



Tax trauma

Glitches in the GST regime are increasing the anxiety among Indian businesses

For a reform that was cracked up to be India's biggest tax overhaul since Independence, the rollout of the goods and services tax is off to a less-than-desirable start. Over 80 days after its introduction, the GST Network, its online backbone, is struggling to keep pace with the millions of invoices and returns being filed electronically by businesses across the country. The government has extended the deadline for filing GST returns for July, the first month of the GST era, twice. And Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has reiterated an appeal to taxpayers to not wait till the last day, to avoid burdening the GSTN. But even those filing returns well before the last date have struggled. It is clear that the network had not been fully tested for chinks before July. A ministerial group formed by the GST Council to resolve the GSTN's glitches gave an assurance last Saturday that 80% of the problems would be fixed by the end of October. For a country that takes pride in its IT edge, this is a strange impasse. Critically, for an economy that is slowing down for multiple reasons, even more troublesome is the implication of these implementation stumbles for 85 lakh taxpayers now registered for GST.

Exporters, for instance, have already alerted the Centre that the delayed timelines for filing GST returns (the last of which must be sent in by November 10) will mean that no refunds can be expected before mid-November on input taxes paid in advance and the integrated GST levied on goods they imported. By their reckoning, as much as ₹65,000 crore of working capital will get blocked, cramping their ability to ramp up capacity and raw material procurement in time for festive season orders from around the world. Terming these as 'wild' estimates, the government has asserted that many exporters' funds were blocked for five-six months even before the GST, even as it said a solution to speed up refunds is being worked out. Those producing only for the domestic market are no better off. Therefore, expectations of a rebound in manufacturing activity may be misplaced. Moreover, in contrast to the ₹95,000-crore GST collections recorded so far for July, about ₹65,000 crore has been claimed as transitional credit (that is, taxes paid on stock purchased before the GST). On Friday, the government clarified this is not 'incredibly high' as firms had outstanding credits of ₹1.27 lakh crore for central excise and service tax levies on June 30. Though the deadline to file the relevant return has been extended to October 31, initially only those who filed by September 28 were to be allowed to revise their credit claims. While revisions will be enabled from mid-October, the tax department is already examining some of these credit claims, triggering unease among firms. Several revisions in deadlines, tax and cess rates, rules, clarifications and tweaks later, the GST regime is turning out to be neither simple nor friendly for taxpayers.

Hopes and fears

The interim report on a new constitution should set off an informed debate in Sri Lanka

It is only with a great degree of caution and circumspection that the interim report of the Steering Committee of the Constitutional Assembly of Sri Lanka can be welcomed. The panel, chaired by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, has done creditably by producing a forward-looking proposal within 18 months of its first sitting. However, there have been several such reports in the past that envisioned far-reaching reforms in the country's structure. None of them found broad acceptance within Sri Lanka's polity. It is thus difficult to see the interim report as the beginning of an irreversible process of constitutional reform. There is room for both hope and fear. There is scope for optimism that Sri Lanka's fractious polity could get its act together and adopt a durable constitution that would protect its unity and stability, distribute powers equitably across ethnic and geographical divisions, and ensure economic prosperity for all. There is equal scope for the fear that the whole process could be derailed by extremists. Yet, there is a sustained effort to build a consensus among all sections of society. The report, which incorporates a framework for key elements of a new constitution, envisages an undivided and indivisible country, with the province as the unit for devolution of power. It suggests that the controversial terms 'unitary' and 'federal' be avoided, and instead Sinhala and Tamil terms that suggest an undivided country be used to describe the republic. Predictably, there is opposition from some parties, which argue that nothing should be done to dilute the state's unitary character.

