



Divided they stand

The two AIADMK groups are confused, being faced with conflicting pulls and pressures

The decision of the ruling faction of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK (Ammu), to distance itself from members of the V.K. Sasikala family comes at a time when there is an unmistakable and growing public resentment against them. This has been compounded by what is allegedly Ms. Sasikala's nephew T.T.V. Dhinakaran's latest folly – a brazen attempt to bribe Election Commission officials to secure the election symbol of Two Leaves; the AIADMK's deputy general secretary and other family members were becoming a political liability. At the same time, with the EC freezing the symbol, a section of the AIADMK (Ammu) leadership saw a reunification with the splinter formation headed by former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam as essential to long-term survival. The choice seemed one between swimming together or sinking separately. Interestingly, neither Ms. Sasikala nor Mr. Dhinakaran seems to be putting up any stiff resistance to the ouster. Also, many in the group perceived to be close to the Sasikala family went along with the decision without a whimper. Given this, there is suspicion that the "ouster", forced by circumstances and carried out in the larger interest, was not entirely bereft of a little stage management.

Ms. Sasikala and Mr. Dhinakaran may well regard what transpired as a strategic retreat rather than an irrevocable order to political exile. Both are aware they have at least a handful of diehard loyalists within the ruling camp – possibly enough to threaten the Edappadi K. Palaniswami government's narrow majority in the Assembly. Many ministers remain beholden to the family and may find it difficult to antagonise their one-time benefactors. It will be no surprise if both strive to retain their political influence, even while appearing reconciled to being sidelined. The party's television channels, its publications, and resources remain in the control of the Sasikala clan. A shared desire for political stability, reflected in the fact that no MLA would want an immediate election, could ward off a total rupture in the ranks. Indeed, if such stability is to be reinforced and is to sustain in the longer run, a patch-up with the rival AIADMK faction is the only viable course. However, for the Panneerselvam faction, merging with the AIADMK (Ammu) presents both an opportunity and a cause for dilemma. While they may get to rejoin the government, the worry lies in the risk of being swamped by the rival group. Also, given that the Panneerselvam faction was formed on the basis of opposition towards the Sasikala family, it would be suicidal to merge with the AIADMK (Ammu) in the absence of clarity about the real nature of the ouster. The moves and counter-moves currently afoot reflect conflicting pulls and pressures – the basic dilemma here being the conflict between reflecting the public mood and remaining together for the sake of political power.

At the crossroads

The presidential election will have a profound effect on France's future. And also Europe's

French voters have defied predictions time and again. In 1995, Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist conservative who had been trailing in opinion polls, won the presidency. In 2002 they sent Jean-Marie Le Pen, the far-right, Holocaust-denying leader of the National Front, to the second round, only to defeat him there. As they prepare to head to the polls on Sunday, predictions are even more difficult. Of the 11 candidates in the fray, four are seen to be leading contenders for the second round on May 7, when the top two face off against each other. Historically, French politics has been divided between the conservatives and the socialists. This balance between the establishment parties is being tested this time with three 'outsiders' among the four leading candidates – independent Emmanuel Macron, the National Front's Marine Le Pen and leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Some opinion polls still give a chance to the conservative candidate, François Fillon, but he is mired in a corruption scandal. The Socialists, directionless after five years of François Hollande's highly unpopular presidency, appear to be out of the race even before polling for the first round begins. The four-way race offers a picture of the issues that shape the election agenda.

While Mr. Macron promises to launch gradual economic and labour reforms and retain the *status quo* in foreign policy, Mr. Fillon wants radical reforms, including an overhaul of the labour code and sacking of public servants *en masse*, and closer ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia. Ms. Le Pen, a eurosceptic, is consolidating her base on anti-immigration and anti-globalisation rhetoric, much like Donald Trump did in the U.S. elections last year. Mr. Mélenchon, who surged in the polls in the last weeks of the campaign, stays focussed on economic issues with promises to raise public spending and taxes on the rich. The country's political and business establishment might prefer the victory of Mr. Macron as the other pro-business candidate is facing corruption allegations. But the outcome is anything but uncertain, given that a substantial chunk of voters remains undecided and that the kind of anti-establishment anger that helped Mr. Trump and Britain's pro-Brexit camp remains strong in France as well. The unemployment rate is over 20% among the youth, while economic growth never really revived after the 2008 financial crisis. Besides, security concerns remain paramount after the terror attacks in Paris and Nice over the past 18 months. Thursday night's shooting in Paris that killed a policeman, and was claimed by the Islamic State, exposes how volatile the security situation is – something that Ms. Le Pen's campaign is trying to cash in on during the final stretch. In many ways this will be the most crucial election in France's modern history. Its results will have profound implications not just on French politics but also on the future of the European Union.

