



Cloak of invisibility

Changes in political funding regulations are a setback to efforts to bring in transparency

Well before financial year 2017-18 begins, the Lok Sabha has signed off on the Budget with the passage of the Finance Bill of 2017. It includes multiple amendments proposed by the government that did not figure in Arun Jaitley's speech of February 1, either in letter or in spirit. For instance, while the speech devoted 420 words to proposed measures to improve transparency in electoral funding, amendments have been made to the Companies Act of 2013 that actually turn the clock back on existing disclosure standards. Till now, companies could only contribute up to 7.5% of their average net profits in the past three financial years to political parties. They were required to disclose in their profit and loss accounts the amount of contributions and the names of political parties to which they were made. The ceiling has now been dropped, paving the way for a firm to deploy unlimited capital into political coffers irrespective of its own financial and operational health. Companies would still have to reveal the extent of their financing of parties, but no longer have to name their preferred parties. For the sake of argument, one could say the 7.5% limit was arbitrary and restricted willing and able corporate donors' ability to influence political activity. But doing away with the limit makes firms susceptible to funding 'requests' from local, regional or national political formations while taking away excuses – such as it being a loss-making unit, or breaching the funding cap.

This would open up new opportunities in crony capitalism. Pressure could be exerted on a company awaiting government clearances, or a loan restructuring from public or cooperative sector financiers. Even a publicly listed company can set up subsidiaries just to fund parties. This removes any pretence of transparency in the process as the donor will not have to disclose who he paid; the recipient has no such obligation either. It is not surprising that India Inc. has remained stoically silent so far. This abandonment of the 7.5% requisite comes in tandem with the proposal to float electoral bonds to give anonymity to political donors. The scheme for such 'bearer' bonds is still being worked out with the central bank, but how this will meet the objective of transparency isn't clear yet. The push for cashless modes for political contributions sounds worthy, but reducing the ₹20,000 limit on cash donations to ₹2,000 does nothing to guarantee that monetary muscle power will dissipate from electoral processes. Instead of, say, a lakh of such donors, a party can now share 10 lakh random names to justify cash holdings. Transparency is not synonymous with anonymous transactions, unlimited corporate donations, relaxed disclosure norms and the persistence of cash. The Budget's promise of "reform to bring about greater transparency and accountability in political funding, while preventing future generation of black money", truly rings hollow.

Terror in London

Wednesday's attack once again underlines the challenges posed by 'lone wolves'

The attack in London's Westminster that left five persons dead, including the assailant, was the type of terror strike that British security officials have been expecting. For almost three years, the threat level from international terrorism in Britain has been "severe", meaning an attack is deemed highly likely. This incident was different from a conventional terror strike, but bore similarity to attacks on European cities in recent years claimed by the Islamic State. As the Berlin and Nice assailants did last year, the London attacker, Khalid Masood, turned a vehicle into a lethal weapon by mowing down pedestrians on Westminster Bridge and later killed a police officer with a kitchen knife at the Parliament compound. Britain has one of the best counter-terror police and intelligence agencies in Europe. Since the 2005 London bombings, the country has remained largely safe. In the last four years, British officials have reportedly thwarted at least 13 terror plots. The country has one of the strictest gun control laws, and its borders, unlike countries in the European Union, are not open. Still the Westminster attack shows how a "lone wolf" without any conventional weapons could bring terror even to the most guarded zones. This is the security challenge the British establishment, as other governments, face today. If terror plots are planned by networks that use modern communication systems and amass weapons, the chances of detecting them are higher. But after the rise of the IS, its followers, mostly radicalised youth, have used different tactics. They stay off the intelligence radar, wait, and use even commonly used public goods as weapons to kill.