On the lines of proposals made since the 1990s, the interim report aims to abolish the executive presidency. It introduces the concept of 'subsidiarity', under which whatever function can be performed by the lowest tier of government should be vested in it. Other reforms envisaged are a change from the electoral system solely based on proportional representation to a mixed method under which 60% of parliamentary members will be elected under the first-past-the-post system, and the creation of a second parliamentary chamber representing the provinces. Nationalists worried about the ramifications of devolving power to the periphery are likely to oppose some of the federal features, and may even seek the retention of the all-powerful executive presidency. The report marks a milestone, but it is still at a preliminary stage in a long-drawn process of enacting a new constitution. The government has promised that the pre-eminent status given to Buddhism will remain, an assurance that may help overcome opposition from the majority. The willingness of the Tamil National Alliance to accept a founding document arrived at on the basis of a bipartisan consensus is also a good sign. It is time Sri Lanka set itself free from the shackles of divisive notions of nationalism and charted a new path of equality and reconciliation for itself.

Questions of numbers

More clarity is needed in the law to prevent manipulation while conducting a floor test



K. VENKATARAMANAN

The key political question that has arisen in Tamil Nadu is whether Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami commands a majority in the State Assembly. There is a remarkable concordance among political and constitutional functionaries concerned in abdicating their core responsibility to find an answer to this question. The Governor is obviously averse to ordering a floor test. The Chief Minister is not keen on demonstrating his strength on the floor of the House. The Speaker is concentrating on ensuring that dissenters are kept out of any possible confidence vote, if and when one takes place. The Leader of the Opposition has not moved a motion of no confidence, but, on the contrary, believes that the Governor should order a floor test.

Dissident legislators from the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the group that has pulled back the ruling party's strength below the halfway mark in the Assembly, have not asked for a meeting of the legislature party to replace Mr. Palaniswami with some other leader. And the Madras High Court, instead of grappling with the core question concerning the government's legislative majority or lack of it, has passed two peculiar interim orders that are contrary to the doctrine of separation of powers and touch on matters outside the judicial domain.

Over to the courts

The High Court has become a battleground for the three-way political sparring going on between the rebel group, the ruling party, and the main opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), when it ought to be the le-



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gislate chamber. The first decisive move came from the 19 MLAs owing allegiance to T.T.V. Dhinakaran, nephew of jailed and deposed former AIADMK general secretary V.K. Sasikala. On August 22, the dissident legislators approached the Governor with a memorandum expressing lack of confidence in the Chief Minister, and, on September 18, Speaker P. Dhanapal ruled that this amounted to 'voluntarily giving up their membership of the party' and disqualified 18 of them. One dissociated himself from the dissenters and returned to the loyalist fold. The DMK leader, M.K. Stalin, who also heads the Opposition in the Assembly, also approached the Governor with a demand that he order a floor test as the ruling party has lost its majority. With the Governor not acting on it for weeks, he moved the Madras High Court for a direction to the Governor to direct the Chief Minister to seek a confidence vote.

Then came the disqualification, as a result of which the ousted legislators also approached the court. Thus, the two issues – the question whether the Governor ought to intervene and whether the Speaker was helping the ruling party by disqualifying rebels and thereby converting its minority into a majority – are both before the court.

The Governor's role

The principal reason for the political impasse is Governor Ch. Vidyasagar Rao's silence. Is he justified

in not acting on the request for a floor test? Going by the observations made by the Supreme Court last year, his inaction is possibly justified. While dealing with the Arunachal Pradesh crisis last year, a Constitution Bench said: "The activities within a political party, or unrest within its ranks, are beyond the concern of the Governor... Who should or should not be a leader of a political party, is a political question, to be dealt with and resolved privately by the political party itself. The Governor cannot, make such issues, a matter of his concern." It said a breakaway group could be legitimate and recognisable only if it constituted two-thirds of a party, as stipulated in the Tenth Schedule, and the Governor could embark on a constitutional course of action only on the claims of such a group. However, does it necessarily mean that Governors should not act until a rebellion touches the two-thirds mark within the legislature party? No, for the Bench adds that such a recourse is available during a constitutional crisis "as when the government is seen to have lost the confidence of the House". Therefore, the correct reading of the judgment is that the court bars Governors from political embroilment and has not restrained them from their constitutional duty to allay doubts that a particular regime has lost its majority.