Courting another political verdict

Nawaz Sharif gets a breather from the Pakistan Supreme Court, but he's been put on notice



HUSAIN HAQQANI

Pakistan's Supreme Court is an arena for politics, not an avenue for resolution of legal disputes. Unlike other countries where the apex court serves as the court of last appeal, Pakistan's Supreme Court often entertains direct applications from political actors and generates high-profile media noise. In that tradition its judgment in the so-called Panama Papers case is a classic political balancing act. It raises questions about Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's property in London, but does not remove him from office.

Opposition politician Imran Khan, currently a favourite of Pakistan's establishment, initiated the case after Mr. Sharif's name appeared in leaked documents about owners of offshore companies worldwide. The documents indicated that the Sharif family had borrowed money against four flats they own in London's posh Mayfair district.

Show them the money

Having an offshore account is not in itself a violation of Pakistani law, but transferring money from Pakistan illegally is. Hence the case decided on Thursday revolved around the provenance of the money with which the Sharifs became owners of the property in London. In hearings that began in January, the petitioners insisted that the Sharif family's ownership of this particular property could not have been possible without their possession of undeclared wealth or illegal transfers of money from Pakistan.

Instead of insisting on the time-honoured principle that accusers



must prove their allegation beyond a shadow of a doubt and that investigations must precede judicial hearings, the Supreme Court acted politically. It asked the Sharifs to explain the source of money used to buy property abroad, forcing the Sharif family's lawyers to offer various (sometimes contradictory) explanations at sensational hearings.

One of these explanations comprised a letter from a member of the Qatari royal family who said that he had transferred \$8 million to the Sharif family as return on investments made in cash by the Prime Minister's deceased father, Mian Muhammad Sharif, in the Qatari family's real estate business in 1980.

The Qatar letter did not settle the matter because the Sharif family members had, at different times, given different explanations for the source of their funds. Moreover, the timelines of the acquisition of the London properties, the formation of the offshore company that was used to buy them and the apparent cash dealings in Qatar did not always align. In any case, a Qatari royal might be willing to send a letter for his friends, the Sharifs, but could not be expected to testify in person in Pakistan and submit himself to cross-examination, something that would be needed if the case ever

went to proper trial.

The Supreme Court's final verdict was split 3-2 among the five-judge bench, with two ruling that Prime Minister Sharif should be disqualified from holding office for failing to explain the source of money for his property. The majority said there was insufficient evidence for such a drastic step and instead announced the formation of a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) comprising five members.

These would include appointees from the Federal Investigation Agency, the National Accountability Bureau, the State Bank of Pakistan, the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan and one representative each from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Military Intelligence (MI).

The fallout

The Prime Minister's side breathed a sigh of relief that the court did not disqualify him from holding office, a decision it has given in the past for the removal of elected civilian Prime Ministers. Imran Khan, who wanted disqualification, declared victory even with the JIT's creation. He and other opponents of the government are hoping that Nawaz Sharif will now bleed politically from the thousand cuts that are likely to be inflicted on him through reports emanating from the JIT.

Mr. Sharif has won elections before notwithstanding allegations of personal financial wrongdoing, but a new wave of charges could make things difficult for him in Punjab's urban centres when Pakistan goes to the polls in 2018.

Ironically, the Supreme Court's nearly 549-page judgment begins not by invoking some eminent jurist, but with a reference to Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, citing Balzac's well-known words, "Behind every great fortune there is a crime." But then most Pakistanis, including judges and military officers, have known for years that the fortunes of Pakistan's uber-wealthy families come from bending or breaking laws or using political connections for private advantage. Why go looking into the origins of wealth now?