It is still not clear if Masood had communicated with an international terrorist organisation. The IS, that claimed responsibility for the incident, described him as a "soldier" of the Caliphate who responded to the "call" to attack Western nations, but stopped short of saying it directed the attack. If such attackers do not have any contact with terrorist groups, it makes it difficult for intelligence communities to detect them. To its advantage, the IS has created a narrative where every 'believer' has the responsibility to take up weapons against the 'crusaders' and their allies. Given that the group also has a dynamic online propaganda system, the challenges of radicalisation it poses remain. Britain's immediate response has been commendable. Both political and community leaders, barring the far-right fringe, sent out a message of unity. But the bigger challenge is to prevent more such non-conventional attacks, for which security officials need to have better human intelligence and community relations. Equally important is to deny the far right the opportunity to use such actions by a handful of individuals and target the majority of British Muslims, exactly what the terrorists want.

Rediscovering its marathon self

With its strong roots, the Congress has to set its own agenda, and not merely respond to the BJP



KUMAR KETKAR

The liberal-intellectual establishment has of late begun lamenting the steady (and they feel, terminal) decline of the Indian National Congress. It has almost unanimously concluded that the main reason for this decline and fall is its vice-president Rahul Gandhi's leadership, and that till he is at the helm of affairs (notwithstanding the party president Sonia Gandhi), the party is heading for extinction. Most pundits have already called the 2019 election for Narendra Modi. It is argued that there is no alternative pole, no challenging leadership and no parallel narrative or script. So Mr. Gandhi is doomed, and with him the Congress.

The idea of India

There are, of course, some who still say that the party which was the vanguard of the freedom movement, and led by giants such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, cannot be junked in the dustbin of history. With or without Rahul Gandhi, or without even the Gandhi-Nehru family at its apex, the party will revive from today's low point. Their argument is that the party is in essence the DNA of India itself, that the centrist and inclusive character as well as the secular-liberal-welfarist agenda of the Grand Old Party of India are the threads that bind the country together. Unity in diversity is not a slogan or a clichéd description, but the true idea of India.

But the Congress is ill-equipped to fight the Bharatiya Janata Party



(BJP). The BJP has an ideology of Hindutva, however vague and vicious it may be. The party has a vast cadre built over 90 years by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS has infiltrated almost all institutions in the last 70 years, despite the long Congress rule – the bureaucracy, academic institutions, the media, the police, the intelligence services, the armed forces, even the judiciary. As a result, even if there was a government led by the so-called liberal-secular Congress, the state machinery was often controlled, sabotaged, derailed and manipulated by various shades of saffron. There have been sleeper cells of the Sangh Parivar everywhere. But what they did not have a firm grip on was political power.

The Congress is a party without cadre, without a well-defined ideology or core like the RSS has. In fact, for most of the time, that was an asset for the Congress. There have been all kinds of trends and tendencies in the party. There were Marxists, socialists, rightists, capitalists too and Lohaites, casteists, linguistic chauvinists, and even Hindutva followers. It

was an umbrella party, which, under the overall leadership of Nehru first and later Indira Gandhi, managed these contradictions.

Losing touch

But the global decline of socialism and the rise of market forces, the dawn of globalisation and its technological spread – with the information-communication revolution exemplified by the mobile phone and Internet – created a new socio-political environment. This info-tech revolution gave rise to consumerism, hedonism and hyper-individualism. The ideas of collectivism (trade unionism, for instance), austerity and simple life, compassion and piety (as reflected in Gandhian values in films such as *Jagte Raho*, *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* and *Pyasa*), idealism and faith in goodness began to be seen as outdated.

Though the Congress was not practising Gandhianism or socialism, it had respect for the values therein and before the advent of the new mobile phone-driven consumerist capitalism, it was possible to live a simpler and collective life. In the last nearly quarter cen-

tury, the Congress lost touch with the emerging new world. Its liberalism and pluralism were challenged by identitarian Hinduism, and its semi-socialism was confronted by market forces driven by liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. Indeed, these policies were actually unleashed by the Congress itself in 1991-92. But the party could not have seen that these forces were attacking the vitals of Congress culture, ethos and broad ideological architecture. The BJP at once integrated right-wing economics with conservative Hindutva. That has proved to be a near fatal blow to the idea of the Congress, with its left-of-centre programme and multi-cultural Sarvadharm-Samabhava known as its version of secularism.