As the Governor has not acted on a reasonable apprehension that the Palaniswami government has

been reduced to a minority, should the DMK's petition for a direction to the Governor to order a floor test be allowed by the Madras High Court? Given that it is a matter that falls under the Governor's discretion, is such a petition maintainable? When the matter came up for admission, the court's attention was drawn to the fear expressed by the counsel that the Speaker was planning to disqualify the dissenters in an effort to bring about a majority in a truncated House. As a result, it passed an order staying a possible floor test that may have taken place after the feared disqualification! This was said to be in the interests of justice, as otherwise the government would have sailed through the vote. In a couple of days, the disqualification did take place, and once again, on petitions challenging the Speaker's order, the court did not grant a stay. Instead, it extended the stay on the floor test on a request from the Speaker's advocate, and with the consent of all other parties.

It is not clear what provision in the Constitution empowers the court to stall a floor test, but there are precedents. The Supreme Court had ordered a 'composite floor test' in 1998 and 2005 in Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, but these directions attracted considerable criticism. Further, the only persons aggrieved by the possible adoption of a confidence vote in their absence will be the disqualified MLAs. Therefore, only a stay of their disqualification or an interim direction allowing them to vote during a floor test could have met the interests of justice. However, instead of adopting this constitutionally permissible course – disqualification under the anti-defection law is justiciable, whereas setting the legislative agenda is outside judicial purview – the court chose to stay the trust vote. Similarly, to address the fear that the 18 vacant seats could be filled up by holding by-elections, the court restrained the issue of a notification for bypolls. A stay of the disqualification would have addressed the

fears of those disqualified as well as obviated the need for the questionable stay on the floor test to be extended. Thereafter, only the constitutionally relevant question on whether the Governor ought to be directed to order a trust vote would have remained for adjudication. While adjudicating constitutional questions, courts ought not to take recourse to the civil law principle of 'balance of convenience' and pass orders appearing to give some relief to all parties.

The main basis for the challenge to the disqualification of 18 legislators is the 2011 judgment in the Karnataka case when B.S. Yeddyurappa was Chief Minister. The Supreme Court had quashed the disqualification on the ground that the Speaker had given insufficient opportunity and time, but it had also noted that approaching the Governor to set in motion a constitutional process to replace the Chief Minister could not attract the drastic action of removal from the House. Speaker Dhanapal's order has tried to address many such issues, but it will still have to be tested against the proposition that expressing lack of confidence in the Chief Minister may not amount to voluntarily giving up the party membership.

The disqualification trick

Taking up disqualification petitions for adjudication just ahead of a floor test has now become a pattern. Disqualifying rebellious MLAs seems to be a favoured way of ensuring the majority of a Chief Minister. The time may have come to amend the law conferring on the Speaker the authority to adjudicate questions of defection. When the floor test remains the sole and supreme means of ascertaining majority, the partisan element should be taken out of anti-defection law, and the adjudicatory power be transferred to an independent body such as the Election Commission.

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From ocean to ozone, the limits of our planet

Transformative changes must be considered to keep Earth safe for the future



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

The population of vertebrate species on Earth in the wild saw a dramatic fall of about 30% between 1970 and 2006, with the worst effects being in the tropics and in freshwater ecosystems. Destruction of species' habitats by pollutants and land-use change are obliterating flora and fauna at unprecedented rates. In fact, the ecological footprint of humanity – the natural habitats, such as water and land, transformed or destroyed as a result of human activity – far exceeds the biological capacity of the earth.

In an attempt to understand the natural world, its relationships with human societies and limits, in 2009, Johan Rockström and others from the Stockholm Environment Institute described elements of the biophysical world that link us together. Often regarded as a "safe operating space for humanity", these planetary boundaries include loss of biodiversity, land-use change, changes to nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosols loading, ozone depletion, chemical

production, freshwater use and, of course, climate change.