The creation of the JIT, and including two military intelligence service members who are not trained in matters relating to business and finance, says more about Pakistan's judicial and political system than it says about the merits of this particular case. The issue in Pakistan is never corruption or failing to explain the source of funds for property. It is where someone fits into the permanent state's scheme of things.

Nawaz Sharif was fine when he was picked up by General Zia-ul-Haq as leader of a military-backed Punjab political elite after the coup of 1977. Courts and investigators seldom found anything wrong with the phenomenal expansion of his family's wealth until he decided to start questioning Pakistan's military establishment and, in recent years, even assert himself in core policy areas. Politicians can make money as long as they do not seek a role in policymaking. When Benazir Bhutto stood for a different paradigm for Pakistan, she and her husband were subjected to long-drawn legal proceedings over corruption. Asif Ali Zardari might have fewer problems on that score now

after he is content to parrot the establishment's views on national security and foreign policy. Nawaz Sharif is being put through the wringer to become more like Mr. Zardari and less like Bhutto.

As for the Pakistani Supreme Court, it intervenes to swing politics one way or another by favouring the country's establishment against politicians or vice versa, to justify patently unconstitutional military takeovers and occasionally to embarrass one party against another. Unlike elsewhere in the world, its function is not just to determine the constitutionality and legality of judgments already given by lower courts.

As a victim of one such Commission (ironically, created on Mr. Sharif's petition) in the so-called Memogate Case, I know that the principal damage inflicted by its proceedings is to public image. The Memogate Commission's findings never led to criminal charges, not even an FIR, against me for any crime as none was actually committed. But its proceedings and comments created sufficient political noise for some Pakistanis to still think I am a fugitive from Pakistani law.

Signal from the deep state?

Generating smoke without fire against persons deemed difficult or uncontrollable by Pakistan's permanent state establishment, the deep state, is often the greatest accomplishment of inquiries created by the Supreme Court on direct petitions like the one over the Panama Papers.

The JIT might still find nothing definitive for prosecution but Mr. Sharif is on notice. And that is how Pakistan's system is designed to work.

Husain Haqqani, Director for South and Central Asia at the Hudson Institute in Washington DC, was Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States from 2008 to 2011

Waiting for the Lokpal

When will the government operationalise the Lokpal law, even in its diluted form?



ANJALI BHARDWAJ & AMRITA JOHRI

In a hearing recently regarding non-operationalisation of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, more than three years after the law was enacted, Attorney General Mukul Rohatgi reportedly argued in the Supreme Court that the court has no powers to direct the government on when and how the law should be enforced.

Failure to implement the Lokpal law by the Bharatiya Janata Party government is an indication of how the party is renegeing with impunity on its poll promise of a corruption-free India. A lack of will on the part of the government to implement the anti-corruption law can be inferred from its various actions and inactions in the last three years.

With the government's refusal to recognise anyone as the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) after the general election in 2014, the appointment of the Lokpal became an immediate casualty as the selection committee of the Lokpal includes the recognised LoP. In order to operationalise the law, the government had its task cut out – intro-

duce a Lokpal amendment Bill in Parliament substituting the recognised LoP in the selection committee with the leader of the single largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha. In fact, a similar amendment was required in the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act for the appointment of the CBI Director; it was introduced by the government and passed expeditiously. However, for the Lokpal law, instead of bringing in a single amendment to alter the composition of the selection committee, the government introduced a 10-page Bill which proposed to fundamentally dilute the original law. Given the controversial nature of amendments, it was referred to a parliamentary standing committee. The Bill continues to languish in Parliament.

Diluting asset disclosure

The Lokpal Act stipulated that by July 31, 2016, Section 44 related to disclosure of assets of public servants was to be operationalised irrespective of appointment of the Lokpal. To prevent the asset disclosure provision from taking effect, the government introduced another amendment Bill. This Bill, which completely whittled down the asset disclosure requirement, was resolutely pushed through by the government in Parliament and passed within 48 hours of its introduction. MPs from various political parties,



who expressed concern that the amendments would dilute the original law, were assured by the Minister that once the Bill was passed it would be referred to a parliamentary standing committee for deliberation. It is significant that the Bill, pushed through in unprecedented haste, did not modify the composition of the selection committee which was needed to appoint the Lokpal.

