwindling forests.

The administration denies that the deaths have been due to starvation. Post mortem of the corpses could have revealed traces of grain in the stomach. But their circumstances reveal a long trail of vanishing livelihoods, increasing debts, diminishing food and low nutrition leading to starvation deaths. Following are brief backgrounds of the three deaths:

**VEERA HONA, 29, OF GAMAR TRIBE:**

■ Last year's drought mortgaged his one *bigha* of land. This year it drove him to Udani near Eedar in Gujarat as early as February. But due to the drought prevalent in those parts too, Veera couldn't get a job. With no money to buy a train or bus ticket, Veera covered 70 km on foot to his home. He returned on February 2, to an empty barn and a starving family of a wife and three children.

There was no work in the village. Nothing was growing in the fields. The government's food for work programme had not yet begun. For two days he and his wife wandered the forests to gather wild *kajari* seeds, whose oil is used in making soap, and sold them to local shopkeepers. The seeds were soon over in the scanty forest. With neither work nor food, and children clamouring for food, Veera could not take it any more.

He drank pesticide to kill himself on February 11.

■ Veera's belongings: A single room *kuchcha* hut, a cot, a rag for the family to sleep on, an empty bamboo granary, earthenware pots, a few utensils and a *bigha* of mortgaged land.

■ Veera's debts: A few thousand rupees loaned by the Udaipur District Cooperative Land Development Bank to dig a well; a few thousand rupees taken from the local shopkeeper by mortgaging land during a period of ill health, and a few hundred rupees taken from the local goldsmith by pawning jewellery.

**MALA PARGI, 65, OF PARGI TRIBE:**

■ Mala of village and gram panchayat Medi, tehsil Kotada, was forced by drought and illness to mortgage his two *bighas* of land two years ago. His child's



Portrait of a farmer in a barren landscape

illness last year incurred an additional loan of Rs 2,000 on the already mortgaged land. Malnutrition took the toll of three of his seven children between the age of one and five over the last five years. The eldest Makana (14 years) is handicapped with a deformed leg. With no crop for the family and no work in the area, it was Makana who first left the village for Gujarat. Finding no work, he came back on foot from Himmatnagar — limping all of 80 kms.

Father Mala too followed soon after and went to his in-laws at Kalikar in Gujarat, borrowing his fare from a neighbour, Tarachand. Unable to find a job, he too returned in February. In early December, Mala had got Rs 600 as old age pension arrears, which went in feeding the family of six. Out of work, money and food, Mala also developed a swelling in a foot. No option left, he started begging for food from his neighbours.

His wife Jeeja Bai gathered firewood from the shrunk village forest to earn Rs 10 after two days of labour. This was enough for the family to prepare corn gruel (*raabri*) made in water every alternate day. The family members ate one meal a day by rotation. In the meantime, Mala's swelling grew worse. He succumbed to the disease and tension and died on February 10.

■ Mala's belongings: A single room

*kuchcha* hut, a cot, a rag to sleep on, two utensils, a bucket, a stone grinder and two *bighas* of mortgaged land.

■ Mala's debts: Rs. 10,000 against the mortgage of two *bighas* of land.

**ROTA HEERA, 75, OF GAMAR TRIBE:**

■ Rota Heera of village Koldara, gram panchayat Medi, tehsil Kotada, and his wife Jeera were dependants of their nephew Limba, whose family lived with them. Lack of livelihood forced Limba to move to Gujarat with his family around Diwali. Limba left behind a 10-year-old daughter to look after the old couple. Rota had polio in one foot and had always kept a mule to climb up the hill.

The drought first took the toll of his mule. With his earnings meagre and five mouths to feed, Limba could not send any remittance to the ageing couple from Vishnagar near Ahmedabad. He got work; picking chillies and tomatoes in the fields for 10 to 12 days a month at the rate of Rs 20-25 per day.

Rota was entitled to the old age pension of Rs 100 per month out of which he spent Rs 50 every time he went to fetch it from the tehsil headquarters 25 km away. When his pension money collected last month ran out, he was left with no option but to beg for food from the neighbours. Rota caught a fever and died on February 10.

■ Rota's belongings: A *kuchcha* house

and a room of thatched leaves, a tin can, an earthenware pot, few utensils, a rag to sleep on and one *bigha* of land.

■ Rota's debts: An accumulated amount of Rs 6,697 from a principal sum of Rs 2,000 taken to deepen a well located in his field. Also other debts not yet accounted by his nephew.

