



That other 'Bharat Yatri': The long march, but short run, of Chandra Shekhar

A prime minister at the helm with a resounding mandate, the flagging political fortunes of their parties, and a massive public outreach starting from Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu and spanning thousands of kilometres. There are several parallels between Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's ongoing Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Yatra in 1983 that Chandra Shekhar, not yet a PM, undertook almost four decades earlier against Rahul's grandmother and then PM Indira Gandhi. Chandra Shekhar already had a reputation by then as one of the 'Young Turks' who had tried to take on Indira Gandhi when in the Congress.

At the time he set off on his yatra, Indira Gandhi was at the peak of her popularity, having managed to successfully dump out of power the Janata Party, a rag-tag group of Opposition parties that had ended the Congress's uninterrupted run of power at the Centre in the 1977 elections. The Janata Party was in a shambles and riddled with factional feuds, and Chandra Shekhar was a part of it. The situation was so bad that after the 1980 elections, Raj Narain — his electoral malpractice lawsuit against Indira had led to her disqualification and precipitated the Emergency in 1975 — had a fallout with Chandra Shekhar and their supporters battled to control the headquarters of the Bharatiya Lok Dal in Delhi.

In their book Chandra Shekhar: The Last Icon of Ideological Politics, current Rajya Sabha deputy chairperson Harivansh and research scholar Ravi Dutt Bajpai write that in September 1981, Janata Party (Kerala) workers N G Anthony and V K Rajamohan made a proposal to launch a mass mobilisation campaign. "The key suggestion," Harivansh and Bajpai write, "was that among all the Opposition leaders, it was only

Chandra Shekhar who could undertake the challenges of undertaking a padayatra to win back the confidence of the common people. Anthony and Rajamohan believed that among all the Indian politicians, Indira Gandhi commanded a pan-Indian presence, and the padayatra would help Chandra Shekhar gain nationwide acceptability to counter Mrs Gandhi."

Harivansh and Bajpai recount that Chandra Shekhar tasked Dr Sarojini Mahishi, a well-known educationist who was the first woman MP from Karnataka, and former East Delhi MP Kishore Lal with assessing "the impact of such a padayatra". The two, according to the authors, were sceptical about the outcome of the march and told Chandra Shekhar that "it would be a harrowing exercise, as it might not find popular support among common people". Chandra Shekhar then deployed Sudhinda Bhadoria, now a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader, to talk to young people.

Bhadoria provided a more optimistic assessment. This helped the veteran leader make up his mind and he decided to begin his march from Kanyakumari towards the end of 1982 and conclude it at Rajghat in New Delhi. But the padayatra got delayed because of Assembly elections in Karnataka and Chandra Shekhar started on his marathon walk from Kanyakumari on January 6, 1983, a day after the elections got over. A young man named Suketu Shah, Harivansh and Bajpai say, "meticulously planned the itinerary of the padayatra" so that it would conclude at Rajghat on June 25, the anniversary of the declaration of Emergency. According to the authors, only around 50 people joined Chandra Shekhar on the first day. There were other crucial differences from Rahul's march now.

Why there's no agreement on India's Covid death figures

With the images from the Covid pandemic, of burning pyres and floating bodies, still fresh in our minds, the current debate on the magnitude of mortality during 2020 and 2021 looks surreal and unsympathetic. There are two extreme positions. One, that the government is showcasing the whole episode as yet another successful management effort by underreporting the number, and the other, that is projecting India to be the biggest contributor to the death pool globally by using fragmented data and macro-level modelling. By deaths per thousand population, India, however, does not figure among the top 100 countries, though the infection fatality rate of 1.2 per cent places it in seventh position globally.

As accurate death statistics by causes is hard to come by — around 70 per cent of deaths take place at homes even in normal times — attempts have been made to estimate the Covid deaths by identifying "excess" deaths over what would have been the number otherwise.

There are conceptual issues involved since deaths due to starvation, returnee migrants miseries, those linked to the lockdown, unemployment, and other ailments not receiving medical help due to pressure on the system, are not due to Covid, but are part of excess deaths. Also, the Supreme Court's decision to consider all deaths within three months of Covid infection as Covid deaths resulted in a surge in reporting. Similarly, the lives saved due to the lockdown and measures adopted by people to protect themselves from the virus and those who would have died due to other causes had there been no Covid, would have to

be taken on the positive side, increasing the discrepancy between Covid and excess death. Notwithstanding this, the figures of "excess mortality" over and above what would have been the number without Covid can be computed without much hassle in the absence of detailed data on the causes of death. Understandably, this would be different from the numbers reported as Covid deaths by the civil registration system (CRS). The differences are not due to conceptual coverage alone. A large part of it is due to the inadequacy of the registration system, particularly in a period of medical and economic emergency. Understandably, independent journalists and health statisticians who had sourced registration data and fragmented ground-level information have raised this concern. All this has made experts within the country and in the concerned global institutions sceptical regarding the authenticity of the statistics of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare resulting in the WHO placing India in the category for which the Covid death figures are to be generated through modelling and not based on the officially reported numbers.