In the course of 12,000 or so years after the last ice age, the Holocene epoch has offered a stable climate, a period of grace for humanity to grow and to flourish, with settlements, agriculture and, more recently, economic and population expansion. This epoch has since given way to the Anthropocene, the exact beginnings of which are debated, but which has led to over-reliance on fossil fuels, industrial agriculture, pollution in water, soils and air, loss of species and so on, which are devastating for many life forms and connected ecosystems throughout the planet.

Biophysical considerations

Many of these conditions respond in a non-linear manner to changes. This means, for instance, that ecosystems that are stressed by their exposure to pollutants may not recover once the pollutants are removed. Or, some systems may collapse precipitously under conditions referred to as thresholds. We understand many of these thresholds and how they interact with each other, but not all.

When ecological thresholds or tipping points are crossed, significant large-scale changes may occur, such as breakdown of glaciers in Greenland and the Antarctica, the dieback of rainforests in the



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Amazon, or failure of the Indian monsoons. Since these boundaries interact with one another and cause changes across scales, crossing a threshold in one domain can speed up or undermine processes in another subsystem. For instance, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions increase ocean acidification, land-use change often increases GHG emissions, and increasing nitrogen and phosphorus deplete species biodiversity and freshwater resources and increase warming from climate change.

Boundaries and limits

According to Mr. Rockström and others, we are already at critical levels of concern for climate change, fresh water, species biodiversity and changes to nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, which are reaching tipping points. For ex-

ample, GHG emissions have led to average atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations being about 410 ppm. This is well above the 350 ppm level considered a 'safe' limit, and the earth is already about a degree Celsius warmer than average pre-industrial temperatures.

Since publication of these studies by Mr. Rockström and others, there has been plenty of discussion, even strong disagreement, regarding the boundaries. Some scientists, such as Kate Raworth, have expanded them to reflect and include several social dimensions such as equity and gender justice that were subsequently placed in the centre of a schematic representation of the boundaries as a circle with a hole or as a doughnut.

One may regard planetary boundaries as support systems for life on Earth or view them as expressing "carrying capacity" and defining "limits to growth". The latter is a thesis that was originally published nearly half a century ago by the Club of Rome as a book in 1972. It described the situation we would find ourselves in with exponential population and economic growth. While the "limits to growth" argument was challenged for good analytical reasons, it still provided a lens through which to view the changing world of the 21st century. It also offered the idea of thinking about a system as a whole – systems thinking – not just as

separate parts and feedback mechanisms as valuable processes in considering long-term change.

On sustainability

The idea of sustainability has been embedded in the human imagination for a very long time and is expressed through our ideas of nature, society, economy, environment and future generations. But it became formally a part of international agreements and discourse when it was recognised at the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro.

This systems view and the recognition of interlinkages among the social, environmental, and economic pillars of sustainability, and between biophysical planetary boundaries and social conditions, are essential to have a chance of keeping the world safe for future generations. It is telling that scholars who work on planetary boundaries regard climate change as one of the easiest to manage and contain.

In thinking about these planetary limits then, researchers and policymakers should reflect on multiple systems and the linkages among them, and whether step-by-step or transformative changes must be considered to keep the planet safe for the future.

Sujatha Byravan is a scientist

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.

Investment flows

While concerns about a slowdown in investments and a widening current account deficit are genuine, quantitative easing by the U.S. Fed, whether it continues or is brought to a complete halt, will not have much of a drag on our country's economic growth as long as foreign portfolio investors, foreign institutional investments and global investment banks see growth potential in India; this has been happening all these years and will not wane (Editorial – "Taper timetable", September 22). In this context, it may be recalled that in the years preceding the U.S. financial meltdown in 2008, our country achieved three consecutive years of unprecedented GDP growth rate and there were massive FDI investments too made by global investors because

they envisioned great potential for growth in the industrial sectors following liberalisation. The providential silver lining in this current episode of QE tapering off is that international crude oil prices are forecast to decline in the coming years as a growing number of automobile makers announce plans to roll out electric vehicles. It will also be prudent for our market regulating bodies to see this current development of QE conclusion in a wider context and introduce provisions to liberalise the investments of our domestic mutual fund companies which are beginning to see massive inflows from retail customers, but which are mandated to invest only in equities and debt in the domestic market.