The law was thus diluted even before it could be operationalised. The Lokpal Amendment Act, 2016, did away with the statutory requirement of public servants to disclose the assets of their spouses and dependent children provided for under the original law. It also dispensed with the need for public disclosure of these statements and empowered the Central govern-

ment to prescribe the form and manner of asset disclosure. This was a critical blow as the Lokpal was established to act on complaints under the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA); one of the grounds of criminal misconduct under the PCA relates to a public servant or any person on his/her behalf being in possession of pecuniary resources or property disproportionate to known sources of income. Since illegally amassed assets are often handed over to family members, public declaration of assets of the spouse and dependent children of the public servants was necessary to enable people to make informed complaints to the Lokpal.

Further, the response to a query under the RTI Act revealed that the Minister had misled Parliament. Despite the Minister's assurances on the floor of the House, the Lokpal Amendment Act, 2016, passed by Parliament was never referred to any parliamentary standing committee for deliberation.

Permission for prosecution

The government's intention to subvert the Lokpal law was further confirmed when through proposed amendments to the PCA, it sought to usurp critical powers of the Lokpal. Experience in India has shown that the requirement for seeking prior sanction from the government for prosecuting government offi-

cials is a critical bottleneck and results not only in huge delays but also, and often, in the accused never being prosecuted. To address this problem, the Lokpal Act vests the power of granting sanction for prosecution in the independent institution of the Lokpal. Instead of reinforcing this provision, which insulates the prosecution process from government influence, the PCA amendments strengthen the requirement to seek the government's permission before prosecuting a public servant by increasing cover to even retired public officials. By requiring the Lokpal to seek permission from the government before it can prosecute officials in cases of corruption, the proposed PCA amendments make a mockery of the independent institution and render the entire exercise of demanding an empowered Lokpal futile.

So when can the people of India reasonably expect the Modi government to operationalise the Lokpal law, even in its diluted form? Perhaps not anytime soon, if the statement of the Attorney General in the Supreme Court is anything to go by, wherein he cited the Delhi Rent Control Act which has not been implemented for 30 years.

Anjali Bhardwaj and Amrita Johri are members of the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

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.

Upholding justice

The demolition of the Babri Masjid was a watershed moment in the modern political history of India. The communal polarisation since then has intensified, resulting in communal clashes and riots. The BJP, which seems to have emerged as the primary beneficiary of the incident, cannot run away from its actions. There may or may not be a conspiracy angle, but there is no refuting the fact that the demolition was a direct consequence of communal feelings fanned by right-wing elements. While it is not certain whether the prosecution will lead to conviction – it is cumbersome to prove the conspiracy angle to any crime – the Supreme Court's order, nevertheless, is reassurance of the secular credentials of the country.

BIPIN THAIVALAPPI,
Pavayannur, Kerala

■ Though it is unfortunate

that it has taken 25 long years for such a sensitive case to move to a final stage, it is heartening that our judiciary has stood firm and upheld the majesty of the law. It is also unfortunate that there is immunity to an accused person when he/she holds a gubernatorial post. If the Prime Minister has any respect for the judiciary, he should advise Kalyan Singh to step down.

YVONNE FERNANDEZ,
Chennai

■ Now that the Supreme Court has revived the criminal conspiracy charges in the Babri Masjid demolition case against senior BJP leaders, the law must be allowed to take its course. Those found guilty must be brought to justice. Political morality would demand that Kalyan Singh step down and face trial instead of continuing under constitutional immunity available to Governors. It would be equally

appropriate for Uma Bharti too to resign or the Prime Minister must dismiss her. She cannot be allowed to face the trial with all the trappings that go with being a sitting Minister.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

Fragile unity move

After the bizarre infighting that first erupted within the two camps of the AIADMK after the demise of Jayalalithaa, the sudden move now to come together again is certainly not born out of any lofty principle, or to uphold any ideology or legacy. Rather, it is a crude attempt to hold on to power when there has been a threat unleashed by a hidden hand. Most MLAs are now strangely not hesitant to disown their godmother to save themselves from being pushed into oblivion by cadres and the electorate. O. Panneerselvam had every opportunity and

authority to order a probe into the demise of Jayalalithaa while he was still the Chief Minister. The Election Commission's move to freeze the party symbol has only sown the seeds of confusion among the MLAs who are clueless as to how to go about stalling the rise of the DMK. On his part, the DMK's Stalin should not raise the bogey of corruption against the AIADMK as his party was also instrumental in part for the total rout of the UPA in the 2014 Lok Sabha election after the unearthing of mega scams.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