The CRS used to be a poorly administered data collection system but the coverage has increased significantly, thanks to greater awareness and enhanced field level surveillance and follow-ups. There has been a jump in registrations starting from 2018. Such jumps are not infrequent, caused by procedural changes and backlog reporting. Given this, the selection of the base years to be used for estimating "normal deaths" becomes extremely important.

The many unexpected creatures you see up close when you are walking in water

"Can you be a heroic life-guard and yet not know how to swim?" I asked a couple of friends recently.

— "What?"

"Well I am one! In the last six weeks or so I have rescued a number of ants from a watery grave in the swimming pool!" I shook my head. "They should be thankful evermore but they're so stupid. They flounder about on the water and then clamber on to your hand looking grateful. You place them carefully — or sometimes flick them — out and what do they do?"

— "No idea!"

"They trundle straight back to the edge of the pool and fall right into it again. It's as if they like being rescued by a heroic life-guard: Or, are attempting suicide!"

Both the girls pounced. "How do you know? Maybe they simply just wanted to go for a swim in the morning, just as you do! You must have exasperated them! Every time they jump in they're thrown out!"

— "That pool must seem like the Pacific Ocean to them! Would you jump into the Pacific?" Alas, they weren't convinced. "Well, all you've re-

ally done is to spoil their morning swim! Really!"

As I mentioned, I can't swim, but for the last six weeks or so, I have been walking up and down the shallow-end of the pool, for 45 minutes starting at 6 am. You would imagine a chlorinated, fumigated swimming pool would not be the kind of place where you'd find much life, but that's clearly not so. Some creatures took to the water, others stalked just above the water-line waiting for live tidbits to come their way. There was one little regular, about the size of a san-serif capital I (in Roman type, probably font size 12, bold) which had two fine stalk-like oars sticking out of its sides — facing forwards. With flicks of these, it would dart over the surface of the pool so fast it seemed to vanish in a blink. Like so many other insects it knew about the physics of surface tension. As did a spider I saw, skating over the surface at speed. (Just the other day, I came across a seven-legged little spider.) There is a rather heavy looking dark-brown cricket I've come across, which normally stalks along



the water-line rather menacingly, but is quite capable of a brisk freestyle if it somehow falls in. One guy I met had one leg missing but didn't seem to miss it at all. On a previous occasion some years back, a yellow wasp landed on the water, to cool off, and on seeing me, crawled up the back of my neck to sunbathe and stung me and I wasn't even trying to rescue it.

What was far more impressive however was the rather stocky, heavy looking brown beetle I met, virtually every day that was basically a submariner. When I first spotted it, I thought my eyes and the water were playing some kind of parallax trick on me: that it was on the sur-

face but appeared to be underwater. That was not so. The guy — or lady — was actually under water and seemed perfectly at home. I looked carefully at it and then noticed that it seemed to have a silver bubble stuck under its bottom: A bubble of air: Its oxygen supply? I knew there were spiders which built webs underwater oxygenated by the air-bubbles that adhered to their hairs, which they rubbed off on site. So, maybe, this chunky little beetle was doing the same sort of thing. And believe me — there is oxygen or air dissolved in water. Glance at your body or legs as you walk through the water and you'll notice a silvery sheen — comprised of tiny, beautiful little

air-bubbles adhering to you, exactly like the bubbles in a bottle of soda or glass of water (left for a while). Other little beetles preferred being out of the water and one stunning little fellow, smaller than a lady-bird looked as though it were made of copper. On some cloudy mornings, there would be the discarded orange-gold wings of termites floating on the surface. Then there were birds. You got a good eye-level look at the ones hopping on the grass, making you feel rather like an anorexic hippo peering over the water's edge. I met the magpie-robin really close up as well as strutting mynas. At a pool in Goa, a white-throated kingfisher would perch on the stair-rail every morning, and would take a quick dip or two before departing for the day's work.