Udaipur district collector P.C. Mehra denies that the cases we followed were of starvation deaths. With the dividing line between starvation and malnutrition being razor thin, one can't help looking at the miseries of thousands in and around the Medi panchayat.

The third successive drought has marginalised the subsistent farmer. In the drab landscape one can occasionally see rabi crop in the fields. Inquiries reveal that these belong to a handful of government employees and shopkeepers who have larger holdings and who can afford higher inputs. Forests have shrunk, and there are not enough of *tendu* leaves, lac, *kajari* seeds and firewood to sustain the people. Successive droughts have also diminished the fall-back systems of live-stock or poultry.

What is worse is that this time there is little work in Gujarat, which is also drought-stricken. Most people have exhausted their grain reserves and savings. Moneylenders are unyielding because earlier debts are unpaid. Most debts have gone in treatment of illnesses, a direct consequence of starvation.

In each of the three villages, nearly everyone said he was in debt. Talk of the public distribution system — it offers only 20 kg of grain per month at the rate of Rs 4.60 to families below poverty line who can't afford even that. And what about the government's relief employment? Only 60 people were employed in Medi panchayat out of an adult population of 5,000 for 15 days in February. We were told that most got only Rs 30 against the standard minimum wage of Rs 60 per day. The relief work started on February 9, a day before the deaths were reported.

The district collector asks how people could die of starvation when the drought relief work was in progress? And how could people starve if the sarpanch had two quintals of grain to give to people?

The truth is that in the villages of Medi panchayat nearly everybody is starving. *Technicalities apart, it is nothing but starvation when members of families eat by rotation and often on alternate days.*

We were told that five kilos of grain was given to ten families each in the panchayat a week after the deaths were reported. The question is not how can any one starve to death, but how can any one live with such misery and for so long?

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

4 APR 2001

# Naveen names WODC chief

HT Correspondent  
Bhubaneswar, March 24

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik sprang a surprise today by nominating Ainthu Sahu of the Biju Janata Dal as the chairperson of the Western Orissa Development Council (WODC).

The Chief Minister has also nominated 13 other members of legislative Assembly and members of Parliament from Western Orissa as members of the Council.

The members are Bikram Keshari Singhdeo (BJP), Prasanna Acharya (BJD), B K Singh Bariha (BJD), Yogendra Behera (BJD), Pradeep Kumar Amat (Independent), Subhas C Panigrahi (BJP), Kishore K Mohanty (BJP), Basant K Panda (BJP), Rabinarayan Nayak (BJP), Kunduru Kushal (BJD), Gajadhar Majhi (Congress), Dayanidhi Kishan (BJP) and Roshni Singhdeo (BJD).

Dilip Panda, former chief engineer in the works depart-

ment, has been nominated as the expert member of the Council.

The Chief Minister has also issued instructions to release Rs 30-crore to the WODC, which was earmarked for the Council in last year's Budget. It has also been decided that the amendments to the WODC Act-2000 would be moved in the ongoing Budget session of the Assembly.

Sahu has been in political oblivion for a number of years now and the choice of the Chief Minister has taken the political establishment by surprise. He represented Bolangir Lok Sabha constituency in 1977.

He also worked as the chairperson of Orissa Forest Development Corporation, during Biju Patnaik's tenure as Chief Minister from 1990 to 1995. Since 1995, he has not been in political limelight.

By nominating Sahu, the Chief Minister has done a balancing act as he did not nominate a sitting MP or MLA as the chairperson.

Twenty-five MLAs from Western Orissa had written a letter to the Chief Minister asking him not to nominate any MP as the chairperson.

Few members of the BJD allege that the letter was stage-managed as it was mainly aimed at stopping BJD MP Prasanna Acharya from becoming the WODC chief.

The WODC was lying defunct for more than a year ever since the new BJD-BJP Government came to power.

The Budget of 2000-2001 had earmarked Rs 30-cr for the Council, but so far not a single rupee has been released to it.

In December 2000, Narasingha Mishra resigned as the chairperson of the Council, following the enactment of WODC Act-2000, which was subsequently accepted in January 2001. The travails of the WODC lingered as the ruling party members vehemently objected to certain provisions of WODC Act-2000.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

25 MAR 2001



## Pak wakes up to Bamiyan destruction

ISLAMABAD, March 8. — The Pakistani government has summoned the Taliban ambassador to convey its displeasure over the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas by the militia.