■ The Sasikala factor needs to be settled before both the warring factions can think of a merger. It is the complete isolation of her family members from the party alone which can instil confidence in the electorate. Till then, meaningless parleys will

continue just to make people believe that there is a solution round the corner.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Managing water

As a concept, privatisation of water looks at water distribution as a revenue generator. But the objective of a water distribution system should be to ensure the availability of this basic necessity to every person irrespective of his or her paying power. Better public oversight is needed. Institutional structures with representation from resident welfare associations and social

activists can audit distribution network functioning. Transparency in water supply-related data such as pipelines laid, incremental households served, leakages, treated water, efficiency in water usage through pricing usage above a certain threshold, smart metering, rainwater harvesting and more budgetary support are some other measures to achieve this objective in urban areas (OpEd page, 'Left, Right, Centre' – "Should we privatise water?", April 21).

AARON GEO ABRAHAM,
Vashi, Navi Mumbai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: In a Life page story headlined "Sachin is my guiding light: Shah Rukh" (April 19, 2017, some editions) it was erroneously mentioned that the film Sachin: A Billion Dreams was directed by London-based writer James Erskine. It should have been James Erskine.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturba Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com



Matter of shame: "The girls' lives don't matter as they come from socially marginalised communities where girls matter little and are seen as a burden on their families." A trafficking victim from Nayatola-Tingheria village of Kursela in Katihar district. ■RANJEET KUMAR

Betrayed by their own blood

In Bihar's impoverished districts close to the Nepal border, sex trafficking often masquerades as a marriage proposal, with families 'selling' their daughters for a song. **Amarnath Tewary** profiles victims from Katihar and Araria

She was only 13 when given away in marriage to a groom old enough to be her father. Pyari Devi can't quite remember the day she returned home one evening and saw two strangers sitting on the charpoy placed outside their house. She vaguely recalls her parents, both daily wage labourers, pointing out to one of them, the middle-aged man who wanted to marry her. After a hurriedly convened marriage, she was sent off the next day in the company of the two strangers to a strange place far away from her native Katihar. Three years later, Pyari ran away and returned home. The marriage was a sham. She was sold to an abusive man for a sum she is not aware of and made to work like a slave for his family. She is only 17 now but sports the sindoor (vermillion streak) on her forehead – the mark of a married woman – to keep men at bay. "I don't want to be married again," she says. Pyari smiles eagerly but breaks into tears when confronted with questions about her marriage. She sells vegetables, making ₹200 on a good day.

Pyari Devi is just a number in the list of girls who are trafficked every year from the impoverished districts of Katihar, Araria, Purnia and Kishanganj in Bihar close to the Nepal border. Illiteracy, poverty and lack of employment are the districts' trademark. Each year, the Kosi river and its tributaries wreak havoc in the villages, flooding the plains and forcing inhabitants to migrate to Rajasthan, Mumbai and Delhi in search of livelihood. There, they come in contact with local touts who promise them not only jobs but – after gaining their trust – assure a good life to their marriageable daughters, many of whom are underage girls. "The touts often visit villages with local migrant people, stay with them for a fortnight, and lure a poor family to sell off their daughter for marriage with the promise of a good life," explains Dinesh Kumar, a Katihar-based social activist.

The promise of marriage with money thrown in as bait tempts the illiterate villagers to sell their daughters. After a sham marriage, and a couple of months of not hearing from their daughters, the parents seek the help of the police to locate them. In police records, they find a mention under the category of missing girls. The stories in this narrative belong to girls sold off by their parents and relatives. There are many who are whisked away by strangers, as money exchanges hands. Their lives don't matter as they come from socially marginalised communities like Paswan and Dhanuk where girls matter little and are seen as a burden on their families. Quite often, their disappearance goes unmentioned. It is also difficult to track them



down as they are hidden from the public gaze and end up in a prostitution racket from where escape is well-nigh impossible.