For a space of its own

The question therefore is not merely of the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, or the so-called dynastic character of the party. Just by bringing in a new face (Jyotiraditya Scindia, Sachin Pilot or Kamal Nath), the party cannot overnight start building its cadre to match that of the communists or the RSS. The party cannot give up its mass character. It had maintained mass contact without the structured cadre system. It cannot give up pluralism and an inclusive approach. It cannot and must not become a "soft Hindutva" party to attract the saffronised middle classes, in India or among the diaspora. The Congress cannot sacrifice its idea of social justice and welfare. The Congress still has a network, though weakened in the last decade, across the country, with roots in the legacy of the freedom movement and Gandhism and Nehruvism. The party has neglected these strong roots. It has to define, campaign and set its own agenda, and not become a reactive

party merely responding to and questioning the BJP. That approach only strengthens Narendra Modi. He has a Teflon character, nothing sticks, and no megalomaniac can be challenged on his turf. The Congress has to create its own political space with or without Rahul or the Gandhis.

Mr. Modi is a transient phenomenon. The Congress is not a transient idea. Mr. Modi is not the future of the BJP. Neither he, nor the RSS can represent the magnificent multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-dimensional India. Modernity does not mean using modern gadgets as Mr. Modi appears to think. Modernity lies in values, ideas and attitudes. It lies in humanism, pacifism, respect for all religions and cultures, faith in civilisation and hope for a better future for the whole world, not just in becoming a superpower or attaining membership of the UN Security Council. That is Nehruvism in the Gandhian mould. The effervescence of the Modi mood cannot replace those values, and therefore cannot last for too long. Modi-ism and the RSS have a limited shelf life. The Congress is a long-distance runner.

Unfortunately, the Congress has lost this faith and confidence in itself. It has been afflicted by a strange identity crisis, and in panic it is looking for existential survival in the face of supposed extinction. Even the so-called dynasty is transient. Each person who believes in the secular religiosity of Mahatma Gandhi, in the vibrant idealism of Pandit Nehru and in the profound legacy of the freedom movement will help resurrect the Congress. Its form may change, but the content and substance will reshape the organisation and leadership.

Kumar Ketkar is a veteran journalist

One India, two time zones

The insistence on observing IST vis-à-vis Northeast India's needs ignores its social and economic impact



LAWRENCE LIANG

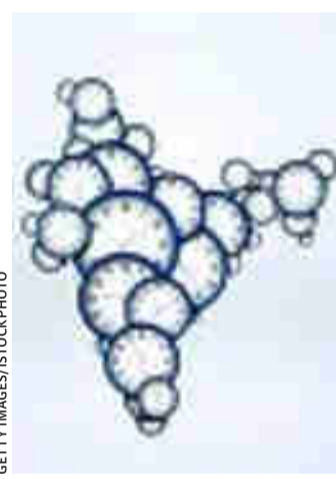
In a two paragraph order delivered by Chief Justice Ajit Singh, the Gauhati High Court has dismissed a public interest litigation filed by Rita Mozumder seeking a direction from the Central government to notify a separate time zone for the Northeast. The court cites a high-level committee study, constituted by the Ministry of Science and Technology, that recognised the difficulties faced by a single time zone in eastern India but concluded that Indian Standard Time (IST) should nonetheless be retained. The issues raised by the petition demanded more than a cursory order dismissing the petition given the importance of the issue. Legislators, activists, industrialists and ordinary citizens from the Northeast have often complained about the effect of IST on their lives, and pursued the issue of having a separate time zone with the Central government, without much success. The petition arose after repeated rejections by the government.

The idea of a standard time zone has become so integral to our lives that we often take it for granted and assume it to be a part of natural phenomena. We tend to forget the complex contestations – including legal ones – that go into its making. The

creation of a time zone signals the victory of time over space with geographical areas being brought under a single time zone rather than relying on local solar time. It entails a denial of local time – or a separation of time from space – a very significant fact if you consider what it means to the experience of social and economic lives. In the case of India, the time difference between the westernmost part of India and the easternmost point is approximately two hours, the effect of which is that the sun rises and sets much earlier than it does in the rest of the country.