ARAVIND SRIDHAR, Bengaluru

Politics over refugees

Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh's statement that the Rohingya are "illegal immigrants" is a falsehood ("Rajnath: Rohingya are illegal immigrants, not refugees", September 22). The truth is that they are political refugees who fled Myanmar to escape persecution. The fear that they can pose a threat to national security is unfounded and an escape route to downplay the humanitarian crisis. To say that they have "links to terrorist outfits" without any evidence to substantiate the claim is to mislead the public. The visibly emaciated Rohingya we see in moving visuals do not look like radicals. To see one set of refugees from the "security angle" and another set from the "religious angle" is not worthy of a secular state. All refugees, be they from

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan or Myanmar, must be seen from a "humanitarian angle". We bat for the refugees in question not because they are Rohingya Muslims, but because they are members of the wider human family.

G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Actor as politician

It is amusing that soon after announcing that he is not hungry for power, actor Kamal Haasan has now openly declared his political ambitions. If even before deciding to float a political party, he voices an intent to serve Tamil Nadu, and only as its Chief Minister, doesn't it convey his unadulterated avarice ("Kamal ready to serve T.N. as Chief Minister", September 22)? One really wonders what good he has done for the people of the State or the sacrifices he has made for

them to immediately crown him as the Chief Minister.

YVONNE FERNANDO, Chennai

■ Kamal Haasan's move to hobnob with the Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal is an unwise and immature step. Mr. Kejriwal has lost his relevance in Indian politics. His grand plan to win elections across India is one that has fallen flat. Mr. Haasan could have egg on his face if he is not pragmatic.

MURLI NAIR, Thiruvir

The ignored engineer

Going by past experiences, "roof collapse" is common

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: A sentence in the Op-Ed page article (Sept. 21, 2017) headlined "A double-edged sword" read: "... Telugu-speaking areas coalesced into Andhra Pradesh, Malayali-speaking areas into Kerala, Kannada-speaking ... etc. in the 1950s." It should have been Malayalam-speaking areas.

