

Editorial

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Outcast in his own kingdom

The state government, in what seem to be an increasingly desperate attempt to win that much needed brownie points and stem the gradual slide in acceptability and credibility with the next general election just around the corner, have put into action its earlier declaration of the Chief Minister and his entourage travelling to Ukhrul for inaugurating a slew of projects touted to accelerate development in the district. The projects to be inaugurated include a 33/11 KV sub-station at Khunchao, another 132/33 KV sub-station at Hundung, LM SDO/BDO office, Chingai SDO/BDO office, bank and a 100 bedded district hospital. Contrary to what should have elicited a positive response, Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL) announced a 24-hour public curfew since 4pm Sunday last and called for boycott of the Chief Minister's visit to the district. The reason—besides the over abused cries of discrimination and recriminations, the contention that the district hospital is not completed yet. The state government as expected took up all precautionary security measures. Turned out the much trumpeted claims of improved law and order situation in the state is anything but. Despite the 'arrangements' and 'collaborations' with every available security forces at its disposal, there still is a spate of blasts and attacks since the last two days, with a 4IRB personnel posted at Hundung sustaining injuries when suspected NSCN-IM cadres launched an RPG attack on them. There were also reports of blasts within close proximity before the Chief Minister could inaugurate the district hospital that hastened his return to the state capital. Following the events unfolding during the last few couple of days building up to the Chief Minister's visit which, by no means is an exception, it is undeniably clear that the state government have failed to extent effective governance to areas beyond the relative safety of the valley districts. Despite three terms of power, there obviously is precious little by means of real and sustainable development, yet the most disappointing aspect of the present government is the fact that precious years have been wasted which should have been utilized to make prudent and sustainable peaceful efforts to usher in development which would have radically changed the negative perception of the public towards the state government, especially more so in places further from the state capital which percolated down to an inexplicable grudge against the valley people. Public administration, despite claims to the contrary, is non-existent in the hill districts and the antisocial elements run riot, making a mockery of the feeble and half-hearted efforts to put up a show of normalcy in these places.

Three terms of dealing with the shortcomings and deficiencies, mostly of its own making have made the Ibbi led state players polished up on their oratorical skills - or monologues to put things into perspective. Yet mere statesmanship will not be enough to set things right and steer the state towards inclusive progress and sustainable development. A state government without the wherewithal to free access to areas within its own territory says everything about its effectiveness without having to say anything for it. Learning to swallow its own words should be the next rational step.

Gurnam Singh did not get proper treatment, alleges the dead BSF soldier's family

Jammu, Oct. 24: When the body of slain Border Security Forces (BSF) soldier Gurnam Singh was brought to his native village of Bhalasar in RS Pura sector on Sunday afternoon, villagers showered rose petals on the coffin and raised slogans against Pakistan. Since his childhood, Singh was fascinated with men in uniform and his dream of wearing the khaki had come true four years back. "He lived and died for his motherland," Dalbir Singh, a resident of Bhalasar village and classmate of Singh, told *Firstpost*. Singh was the first soldier from Jammu and Kashmir to die since the Indian Army carried out surgical strikes on terrorist launch pads across the Line of Control in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. On Friday night, he was injured when Pakistani snipers targeted his post in Bohiya area in Kathua district on the International Border. He had been instrumental in foiling a major infiltration bid along the International Border a day earlier, when Pakistani rangers, according to the BSF sources, were trying to give fire cover to a group of militants trying to enter the Indian territory. "Pakistanis were trying to push terrorists into our territory and our jawan Gurnam Singh fought hard and pushed them back and killed one militant. The next day, there was firing from the Pakistani side and he received a bullet injury in his head after which he was shifted to the Government Medical College Hospital (GMCH), but

we lost him," Arun Kumar, (Additional DG BSF), said in Jammu. Singh succumbed to his injuries in the Jammu GMCH in the wee hours of Sunday. His family, however, alleged that he was not given proper treatment, despite being critically injured. Gurnam Singh's brother, Manjeet said that despite his head injury, the authorities did not shift the soldier for treatment to a neurological facility outside the state. Rajinder Thappa, chief medical officer of the GMC Jammu said that Singh's parents wanted him to be shifted to Aims in New Delhi. "Bullet had hit Gurnam Singh in the head and he was being treated in the Intensive Care Unit. Senior doctors had kept him under observation. His parents wanted him to be shifted to Aims for better treatment. We were about to do that yesterday, but unfortunately he passed away." The family members insisted that a super speciality hospital should be built exclusively for the injured soldiers so that whenever incidents like these happen they can get the best treatment. Gurjeet Kaur, sister of the soldier, urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to build a hospital for the BSF soldiers. "We feel proud that our brother achieved martyrdom but I appeal to the PM to open a super speciality hospital in RS Pura so that injured soldiers get good treatment. Gurnam would have gone back and fought against Pakistan had he received proper treatment," she said.

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Virtual reality debuts in Indian journalism

On Monday Memesys Culture Labs, a multimedia outfit founded by filmmaker Anand Gandhi, launches India's first virtual reality magazine, *ElseVR* (pronounced Elsewhere). This includes the launch of its app featuring three films that have been shot in the VR format and can be viewed as 360 degree immersive experiences.