There is a strong case

In the Northeast, the sun rises as early as four in the morning and in winter it sets by four in the evening. By the time government offices or educational institutions open, many daylight hours are already lost. In winter this problem gets even more accentuated and the ecological costs are a disaster with much more electricity having to be consumed. Profs. D.P. Sengupta, and Dilip Ahuja of the National Institute of Advanced Studies claim that advancing IST by half an hour would result in saving 2.7 billion units of electricity every year. None of the other proposals such as the introduction of daylight saving time in India has met with any approval and it is felt that having two time zones would be unsuitable. There is of course a strong political dimension to granting a separate time zone in the Northeast given the region's long history of self-determin-



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

ation movements. The unstated assumption is that the grant of a different time zone is only the first temporal step towards conceding spatial autonomy. This appears to me to be a short-sighted perspective. If socioeconomic development is indeed one of the formulae to combat insurgency, might it not be worthwhile to consider the disastrous impact that IST has on productivity and efficiency in the region?

A few years ago, then Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, frustrated with the decision of the Centre not to have a separate Northeast time, unilaterally decided that Assam would follow *ChaiBagaan* time or tea time is a reference to an informal practice followed in tea gardens in Assam which is an hour ahead of IST. It alerts us to the fact that there is indeed a long history of the applica-

tion of different time zones in India. We find evidence of this in the Constituent Assembly debates. On December 28, 1948, responding to an amendment proposed by Naziruddin Ahmad, Dr. Ambedkar asked him what system of timing he had in mind: "Is it the Greenwich time, the Standard time, Bombay time or Calcutta time?"

Ambedkar's reference to "Bombay time" and "Calcutta time" reminds us of an interesting aberration in the history of IST. It was instituted in 1905 but after it had been adopted, Bombay traders found it difficult to convert to IST. Because the conversion to IST was sought to be effected at a time when there was considerable public resentment over the Tilak sedition trial, the government found little support for this shift among the people in Bombay. Bombay Time was maintained right up to 1955 with Bombay following its own time zone which was 38 minutes ahead of the rest of the country.

Our use of time

While the court may have been reticent to intervene in what it saw primarily as an executive prerogative, it also passed an opportunity to examine a fascinating dimension of temporal justice that Indian courts have not had an opportunity to address, but other jurisdictions have had to contend with. In the U.S., battles over daylight-saving time regularly went to court and it was not until 1966 with the passing of the Uniform Time Act that they had a uniform national period of day-

light-saving time. Todd D. Rakoff in his work on the invisibility of time in structuring the law argues that there is a normative dimension of time that seems to underwrite a number of legal arrangements, and the question of how we, as a society, structure our time is mirrored in the question how we structure our laws.

Responding to the various objections raised about a separate time zone, journalist, writer and academic Sanjoy Hazarika raises critical questions and asks us to consider why it is that the development index leans considerably in favour of western India as opposed to the east, and what impact differential time may have on it. This I believe is a question that has a significant impact on the interpretation of 'life' in Article 21 of the Constitution. Even if the Gauhati High Court were unwilling to issue a substantive order, it certainly had the discretion to ask for a study on the legal impact of a single time zone on the fundamental rights of people. This is perhaps a question that the Law Commission may find worthy of investigating further. In the meantime, we will have to be content with the tweaking of local orders changing office timings etc. And, most of east India will continue to feel the vagaries of IST an inconvenience while the further you go to the Northeast, it will be experienced as the caprice of the state.

Lawrence Liang is a professor of law at Ambedkar University, Delhi, currently teaching at Yale University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Westminster attack

The terror attack in the heart of London, and which has claimed lives and injured many, is another grim reminder that the roots of this malaise run deep ("IS claims responsibility for U.K. attack", March 24). The modus operandi was similar to the deadly attack in Nice last year. Whether it is a lone wolf attack in the West or suicide bombings in Afghanistan and other areas of West Asia, terrorism is now spreading its tentacles. World leaders need to speak in one voice and be united in this big fight. For India, it is vital that intelligence agencies put every shoulder to the wheel and remain alert.