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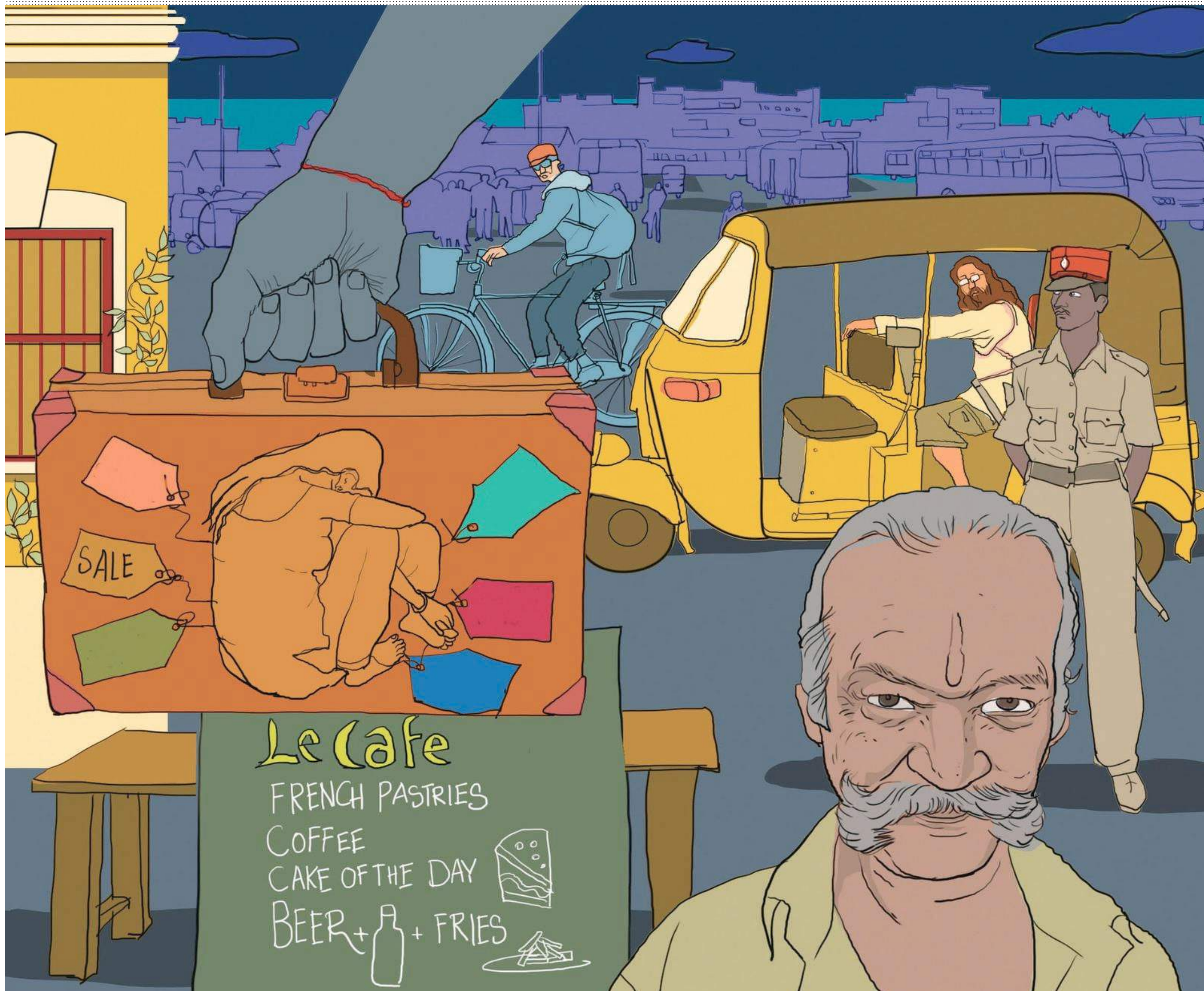


ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

The two faces of Puducherry

Behind the tranquil boulevard-lined environs and French heritage lies the seamy underbelly of Puducherry. **Senthalir S.** reports on how young girls are trafficked and forced into a prostitution ring from where escape is rare

Spread across 20 sq. km along the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal, the former French enclave of Puducherry is yet to prep up to welcome this year's tourists from abroad, although the Sri Aurobindo Ashram keeps getting its steady stream of devotees and weekend holidayers from neighbouring States. Away from the tranquil boulevard part of town, 17-year-old Jasmine cuts a forlorn figure as she stands, arms folded, in a corridor on the first floor of the government children's observatory home in Ariyankuppam, on the outskirts of Puducherry. She has just been brought here from a shelter home in Thavalakuppam, her address since early 2017 after three years at another shelter home, for counselling.

Escorted by a warden, Jasmine walks into the counselling room. Lean, and of average height, she is attired in a bright-coloured churidar-kurta with her oiled hair neatly plaited. She sits uncomfortably on a plastic chair waiting for her mother, who needs to complete the formalities to take her home. A resident of Lawspet in Puducherry, Jasmine dropped out of school when she was in Class VI. It has been four years since she was rescued from a child sex trafficking racket involving nine policemen — exposing the hidden murky side of this global tourist destination where footfalls have officially gone up from 4.76 lakh in 2001 to 12.97 lakh in 2015 for domestic tourists while the inflow of foreign tourists rose from 22,115 to 1.06 lakh over the same period.

Jasmine and Jessy

As she waits, Jasmine begins incoherently narrating the reason she was in the shelter home. "Jessy was my friend and she knew Sheela who was her neighbour. Sheela introduced both of us to Veena. I spent more time with them since I did not like my stepfather; he used to beat me whenever I made a mistake. I was so angry with the way he treated me that I would frequently run away from home. While spending time with my friends one day, I was thirsty and asked for water. Veena offered me juice. I don't remember what happened after that. When I woke up the next morning, I was bleeding and felt excruciating pain in my abdomen. Later, I found out that she had mixed drugs in

the juice and let her client rape me while I was unconscious."