One of the films is on how coal mining is affecting the lives of *adivasis* around the Kusmunda coal mine in Chhattisgarh. The second is on the agitation to win women's right to worship at the Trimbakeswar temple in Nashik in Maharashtra earlier this year, and third on the Una protest march by Dalits in August after six Dalit men were flogged because they were carrying the carcass of a dead cow. Viewed with a headset like the Google Cardboard or the Samsung Gear VR, these films make you feel as though you are inside the picture, within smelling distance of the desolation of a coal mine's fly ash pond or the smouldering anger of Dalits protesting against a grievous wrong.

"The online quarterly magazine is VR with multimedia," says Khushboo Ranka, editor-in-chief, ElseVR. "So the eight-minute films are accompanied by other material such as text to contextualise the narrative."

ElseVR may be India's first effort to meld virtual reality with journalism, but global news media have been experimenting with the VR platform for some years. Though the concept of virtual reality seems to be straight out of science fiction, or at best the gaming universe, the technology is actually a pretty irresistible storytelling tool. The immediacy of the 360 degree experience (as opposed to the flat 2D or 3D images) is such that the viewer feels as though he or she is witnessing the action while physically present on the scene. It's why VR is called "immersive journalism" — it feels like you have been pitched into the story unfolding all around. (For the truly immersive feel, you need to use a headset; watching a 360 degree video on YouTube is not the real thing.)

In other words, after the internet and the rise of digital media, VR

could well turn out to be journalism's next big disruptive event.

This year the BBC and the NBC made substantial use of 360 degree videos to cover the Rio Olympics. Newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* or *The Guardian* already have their own VR apps, which you can download on your smart phone, connect to a headset and view their VR films. You can take a virtual tour of the Gale Crater on Mars (*LAT*), experience the texture of Pluto's frozen, serrated terrain up close (*NYT*), or, as in the *The Guardian's Project 6X9*, feel the crushing claustrophobia of being in solitary confinement.

These may be more experiential knowledge videos than films of news events. But they are really part of the effort of news organisations to familiarise themselves — and their audience — with the next generation of media technology.

Nony de la Peña, a Los Angeles-based journalist and film maker, is someone who has been in the vanguard of bringing VR to journalism. Often referred to as the Godmother of VR, Peña, whose Twitter handle is @immersivjourno, has been using the technology to great effect to tell some hard-hitting stories. Her VR films include the *Project Syria* (2014), an extensively researched journalistic piece which recreates two scenarios — a bombing in an Aleppo street and a Syrian refugee camp; a film of a Mexican refugee being beaten up by a US border patrol; and another on an event that roiled race relations in the US — the shooting of Trevon Martin, a black youth who was gunned down by a neighbourhood watchman in 2012.

In a 2015 TED talk titled *The Future of News: Virtual Reality*, Peña said, "With virtual reality I can put you right in the middle of the story... so you get a whole body sensation of actually being there." To Peña, there is no better, more intense or visceral way to connect the audience with a story. "This stuff works, it really does," she says.

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Though the global media are making

their first forays into VR, Indian news media have not even dipped their toes into the technology. Indeed, whether it is the big print media houses or the television channels, VR does not seem to be on anyone's radar right now.

Prasanto K Roy, former technology journalist and now head of NASSCOM's Internet Council, says that VR is a natural fit for mobile multimedia, but that Indian media have been slow to take to the mobile itself (barring mobile-web sites and a few apps, only one of which is in the top 100 apps in India). This is especially stark given India's roughly billion mobiles.

Roy adds that typically, large media organisations are slow to take up tech until after it disrupts them. "Many of them ignored the internet when it first turned up in India in 1996, and it was left to disruptors like Rediff and Indiaworld to show the way. Today, in the West — where news media have long been disrupted by digital players, with a lot of print having shut down — media firms are experimenting with cutting edge digital tech, including virtual reality. Indian media houses haven't been as severely disrupted yet, and print is going strong, creating less appetite for experimenting with technology." Indian news television channels too feature only broadcast videos — there is no significant use of multimedia on their digital platforms. "In contrast, large global electronic media organisations such as the BBC or the CNN are extremely reliant on multimedia digital tech. So it's natural that they would take up VR," says Roy.

Of course, even in the West, the costs and the complexity of the technology remain a barrier to its widespread adoption. The good thing is, the costs have been coming down in recent years. There are now several relatively inexpensive (about Rs 34,000) VR cameras such as the Ricoh Theta S, the Nikon KeyMission 360 or the Samsung Gear 360 available, which can be used by reporters to produce stitched VR footage. Headsets too are getting cheaper.

While there are the more expensive variety such as the Oculus Rift or the HTC Vive, a basic Google Cardboard costs no more than a few

hundred rupees on Amazon. Some publications are doing their bit to pump up the use of VR hardware on the consumer side. In April this year, *The New York Times* distributed 300,000 free Google Cardboard devices to its most loyal digital subscribers so they could view its new VR film called *Seeking Pluto's Frigid Heart*. In fact, when the paper launched its VR app last year, it gave away a million headsets to its print subscribers!