The foreign office spokesman, Mr Riaz Mohammed Khan, said Mulla Abdul Salam Zaeef was summoned yesterday and was told about Pakistan's as well as the world community's concern over the destruction.

The envoy was also informed about General Musharraf's appeal to the Taliban to stop destroying the statues. "We told Taliban envoy to preserve Afghanistan's cultural heritage as it is the asset of the world community," Mr Khan told the BBC's Pushtoo service today.

He, however, clarified that the Taliban's refusal to budge from its decision would not affect Pakistan's ties with the regime.

The Japanese parliamentary team which arrived here yesterday has left for Kandahar to prevail on the Taliban to at least hand over the parts of the statues destroyed by them. — PTI

# Deshmukh drops ministers to quell rebellion

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE & PTI

MUMBAI, March 8. — The Maharashtra ministry was revamped today with the dismissal of five ministers and the appointment of six.

This was reportedly done to pre-empt any dissidence during the budget session which begins on 12 March. The chief minister, Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh had asked the five ministers to resign. All of them, except the agriculture minister Mr Ranjit Deshmukh, complied.

Though the Congress is the dominant partner in the nine-member Democratic Front alliance, it has now less ministers than the Nationalist Congress Party.

The NCP has managed to squeeze in four members in place of the three removed and elevate two more to the Cabinet rank.

The six new ministers and the two ministers elevated to the

Cabinet rank were administered the oath of office at Raj Bhavan today.

With this, the strength of the council of ministers has gone up by one from 54. The Congress tally remains at 23, while the NCP's has gone up to 25.

NCP sources justify the one extra induction on the ground that one of their nominees, Mr Gangadhar Gade, was dropped a few days after the council took office in October 1999.

However, it's clear that dissidence in the NCP, for which the sources blamed the deputy chief minister Mr Chhagan Bhujbal, had a role in the induction. A 20-member group in the 58-member NCP legislative party is threatening to break away.

The axed Congress ministers are Mr Ranjit Deshmukh and Mr Hussein Dalwai. They have been replaced by Mr Satish Chaturvedi and Mr Saeed Ahmed.

Mr Deshmukh is clamouring for a separate Vidarbha state to be carved out of Maharashtra.

He had incurred the wrath of the Congress high command after he threatened to begin an agitation if the Pranab Mukherjee committee failed to submit its report on the issue by 1 May.

The NCP ministers who have been sacked are Mr Vasant Chavan (who has a cold relation with Mr Bhujbal), Mr Datta Meghe (Sharad Pawar protegee), and Dr NP Hirani.

They have been replaced by Mr Rajesh Tope, Mr Rajendra Shingde, Mr Hassan Mushrif, and Dr Vijay Gavit, known for their combat tactics.

The NCP ministers of state elevated to the Cabinet rank are Mr Anil Deshmukh and Mr Laxman Dhoble.

Mr Deshmukh was in-charge of school education, while Mr Dhoble looked after general administration, social welfare and marketing departments.

THE STATESMAN

# CM axes 5 ministers to stave off crisis in state

## Ranjit Deshmukh refuses to step down

**The Times of India News Service**  
MUMBAI: Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh on Thursday axed five ministers to stave off a political crisis triggered by large-scale dissension in the Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

However, the chief minister's troubles are far from over as agriculture minister Ranjit Deshmukh, the CM's bete noire, has refused to put in his papers. "I have received all resignations, except Ranjit's," the CM told newsmen at Raj Bhavan.

After prolonged talks with Mr Pawar in Mumbai on Wednesday night, Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh hammered out a strategy to consolidate the beleaguered Congress-led Democratic Front government and assuage a section of NCP legislators who have been clamouring for ministerial berths.

In a day of high drama, which took political circles by storm, Mr Deshmukh sought resignation letters from Ranjit Deshmukh, Datta Meghe, Hussain Dalwai, Vasant Chavan (all cabinet ministers) and minister of state for cultural affairs N.P. Hirani.

The coup de grace served on the ministers on the eve of the budget session, which begins in Mumbai on March 12, sent shockwaves through the ranks of DF allies.

The chief minister inducted six new ministers who were sworn in by governor P.C. Alexander at a simple ceremony in Raj Bhavan

on Thursday evening. Two ministers of state—Anil Deshmukh and Laxman Dhoble—have been promoted to the rank of cabinet minister, taking the tally of Maharashtra's cabinet to 55.