Last month, the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party leader Nand Kishore Yadav flagged the issue of the missing girls in the Bihar Assembly. It was a short-notice question to the Nitish Kumar government, seeking to know the whereabouts of the missing persons. Reading from the National Crime Records Bureau data, Yadav said 3,037 girls have gone missing from different parts of Bihar in 2016 and in 1,587 cases, the police cited "love affair" as the reason. Among the four border districts, the district police records show Katihar at the top of the list with 81 missing cases – 51 girls and 30 boys – since February 2016. A stark reality is the darkness that pervades the district: out of 1,500 villages in Katihar, 970 are without power – the highest number in the country in a district, according to officials.

Sold by her own parents

Four years ago when Pyari Devi returned home after a game of hide-and-seek with her friends at the Nayatola-Tingheria village in Kursela block of Katihar, she was asked by her mother Pramilla Devi to get ready for marriage. "I just giggled and thought it was a prank, but my mother was serious. She asked me to pack my favourite dress. No one from the family accompanied me. I had no one to play with," she says.

After two days of travelling by train, Pyari reached Rajasthan, a place unfamiliar to the unlettered girl who had never been to school, let alone step outside her village. "Along with my middle-aged husband there were three other people in the family and they were into the business of brewing country-made liquor... I was kept in a room at a roadside dwelling and allowed to come out only in the presence of my husband," she says.

Within a week of her arrival, her ordeal began. She was asked to brew liquor, serve it to people who came to drink and was ordered by her husband to service the men. Her refusal to do so prompted a severe thrashing. Denied food for days, she finally yielded. "One

day, my husband informed me that he had sold me for ₹1 lakh to another man," says Pyari. She contemplated suicide but the noose prepared from a dupatta (long scarf) snapped. It was then that Pyari planned her escape and waited for an opportune moment, which came three years later. She stepped out of her house, turned her back on an abusive marriage, and in the cover of darkness made good her escape, while her husband and his family slept in drunken stupor.

She was lucky to get home. Sporting a silver nose ring, brown polish on her overgrown fingernails, bangles on hands and rubber slippers on her feet, Pyari says she's happy with her life today. But what if her husband comes looking for her? "I'll kill him." He has not come for her yet.

Sixteen-year-old Asha Kumari has a similar story to tell. The eldest of four sisters and a brother, her father Akhilesh Paswan and mother Sunita Devi too are daily wage labourers at Nawabganj Harijan Tola of Sameli block of the district. Six months ago a distant maternal aunt visited her home along with a middle-aged man, Sudhir Rai. Even before she could understand anything, her mother informed her that they would be leaving for a village fair in the Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh, some 600 km from Katihar. "I was excited and started reading names of stations through the train window but Gonda never came," she recalls, adding that at night, mother, daughter and aunt got off at the Samastipur railway station. Some 10-12 people accompanied them from there. "Brandishing knives and spears they got me married with Sudhir Rai at a makeshift courtyard. My mother abandoned me... possibly fearing for her life," says Asha.

Confined in a dingy room for three

months, Asha was treated like a slave, sexually assaulted by all male members of the family, and forced to do all household chores from dawn to dusk on an empty stomach. She too fled one night and reached the Kishanpur railway station, caught a train for Barauni and onwards to Katihar. For three days she went without food – but hope kept her going. "One day, I just walked out of the house and kept walking. I didn't know where I was going and hitched a ride on a bicycle after telling the cyclist my story. He dropped me at the railway station and I took a train to Kishanpur. I was lucky that I met some kind people who helped me along and I finally made it to Katihar, where a bus conductor took pity on me and dropped me off at Kursela," she says.

Asha wants to be a doctor. She knows she was sold off for money to feed her siblings, but doesn't want to confront her mother with the question.

Every year, scores of girls go 'missing' from the districts after such transactional marriages. Kiran Devi, 18, of Bakhri village in Sameli block too recounts her heart-wrenching travail of marriage followed by physical abuse and regular sexual exploitation. After a year of "unbearable daily abuse" she fled from Delhi when she overheard her husband Kamta (she remembers just the first name) negotiating her price with a pimp. "I don't want to recall those days... even death would have been welcome. I'm happy today," she says, "and not a burden on anyone." Kiran sells cosmetics and earns ₹200 a day on average.