Despite the desire to push the storytelling envelope with VR, those who are employing it admit that they are still figuring out the medium. "Right now we are just scribbling on the canvas," says ElseVR's Ranka. "With every film, we are learning something more about the technology and how best to use it to narrate non-fiction."

So will VR transform journalism? Will newsrooms of the future dispense with text and 2D images and switch to conveying everything in spherical, 360 degree format? And will consumers want to get their news fix *in media res* — through VR goggles that plunge them into the scene of the story?

That vision seems slightly dystopic to one's early 21st century sensibilities. But, really, it is too early to tell. As the technology stands today, it's clearly fantastic for creating powerful immersive experiences of specific situations. Says Nasr ul Hadi, journalist and Delhi-based consultant for digital media companies, "The cost-benefit analysis of VR to tell a one-off story isn't great. But using it to build a reusable, repurpose-able asset could make sense. For example: VR films on emergency medical care access in non-metros or virtual tours of spaces often in the news such as Parliament in session and so on."

Indeed, for all the excitement around VR, at this point it is undoubtedly faster and cheaper to stick to current multimedia formats to report news stories. But that could change. As is so often the case, today's "esoteric, gimmicky" technology may be totally mainstream tomorrow.

If that happens with VR, one hopes Indian new media won't be left scrambling to play catch up.

(Courtesy The Hunt)

National & International News

24 dead in Maoist encounter in Malkangiri, top Maoist RK escaped

Hyderabad, Oct. 24: At least 24 Maoists, including two top leaders and 7 women, were shot dead in an alleged encounter with a joint team of Odisha Police and Greyhounds team of AP Police early today morning in a forest in Malkangiri district near the Andhra-Odisha border. The two constables were reported to be injured. However, Maoist central committee member RK reportedly escaped.

Among the dead are at least 7 women Maoists. While the bodies are yet to be identified it is suspected that Gajarla Ravi, 49, Secretary of the Andhra-Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee, Chalapatli alias Appa Rao, his wife Aruna and another leader Bakuri Venkata Ramana Murthy, were killed in the encounter. Ravi had a reward of Rs 20 lakhs on his head while Chalapatli, secretary of the East division, carries a reward of Rs 20 lakh on his head. His wife Aruna, deputy commander of the Koraput-Srikakulam Division Committee carried a reward of Rs 5 lakh.

Malkangiri SP Mitrabhanu Mohapatra said the bodies are being brought to Malkangiri district headquarters hospital for post mortem. In May this year, police in Andhra Pradesh had recovered a recent photo of Chalapatli and his wife Aruna, from the laptop belonging to slain Maoist Azad. Till then police

had an old photo of Chalapatli taken in the nineties. The cops then made posters of the photo and splashed it all over.

The alleged encounter happened after the joint police team surrounded a Maoist camp in Bejingi village where it was suspected that Maoist plenary was going on, attended by top leaders of the Andhra Odisha Border area. Officials said that when the combing team came under fire from the Maoists and a gunfight ensued in which 21 Maoists died while two cops were injured. They were airlifted to a hospital in Vizag for treatment. A young Maoist named Munna who is son of Maoist top leader G Ramakrishna alias RK is also suspected to have died.

Officials said that they suspect the entire 'dalaim' led by Maoist leader Gajarla Ravi alias Uday alias Ganesh has been wiped out in the encounter along with him. However, none of the bodies have been identified so far. Gajarla Ravi hails from Velishala village of Warangal district in Telangana. He is the youngest of three brothers all of whom joined the Maoist movements in the late 80s. His elder brother Gajarla Ashok surrendered several years ago due to ill health and now drives and autorickshaw in Warangal. His other brother Gajarla Saraya alias Azad was shot dead in an encounter with police seven years ago. Venkataramana hails from Hakimpeta mandal of Vizag districts

in Andhra Pradesh. It is suspected that top Maoist leader G Ramakrishna alias RK was also present at the meeting but managed to escape with other top leaders. Officials said that three AK 47 rifles, four SLRs, one INSAS, one 303, one SBML, two kit bags, one laptop and Rs 2.16 lakhs cash and several small arms and ammunition has been recovered from site of the encounter.

"The AK 47s indicate that some top leaders were present at the site. Normally, only top Maoist leaders carry AKs. We suspect that one of the leaders killed is Gajarla Ravi," said Vizag Rural SP Rahul Sarma. The bodies are likely to be taken to Koraput for postmortem. Today's is the biggest and second major

encounter in Malkangiri district. In September 2013, 13 Maoists were killed in an encounter with Odisha Police in Podia block of Malkangiri district. Meanwhile, revolutionary writer P Varavara Rao called it fake encounter and demanded a probe. "Cops surrounded a Maoist meeting and shot them in cold blood and terming it as an encounter. After the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, the influence of Maoists has come down and they have not launched any major attacks. So what was the reason for such drastic action against them? This encounter case should be registered as a murder case. A sitting HC judge should conduct the probe," Rao said.

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