SHATAYU SAHAJ, Unnao, Uttar Pradesh

Meat industry in limbo

The kind of over-the-top drive using police power

against petty shop owners who earn their livelihood selling meat shows utmost disrespect for the profession and their way of livelihood as well ("Meat traders shut shop across western U.P.", March 24). It is shocking that even shops with proper government-issued licences have been coerced to shut down without providing the owners and employees any other means of survival. This is a decision that goes against the ethos of our democratic values and rights, and can also be seen as a desperate attempt to impose a certain choice of food on people.

MD. FARUJUDIN KHAN, New Delhi

MP's behaviour

Resorting to violence and high-handed means at the drop of a hat to muzzle people and impose their whims and fancies with

scant regard for sentiments and the due process of the law has been the hallmark of bigots. The shocking incident, where Shiv Sena MP Ravindra Gaikwad manhandled an Air India employee on not being allotted a business class seat in an all-economy flight, is an example of this ("Shiv Sena MP beats up AI employee", March 24). The show of arrogance of power by an elected representative of a responsible political party, without any sense of remorse, makes the incident even more despicable. Instead of always being in the limelight for the wrong reasons, the Shiv Sena could gain wider political acceptability by championing the cause of the downtrodden. The party needs to understand that the politics of hate and divisiveness is subject to the law of diminishing returns.

An evolution of a model code of conduct for all elected representatives must be done on a war footing.

B. SURESH KUMAR, Coimbatore

The incident is sickening and reprehensible. Whatever may be the reason for the provocation, the MP cannot beat up someone and remain defiant. His party should take disciplinary action against him. The privileges that MPs enjoy are limited to their conduct in Parliament; outside its precincts, they are ordinary citizens. Their conduct should be a model for others and this includes being responsible and courteous.

K.R. JAYAPRAKASH RAO, Mysuru

Bleak future

It is disheartening that the government, which is

supposedly committed to uphold the greatness of India, seems to be giving least importance to preserving our ancient heritage and traditional knowledge, possibly in favour of industry behemoths ("Ancient knowledge hub faces grey future", March 24). Instead, it seems bent upon taking symbolic and potentially rabble-rousing activities such as cow preservation to the extremes. This government needs to take a more inclusive view of the great culture and heritage of India and for the benefit of all Indians.

JOSEPH ANDREWS, Bengaluru

But for a clause

There is certainly a case for HIV patients to feel unhappy about the HIV Bill (March 22). Their disappointment and displeasure are reasonable

as the clause to "provide treatment as far as possible" takes them nowhere. It is as good as saying "no" to them. When we try to help those affected by a so-far incurable disease, why dilute options to help them?

J. EDEN ALEXANDER, Thanjavur

Jumbo's rescue

A 10-year-old male elephant seems to have been a bit careless by falling into a 65-foot dry well in Coimbatore, but the fact that forest officials swung into action and worked patiently to rescue it is both marvellous and memorable. The pictures that accompanied the report breathed life into the story ("Jumbo rescue effort, spread over two days, has happy ending", March 24).

P.U. KRISHNAN, Udhamandalam, The Nilgiris

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/



Second home: "Roughly 15,000 fishermen from Andhra Pradesh are hired by the Gujarati seafaring Kharva community in Veraval each season." Hari, a migrant from Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh, works as a captain on a fishing boat in Veraval, Gujarat. (Below) Mylipalli Satyamma, from Etcherla mandal of Srikakulam district, speaks to her husband Lakshmaiah and sons who are now in Gujarat. • PRASHANT NAKWE; K.R. DEEPAK

The Andhra flavour in Gujarat's fish

Each fishing season, migrants from coastal Andhra Pradesh arrive in droves at Veraval. **Mahesh Langa** and **Santosh Patnaik** report on how this journey to escape poverty has built the fortunes of the coastal town in Gujarat

Shaik Navab Jani, 32, is busy cooking rice and fish on a 15-metre mid-sized mechanised fishing trawler anchored at the harbour in Veraval. The coastal town in Gujarat is considered to be one of the biggest fishing and seafood hubs in western India with more than 8,000 registered fishing boats and dozens of processing factories exporting frozen fish. Jani, even as he cooks, is also arguing on his mobile phone with his "seth" (employer) for the full salary which was committed to him and his other mates. The seth, he claims, has cut ₹8,000 from his consolidated salary for eight months. "You cannot cut my salary as you had promised the full amount," he wails in broken Hindi, immediately switching to Telugu to translate for his fellow travellers huddled near the boat on a jetty. "The seth and the tandel (captain) promised ₹80,000 for the season," he tells his mates, who also appear angry and dejected. The negotiations go back and forth, in a curious mix of Hindi, Gujarati and Telugu.