On April 1, 2014, Jasmine, then 14, and her friend Jessy, 16, sought help from Childline, a social service organisation, by calling their helpline number (1098). Jessy later told a protection officer during one of her counselling sessions that her mother had pushed her into prostitution on several occasions.

The staff of Childline took them before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) the very next day. On April 16, 2014, their statements were recorded at the Grand Bazaar police station before both of them were admitted for a medical examination at the Rajiv Gandhi hospital. The police records reveal that the two girls named a number of other people, including two other juveniles, who they said had pushed them into prostitution. In her deposition, Jasmine said that Sheela and Veena (who worked for a pimp) had compelled them to enter into sexual relationships with several men (including policemen and businessmen), threatening to upload video clippings of them in compromising positions with unknown persons while they were "sedated and in an unconscious state".

For further proceedings, the case was transferred to Crime Branch, Crime Investigation Department (CB-CID). On May 8, 2014, the CB-CID questioned the girls, who said they were forced to obey the orders of a pimp and that they were

made to stay at least on four occasions in Savarayalu Street Junction, one of the main commercial areas in Puducherry thronged by tourists. Two constables, two head constables, two sub-inspectors and two inspectors (all of them have been dismissed from service), and one retired sub-inspector figure in the chargesheet after the two girls identified them. On May 19, 2014, five of the accused were remanded in judicial custody. The case, however, is still pending trial before the court. Curiously, Jessy, who was sent home when she turned 18, has now gone missing.

A quartet's horror

Jasmine and Jessy's tragic fate finds an eerie parallel in that of two teenage girls from Cuddalore, 22 km from Puducherry, who were recently rescued from pimps. Having lost their parents, the two girls had left their poverty-stricken homes to reach the coastal town only to be trapped into the vicious sex trafficking nexus of autorickshaw drivers, bus conductors and lodge owners waiting to pick up vulnerable girls. Within three days of their arrival, they were taken to three lodges on East Coast Road and New Bus Stand in Puducherry, and forced at knifepoint to engage in sex with their abductors. While the girls state that they were rescued by the police from a lodge, the police claim they rescued the girls from a street in Vambakeralayam, which comes under Odiansalai police station limits.

Of average height, broad-faced and with wide eyes, an agitated Prema, 17, from Cuddalore recounts the horror: "My father died from snakebite when I was a year old. My mother died during (the 2004) tsunami. I grew up in my aunt's house. They didn't like my boyfriend so I left home and came to Puducherry with another girl. While we were standing at the bus stand, we met two other young girls who had left their homes in Puducherry. After a while a group of auto drivers came and took us to a lodge. They paid ₹2,000 to one girl who had sex with them... Later, the police rescued us."

On April 13, 2017, the Child Welfare Committee forwarded the case to the Odiansalai police station. A case under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and Protection of Children from Sexual

Offences (POCSO) Act was registered on April 19, 2017, and the CB-CID was roped in about three months later. While the case is still under investigation, there have been six arrests so far, a majority of them autorickshaw drivers.

Prema was sent to Jawaharlal Institute for Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) for counselling as she had turned violent and started attacking the staff at a government-recognised shelter home she was taken to. She was treated as an in-patient for more than a week before her statement was recorded by the police. Of the rest of the quartet, while two girls were sent home with their relatives, the third girl has been enrolled in a vocational course and put up in a hostel after her family refused to take her in.

A proliferating network

The rescue of the quartet coincided with the police busting an online sex trafficking racket in March this year, rescuing one woman from Kerala, two from Bengaluru and one from Puducherry. These women claimed that they came to Puducherry after reading an advertisement for jobs in beauty parlours. The women have been sent back to their native places and four persons have been arrested by the police. Rajiv Ranjan, Senior Superintendent of Police (Law and Order), Puducherry, however believes the busted online racket is only the tip of the iceberg. "There is a large network involved and the main accused in this case heads one of these networks. They have contacts in Bengaluru and Chennai and they even bring girls from West Bengal. The accused in this case is a pimp and runs gambling and prostitution rackets in Puducherry. He has been arrested for both these offences in the past," he says.