Ironically, in the water, you could also learn all about flight — lift and drag. Draw your hand through the water, held flat and it'll go through easily. Tilt your hand slightly upwards, or even gently cup it and draw it through: it'll begin to rise or lift but will slow down, and you need a little more thrust to push it

through. Just like a bird or aircraft's wing! Here in Delhi, there were parakeets, hornbills, barbets, woodpeckers, tree-pies, bulbuls, and of course the ubiquitous rock doves hanging about in the trees surrounding the pool. Koels would call frantically and dash across like bank robbers just after a heist. Overhead, a lapwing would occasionally fly across, still screaming hysterically and, on one occasion, I spotted a white ibis hurrying by. As for mammals, on a couple of occasions, monkeys had a quick dekho before being shooed off (they swim well). I still can't swim. But hmm...while I can walk in water, maybe it'll be worth taking coaching classes from those little guys that walk on water... Now that would be something! As did a spider I saw, skating over the surface at speed. (Just the other day, I came across a seven-legged little spider.) There is a rather heavy looking dark-brown cricket I've come across, which normally stalks along the water-line rather menacingly, but is quite capable of a brisk freestyle if it somehow falls in.

VILLAGES LACK SPORTS GROUNDS FOR GIRLS

Not much attention is given here [Kapkot, Uttarakhand] to girls' participation in sports. There are many girls in the village, who can bring laurels to Uttarakhand in national and international tournaments if they are given the chances and facilities," said Mamta and Pooja, a duo from Dhurkot Village in Bageshwar district in Uttarakhand. Lack of a proper playground with adequate facilities is a major problem in several places in Bageshwar. As a result, youth, especially girls, face a lot of difficulties in practicing and making their careers in sports. Moreover, even with the presence of a ground, girls are barred from using the ground, as playgrounds predominantly become spaces for boys in villages. Dhurkot Village, which

is situated on the banks of the river Saryu, is 25 kms from Bageshwar in Uttarakhand. The population of this village is about 5,000. But being in a hilly area, there is a lack of a playground in the village. Although it affects both boys and girls in developing their skills, boys have the option to travel and access a proper field, whereas girls are not allowed to travel far from their villages to play.

"There is a ground available about three kms away from the village, where boys easily go to practice, but it is not easy for girls to go there every day. The locals do not take this issue very seriously," said Deepa Devi, an Asha worker from the village.

Echoing similar sentiments, Sita Devi, the village



head, said, "The absence of a playground in the village is a big drawback. It has the most negative effect on girls. Not only is their physical development curbed, but their talents are also suppressed. Despite taking this issue to the local administration several times,

our effort has not been successful."

Although schools provide grounds for sports, girls are not encouraged to play or given sufficient time to hone their skills. "The only place where we can practice is our school. But even that right is

Gujarat, 2 other states likely to get GIB breeding centres



The Union minister for forest and environment, Bhupendra Yadav, has asked Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka governments to send a proposal to set up breeding centres for conservation of GIBs in their respective states, reports Himanshu Kaushik. During the meeting of the standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), the minister proposed to establish breeding centres, and has directed the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) to prepare a framework for the same. These centres would be different from the one in Rajasthan. Officials said that during the meeting it was also instructed that wherever there is need for a male GIB, it must be translocated and if a state requires females, it must be given the same. The breeding centre in Rajasthan has about 28-odd birds, and one male can easily be moved to Gujarat. The state does not want to lose the opportunity and will soon propose the centre in Gujarat. A project was readied by the government in 2017. Nityanand Srivastava, in charge principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife), said, "We will soon send the proposal to set up a breeding centre in the GIB sanctuary in Kutch. Once approved, the state will begin the work as the state already has a notified sanctuary." The Gujarat and Rajasthan governments had in the past locked horns over a male GIB, but the latter had refused to send the male species to Gujarat. The last male from the GIB sanctuary in Kutch has been missing since December 2018. Senior officials from the ministry of environment forest and climate change said, "Gujarat had already made up its mind to have its own breed-

ing centre but unfortunately the only surviving male went missing and has not returned till date. The ministry will give a male GIB to Gujarat, but the state will have to promise to lay the hightension cables underground. Only then would they be permitted to release the birds into the wild." According to a 2018 count, India has fewer than 150 GIBs, of which 122 are in Rajasthan. Gujarat has just four females left. "Gujarat should preserve the GIB landscape of Kutch and start mitigating the problem of overhead power lines as directed by the Supreme Court," said an expert on bustards. Gujarat must launch efforts to manage the habitat in such a way that captive-bred birds can be released here in the future, he said. An expert on GIBs said that Gujarat has not done enough for conservation though the bird was the mascot of the 13th Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, held in Gandhinagar in 2020. However, in April 2022, an affidavit filed by Dipesh Raj, an undersecretary of the Gujarat government's energy department, said: "...there are four female GIBs left in the Kutch area, and therefore the option of relocating the GIBs may be explored." In 2017, the state, in collaboration with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and expertise offered by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had planned to set up a breeding centre for Great Indian Bustard (GIB) at Naliya in Kutch.

Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka send proposal to set breeding centres

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