Of the six new entrants, four ministers—Rajesh Tope, Rajendra

mony, a self-assured Vilasrao Deshmukh described his decision as "a routine reshuffle aimed at offering opportunities to freshers".

Deputy chief minister Chhagan Bhujbal sought to offer a more realistic explanation. "There were far too many ministers from the legislative council. This had created a kind of unrest among a section of MLAs who felt that those directly elected by the people should enjoy the privilege of being in the council of ministers," he said.

Speculation has been rife in the last few weeks that the Congress-led DF government was in deep crisis what with a number of MLAs opposing MLCs as cabinet ministers.

To add to Mr Deshmukh's woes, there were rumours that the NCP was eager to work out a new alignment of political forces, minus the Congress, in Maharashtra.

Anticipating trouble, the chief minister sought Mr Pawar's intervention to keep the eight-party DF government from falling to pieces. Mr Pawar advised the CM to defuse the crisis by offering ministerial berths to a group of new NCP MLAs.

With the eight-week budget session staring him in the face, Mr Vilasrao Deshmukh could scarcely risk any cracks in the DF alliance.

Asked if seeking the resignations was a move to stabilise his shaky government, Mr Deshmukh retorted, "My government was always stable. There never was any threat to the DF regime."

### POLITICAL ROULETTE ON EVE OF BUDGET SESSION



**Sharad Pawar**

With the backing of the opposition, the strategy was chalked out by Sharad Pawar and Vilasrao Deshmukh to placate NCP legislators clamouring for ministerial berths. But if Vilasrao thought Ranjit Deshmukh would fade away quietly, he was mistaken. The CM's bete noire is in no mood to hang up his gloves.



**Vilasrao Deshmukh**

It's a routine reshuffle to give freshers an opportunity, says the CM. His deputy, Chhagan Bhujbal, claims there were far too many ministers from the legislative council and that a section of NCP MLAs were feeling restive about not being given their lollipops.



**Ranjit Deshmukh**

And the worst part of the story: Vilasrao could scarcely rest easy with the NCP keen on dumping the Congress and continuing in power with new allies—not with a budget session staring him in his face. Ergo, he allowed himself to be arm-twisted by the NCP once again. Some arm, that!

Shingne, Hassan Mushrif and Dr Vijaykumar Gavit—belong to the NCP, while two ministers—Satish Chaturvedi and Sayyad Ahmed—are Congressmen. Mr Anil Deshmukh and Mr Dhoble belong to the NCP.

Talking to newsmen at Raj Bhavan after the swearing-in cere-

# Veerappan aide Maran nabbed

By Our Special Correspondent

**COIMBATORE, FEB. 15.** In a major breakthrough, the Tamil National Liberation Army chief and Veerappan associate, S. Maran, was nabbed by a party of the Special Task Force and the State police team in the Velliangiri Hills on the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border this morning.

The STF IG, Mr. V. Balachandran, told a crowded press conference that Maran played a pivotal role in the kidnap of the Kannada actor, Mr. Rajkumar, last year. He was also involved in other cases, including attacks on three police stations, a railway station and the blowing up of an electrical transmission tower adjoining a railway track in Dharmapuri district.

Two live pipe bombs, a cellular phone, a solar panel, an antenna, some cash and a couple of other items were seized from Maran by a 40-member team led by Mr. Sampathkumar, DSP, around 9.30 a.m. The TNLA chief indicated that Veerappan and his two associates might have gone to their usual habitat of Erode or the Nilgiris forests.



The IG said, "We are now sure that the gang is in disarray. The February 2 shoot-out with the STF led to a split in the 10-member gang. While Maran remained with Veerappan and his close associates, Sethukuli Govindan, Chandragowder, and the TNLA cadres — Alappakam Murugesan and Selvam — and TNRF activist Krishnamurthy, three others, including Nellikkuppam Ramesh, fled in a different direction. "These two are yet to be identified."

(Maran, who hails from Mullan-gudi in Thanjavur District, earlier fell out with the original TNLA leader, Tamilarasan, and started his own outfit in the late 1980s. Around 1998, he is said to have entered the forests to join hands with Veerappan, and it was he who provided the ideological veneer to the Rajkumar abduction episode.)

Mr. Balachandran said Maran had confessed that the gang had switched to the forest area on the

Tamil Nadu-Kerala border hoping it would be "safer". Besides, the STF's relentless pressure forced them to be on the run. The IG said, "we are happy to have achieved a breakthrough which is a big boost to our morale."