Jani is one of several thousand single migrants, addressed as "Madrasis" here, who have journeyed from Vizianagaram, Srikakulam and Visakhapatnam on the east coast to Veraval 2,000 km away to work on mechanised fishing trawlers from August to March every year. Away from their families for eight months of the year, the rough seas are their home, a home they revere and fear.

"Our problem is with payment. They promise ₹10,000 per month when we come and then reduce it when it's time for us to leave. It's unfair," says Jani, quickly adding, "Our seth is god for us. We have no other problem here. They give us free food, good basmati rice and fresh fish. They even let us take 10-15 kg dried fish back home when we leave. But the payment is a problem as at the end of season, the seth tries to cut the salary under the pretext of low catch."

Life in a boat

No official figures are available but roughly 15,000 fishermen from Andhra Pradesh are hired by the Gujarati seafaring Kharva community in Veraval each season. Locals prefer day-long fishing, venturing out before dawn and returning as dusk settles in, in small boats. The fishermen from Andhra come in handy for the long haul, for deep-sea trips that sometimes last a week. The migrants have been mainstays of the fishing industry here for more than two decades now.

Each boat carries 8-10 persons. The tandel gets paid ₹15,000 to ₹20,000 a month while khalasis (sailors) are paid



₹7,000-₹10,000 a month plus free food. Typically, in a month they are 20-25 days out at sea. After each week-long trip in which they venture as far as Goa, Karnataka and even Kerala, they unload tonnes of catch at the jetty and prepare the boat – loading it with ice, diesel and ration – the very next day for the next trip. There's no home to go to for recuperation; they live on boats even when the boats are anchored at the harbour. "For eight months, the boat is our home, as we do everything in it," says 35-year-old tandel Rayithi Erraiah from Srikakulam district, who has worked in Veraval for two decades.

Locally built traditional fishing trawlers are around 15-20 metres long, powered by engines of 75-100 horsepower, and fitted with a radio transmitter and navigational instruments like GPS and echo-location fish finders. On every boat, cabins are constructed at the back of the deck. These cabins, just about 8x6 ft big, house eight men at a time, along with the navigation equipment and the fishers' luggage, safety kits and even small TVs and DVD players.

Erraiah says the low income from fishing in traditional boats in his home State forced him and thousands of others to migrate to Gujarat. As tandel, he is the literally the man in the middle between the seth and the khalasis, who are hired through word of mouth or, as is often the case with the likes of Erraiah, from the vicinity of the native village. As per the informal system, the seth pays a lump sum of ₹7-8 lakh to the tandel, who then pays the khalasis for the entire season in advance. At the end of the season, there is a final stocktaking – if the catch is good and the seth is pleased, there are bonuses to be had, but there's no guaranteeing them.

The push and pull factors

Several migrants in Veraval complain about the low wages but at the same time, they insist that back home they don't even get one-third of what they earn in Gujarat. Jangaya, 44, from Kun-

jurvanipeta near Arasavilli in Srikakulam, has been coming to Veraval for 15 years. A tandel, he gets around ₹18,000 per month. "There's no income from fishing on the Andhra coast," he says. The shortage of skilled manpower for fishing in Veraval is perennial, and the Andhra fishermen plug the gap.

According to the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), poverty remains a major factor driving migration. Last year, the ICSF carried out a detailed study, 'Migrant Fishers from Andhra Pradesh in the Gujarat Marine Fishing Industry', which found that of the 1,60,000 fisher families in Andhra Pradesh, 97% are below the official poverty line.