Between 2013 and 2017, the CWC reported eight cases under the Immoral Traffic Act and POCSO: two in 2013, two in 2014, and four in 2017. Child Welfare Committee Chairperson Vidya Ramkumar corroborates Ranjan. "Some children we rescue have a history of being trafficked several times for sex work. After being rescued, they are brought to the shelter homes. While tracing their background, we find out there is a wide common network involved," she says. An autorickshaw driver throws light

Drivers are well connected with lodge owners, pimps and even clients from different States who come to Puducherry during weekends. Many cases go unreported to police stations.

Autorickshaw driver

on the trafficking nexus involving his tribe, saying many drivers at the Puducherry bus stand, Perumal Koil Street or East Coast Road act as go-betweens, taking vulnerable girls to lodges or directly to clients. "They are well connected with lodge owners, pimps and even clients from different States who come to Puducherry during weekends. This network thrives since many cases go unreported to police stations," he adds.

Commercial sexual exploitation is not confined to the brothels anymore. It happens in hotels, lodges and homestays where the service is booked online. SSP Ranjan adds that with the development of technology, the prostitution network has become more sophisticated. A random Internet search throws up several results, with links purportedly for "Women seeking men in Puducherry", "erotic services", "call girls", "escorts", "college girls", "foreign women" — and even "cute and sexy royal VIP personal female escort services".

Beginnings of a crackdown?

In July this year, six young women from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry were rescued when the police raided Traditional Style Beauty and Ayurveda Clinic in Nellithope; four arrests were made as well. Sensing that spas and beauty parlours were being used clandestinely for prostitution, issuing of trade licences to them was stopped. "We have cancelled licences of many spas and beauty parlours. The municipality has passed an order that we would issue trade licences only if they are routed through the police. Since then, no one has received any request for new licence or for renewal," says Municipal Commissioner S. Ganessin.

Child rights activists and NGO workers claim that several unlicensed homes — as opposed to 63 licensed homes — in Puducherry are forcing children including young boys in their homes into sex

work. It was due to the proactive involvement of CWC that 37 tribal children were rescued in January 2017 in a raid on a home that was used to provide accommodation to foreign tourists. The children, who were made to entertain the guests, reported physical and mental abuse. Following this raid, there has been no full-fledged investigation into unlicensed children homes except for an attempt to survey the number of such homes functioning here.

Some medical professionals, on condition of anonymity, claim that several children below the age of 18 with sexually transmitted diseases are being treated in private clinics. "They are not taken to the government hospitals and private clinics do not keep a medical record of their patients," says one. Pondicherry AIDS Control Society Project Director S. Jayanthi says that it is impossible to get age-wise data since it is collated from several medical institutions. "They segregate the data into four categories: below 20 years, 20-24, 25-44 and above 45 years old," she says.

Children rescued from trafficking are taken either to a government observatory home or government-licensed shelter homes run by NGOs. These shelter homes can accommodate girls until they turn 18, after which they are sent to their parents or relatives. While a few are taken back by their parents or relatives, others without any support are forced to return to sex work, with no system in place for their phased reintegration into society: "We do not have government-run shelter homes for victims of sex trafficking," admits Puducherry Women's Commission Chairperson K. Sundari. But more than systemic inadequacies, it's the refusal to acknowledge the scale of the problem on the part of some that rankles. "Though trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation is not rampant in Puducherry, we cannot completely deny its presence. We don't have records to show that children are being taken from here," says a police officer.

In Ariyankuppam, as Jasmine leaves with her mother, her parting words reverberate: "I have to look for a job. I do not want to depend on my mother or stepfather. I don't know what to do." ("Names of the girls have been changed to protect their identity")