In mid-February this year, Neetu Kumari, 16, of Milki Nawabganj village in Kursela block went missing and since then her mother Jeetani Devi has been knocking at every door in a desperate effort to trace her young daughter. She



Pyari Devi from Bakhari village of Sameli block in Katihar district

doubts a woman in the village who may have played a role in her daughter's disappearance.

Occasionally, a tragedy is averted in the nick of time. Twelve-year-old Akshita Kumari of Balkhi Maheshpur village, a Class VI student, was lucky that she escaped the trap set for her by a local tout. "Her brother and sister-in-law had sold her for ₹20,000 to the local tout, but we came to know and, with the help of other villagers, saved her from being put on the bus out of the village," says Saryu Mahaldar, her grandfather. Akshita, in a green salwar-suit, looks perplexed and speaks little. She now lives at a relative's house in the neighbouring district of Purnia. "I don't want to marry early," she says.

The band of sisterhood

Four years ago, the girls of Kursela block formed a group called Kishori Samooh. They meet to share stories, carry placards to alert villagers about trafficking, and encourage them to value the girl child. "Main Hoon Badlao, Mauka, Gyan aur Padhai...trafficking aur bal-vivaah ki safai (I am the change. Opportunity, knowledge and schooling will ensure that trafficking does not happen)," reads one placard. "The brokers or touts can be anywhere, in your family, village or at the village shops," they say at Nawabganj Purab Tola village in Kursela.

"In the last four years there have been over 25 incidents of girls being trafficked from Sameli and Kursela blocks alone... we've rescued over 250 trafficked girls from this area in the last 25 years," says activist Dinesh Kumar, who assists Kishori Samooh. Former head of Raj Muradpur panchayat Suresh Kumar says they have now become vigilant; if a local tout gets caught, he is thrashed before being handed over to the local police station. "It has put a check on things," he says. "Girls from poverty-stricken families often become easy targets for traffickers but our studies and surveys show poverty is not always the reason behind it... Illiteracy, gender disparity, ignorance, low level of

awareness and poor record of law enforcement also contribute to the problem," explains Shilpi Singh, director of Bhoomika Vihar, a Katihar-based NGO working on human trafficking in the border districts of Bihar.

Waiting for a better tomorrow

In neighbouring district of Araria, similar stories abound. Sangita Devi, 25, of Gaiyari-Rampur village, was sold twice on the pretext of marriage, forced into illegal activities and prostitution, tortured on refusal, and starved for days. She fled when she got an opportunity. The first time, she was sold by her maternal uncle who played the role of a tout; the second time, her brother sold her off for ₹6,000. "No one can be as unfortunate as I am. But I have to live for the sake of my daughter," says Sangita, whose six-year-old daughter Madhulika Kumari studies in Class I at the village school. She runs a makeshift cosmetics shop. "I shudder whenever a marriage takes place in my village."

Farha Khatun and Shabnam Ara, both 35 years old, were similarly forced into fake marriages and taken to Delhi, where they were forced into prostitution. Both fled and somehow made their way back to their village in Araria. Farha has a son and a daughter. Shabnam sells vegetables in village lanes to eke out their livelihood. "We pray to Allah every day that nobody should experience what we have undergone," they say in one voice.

District-level child welfare officials in Katihar lay the blame on lax law enforcement, among other things. "There is very low or negligible conviction in trafficking cases," says Ravi Shankar Tiwari, assistant director of the District Child Protection Unit. "It's the government's lackadaisical approach which is responsible for the trafficking of poor girls from the area," fumes Rajesh Kumar, member of the District Child Welfare Committee. Katihar District Magistrate (DM) Mithilesh Mishra is only two months into his current posting but is aware of the extent of trafficking here. "Out of a total 16 blocks of Katihar, nine get flooded for four months every year leading to displacement and migration, mostly of male members of the family, which leaves girls and women vulnerable to trafficking," he says. By June, the DM promises, the administration will make a strong intervention.

For the likes of Pyari Devi, Asha Kumari, Kiran Devi, Sangita Devi, however, life is all about making peace with the shock of being betrayed by their own blood.

(Names of the girls have been changed to protect their identities.)



Jeetani Devi of Katihar district with a picture of her missing daughter, Neetu Kumari, and a copy of a police complaint she filed.