Chikati Polisamma, 50, a resident of D. Machilesam in Etcherla mandal of Srikakulam district on the Andhra-Odisha border, has had her husband Korlayya leave every year for Veraval for a decade now; most of the 3,000-odd men of this village work there. Last August, their eldest son Hariappadu also headed for the Gujarat town after the graduate's year-long search went in vain. "I have not given up hope and am ensuring that my two other sons are also well educated. They are in school," she says.

Left to fend for herself, Polisamma soldiers on with her growing-up sons in

their two-room tenement. Every morning, she goes to the shore to buy fish from the local fishers and travels around in shared autos selling them in the streets of Etcherla and its adjoining areas – public transport to the village was withdrawn a couple of years ago. Her earnings at the end of a long day are a meagre ₹100.

While they are gone

There are many Polisammams in this backward district, selling fresh or dried fish to make their daily ends meet and staying connected with their men on the other coast through occasional mobile-phone calls. There are often scares. "My husband Pakkala Lakshmi accidentally crossed the border area in Pakistan two years ago and was detained by the authorities. The fishing community in Gujarat finally managed to secure his release," says Ramulamma of D. Machilesam village. The falling health of their men due to continuous exposure to sunlight and the elements at sea remains a matter of concern, but there's wry humour too. "We are happy that they are deprived of booze during their stay in Gujarat," points out Kondapalli Gavaramma from Srikuram in Gara mandal, whose husband and two sons work there.

Of late, insurance has been made

compulsory for all the fishermen but Pandodu's family wasn't so lucky. "My husband died of ill-health but we didn't get any ex gratia or compensation as he had no insurance. My son Ramu is now in Veraval. I look after my grandson and earn a few bucks by selling dried fish," says Guramma of Badiwadipeta village.

Andhra fishermen who've opted to venture out to Gujarat since the early 1990s say their own coast is a long-running saga of depleting catch. Though the Visakhapatnam fishing harbour is 100-200 km away, they are treated as outsiders there. With fishing at home no longer sustainable, there are some who still do not want to take the Gujarat route. But jobs are difficult to come by.



"After finishing my intermediate in commerce, I went to Chennai to undergo a seamen's course for six months by spending ₹1 lakh but have been looking for a job for the past two years. Consultants who act as placement agents for various merchant vessels are insisting on a payment of ₹50,000 towards service charges, a sum I've been unable to arrange," says Barri Hari, 21, from Etcherla. Another youth, Gangala Laxman, from the same area, is making do as a tailor. "Our demand for ST status hasn't been granted. I completed my BA and BE in 2011-12 but haven't been to get a job," says the aspiring teacher who has attempted the District Selection Committee Test twice.

Then there are some like Chikati Appa Rao who turned their back on Veraval after a stint. He saw two of his crew members – fellow villagers – die in a freak mishap while jumping from one boat to another in 2002. "Now I am happy whenever I get some work and manage the family with meagre earnings at my native place," he says.

Giving them their due

Veraval produced 2.8 lakh tonnes of marine fish in 2014-15, out of which 24,073 tonnes was exported, fetching ₹361 crore in export earnings. Asked why they hand out a raw deal to the Andhra migrants, boat and fish processing unit owners deny any exploitation and take pains to explain how food and medicines are never in short supply. "We pay them handsome salaries and provide them ration," claims Tulsi Gohel, president of the Veraval Boat Owners' Association, who operates a fleet of around a dozen boats and employs over 30 migrant fishers. "I agree that it's hard work but they are paid accordingly. It's unlike Myanmarese bonded labourers on Thai fishing vessels," says Kenny Thomas, who owns the Jinny Marine processing units, drawing an eerie parallel. Thomas also claims that there has never been any complaint of labour abuse in Veraval.

Veraval's fortunes in recent years have largely been built on the blood, sweat and tears of the Andhra migrants, and while they would feel short-changed every once in a while, the sobering reality is that this is their only escape from deprivation at home. This fishing season is at its end, and many are preparing for the journey home and relishing the prospect of being reunited with their families. But chances are that come August, most of them – and newer recruits from their villages – would be retracing the rehearsed route from one coast to the other for another season in the deep seas.