The gang is now demoralised. We are in a strong position now and we are quite confident of nabbing the brigand at the earliest. We will intensify combing operations in all the forest areas and keep up the pressure."

He denied that the Tamil Nadu police had been served a notice by their Kerala counterparts with regard to return of some objects, including a digital diary.

After the February 2 incident, police did not even touch the objects left behind by the fleeing gang members as the area was under the Walayar police station in Kerala. Besides, after filing an FIR with the Walayar police station, the work of the Tamil Nadu police was over. Mr. Balachandran said no digital diary had been recovered adding that only a pocket diary containing Mr. Rajkumar's phone numbers was found.

THE HINDU

FEB 15 2001

## Power play 1072

AN END to the Enron imbroglio seems to be in sight. The multinational giant has shown some willingness to amend the power purchase agreement signed in 1996. But the fact that it has evoked the counter-guarantee clause is a somewhat peremptory move, indicating that it has run out of patience. It wants the Centre to intervene, therefore, to clear the dues owed by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) to the Dabhol power company. The Centre has little option in this matter because unless it honours the contractual agreement, India's sovereign credit rating will suffer. So, it may have no alternative but to fork out the Rs 231 crore that the MSEB owes Dabhol for November and December 2000.

The non-payment of dues by the MSEB can be traced to its being cash strapped and its indulgence in cross subsidisation. But it is also the result of the hike in the cost of power by Dabhol. The rising tariffs have been due to the rupee's depreciation against the dollar (as the tariff was fixed in dollars) and the increase in the price of naphtha on account of the rise in international oil prices. The review committee appointed by the Government is currently finding ways of reducing the cost of power per unit through indirect means. A lowering of the interest charged by lenders and an alternative local supplier of naphtha would bring down the cost per unit. Due to the escalating tariffs, the MSEB has been buying only 10 to 20 per cent of the power produced by Dabhol although it is committed to buy 90 per cent. In any case, it has to pay fixed charges amounting to Rs 95 crore per month.

Essentially, the problem lies in the power purchase agreement because it is tilted in favour of the power generator. Even if the MSEB were to shed its current inefficiency, it may not be able to buy all the power produced by Enron because of its high cost. One solution is for the Centre to buy the power and distribute it through the National Thermal Power Corporation and the Power Grid Corporation. The fixed cost per unit will then be much less and result in lower tariff. Alternatively, it can allow Dabhol to sell power directly to private users who may be willing to pay more for an uninterrupted supply. A quick solution of this nagging problem will improve the foreign investment climate and expedite the launching of the second phase of the project to generate the much needed 1,444 MW.

## Spot the difference

A COMMON belief outside the United States is that there isn't much to choose between the Republicans and the Democrats. What is more, whatever little ideological differences there were earlier appeared to have been largely obliterated in the post-Reagan, post-Thatcher period when the economy has become the main driving force of Western society. Therefore, the shrill comments which a British newspaper like *The Guardian* published before the American election about the threat which George W. Bush will pose to the world seemed a bit like overstating the case. But ever since these fears about the electoral outcome have been proved true, there have been policy decisions in at least four areas by the Bush administration which show that even compassionate conservatism can be quite distinctive from the new liberalism.

The areas are the 'son-of-Star Wars' National Missile Defence programme, Taiwan, abortion and the proposed involvement of religious organisations in social work. To take the last named topic first, few in India will fail to see the danger involved in allowing religious groups to undertake social work because their main objective will be to proselytise. The Christians, of course, are still the dominant demographic group in the US despite its multi-cultural claims. But the Christians themselves are divided into various traditional sects and, even among each of them, there are extremists and moderates. If other religious organisations run by the Muslims, for instance, enter the field, one can foresee the tensions such decisions will generate. Little wonder that this move of the Bush administration has been seen in some quarters as a blow to the separation of Church and State — a central tenet of Western democracy.

The other social issue on which the new rulers in Washington have reaffirmed their customary views is abortion, thereby delighting those who are 'pro-life'. The importance of this issue cannot always be appreciated in an overpopulated country like India, but in the US it does divide the country on political lines. The renewed insistence on a missile shield to protect the US from rogue States and the promise to come to Taiwan's aid if it is threatened by China show that there are more cold warriors in the higher ranks of the Bush regime than in the immediate past.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

10 FEB 2001