



NEWSMAKER / PINARAYI VIJAYAN / CHIEF MINISTER OF KERALA

God's own challenges

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With months to go for the Kerala Assembly elections (due April-May 2021), Kerala Chief Minister and proud Communist Pinarayi Vijayan is having a torrid time of it. Otherwise known as an able administrator and undogmatic to a fault, he has been battling multiple challenges in the past six months of his tenure.

Take the latest, wholly avoidable controversy. The government amended Section 118A of the Kerala Police Act to impose rigorous punishment — five years imprisonment and a fine of ₹10,000 — on anyone found to be bullying, insulting or disgracing individuals through any content. The offence included forwarding such content. The state cabinet had on October 21 decided to bring in a penal provision against those engaging in character assassination or misogyny on social media. But the scope of Section 118A was more sweeping. Worse, it had remarkable resemblance to a similar central law the Supreme Court had struck down earlier (*Shreya Singhal* versus *Union of India* on Section 66 of the Information Technology Act 2000). As outrage broke out — both at the sloppy drafting of the law as well as its actual intent — the government announced it was withdrawing the amendment. But the damage was done. The Vijayan government will forever be remembered, not for the good things it has done but for trying to muzzle the freedom of expression.

In the four years the Vijayan government has been in office, Kerala has had to battle cyclones (Ockhi and now, possibly, Nivar), two floods and two epidemiological disasters — Nipah and Covid-19. While its initial management of Covid-19 won it plaudits, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was only quoting the chief minister when he lashed out at the “carelessness” of some states that led to its further spread: Pinarayi himself conceded that “initially, everyone hailed Kerala for good work in containing Covid-19 as we took necessary precautions. But we became complacent that is why we've reached the present situation.” At one point Kerala had only 100 Covid-19-positive cases left — if it had been diligent then, it could have



stamped the infection out altogether. Kerala also scored high on the compassion index when it came to handling the problem of migrant labour.

The jewel in the crown has to be the state's achievement on the infrastructure front. The 444 km GAIL Kochi-Kootanad-Bengaluru-Mangaluru pipeline project (KKBMPL) was commissioned in 2013. But hit by problems of land acquisition, campaigns by religious groups and other kinds of political obstructions in North Kerala, the company was on the verge of winding up the project as in the intervening years it had been able to build only 39 km. The project was crucial for the future of Petronet LNG's terminal in Kochi, to ensure natural gas supply for domestic and industrial use in Kerala and South India. Although 15 months late, the project could be commissioned any time now as only 4 km of the pipeline is left to be constructed. The credit for this should go entirely to the Vijayan government.

But the downside is the macroeconomic anxieties in Kerala. The unemployment rate of the state is 9.53 per cent, much above the national average of 6.1 per cent. As many as 3.6 million youths are unemployed — including 7,303 medical graduates, 44,559 engineering graduates, 6,413 MBA graduates and 3,771 MCA. Covid-19 has only

accentuated unemployment as Gulf migrants return home, putting more pressure on the jobs front. Kerala has cumulative debt touching ₹1.71 trillion. And on the social and religious front, the state is facing seriously divisive strains.

When you add to this the fact that the Chief Minister's Office has been directly drawn into a gold smuggling racket with a bureaucrat who was the CM's right-hand man in custody, it makes for a depressing epitaph of a government that started out with the best of intentions. State Finance Minister Thomas Isaac has led from the front in demanding the centre follow financial federalism in letter and spirit, especially relating to the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Going against its ideological grain, Kerala appointed Gita Gopinath advisor to the government although for the Left, she was deeply entrenched in an institution that is a bulwark of neo-liberalism, the International Monetary Fund.

There is hardly any doubt that the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by Vijayan and the CPI(M) is on its way out. But was it a government that curtailed the freedom of the opposition and the media, threw Kerala's economy under a bus and prevented the Centre from rolling out projects for the benefit of the people of Kerala? That is too harsh a judgment for a state that battled natural disaster bravely and leveraged the strong foundations of its health and education system to protect its people as best it could.



MV Iyer assumes charge as director of GAIL



MV Iyer assumed charge as Director (Business Development) of GAIL. Earlier, he was working as the Executive Director (Projects) with the company.

An electrical engineer, Iyer has 33 years of rich experience in GAIL in projects execution amounting to ₹40,000 crores, including current projects worth ₹25,000 crores spanning 16 states, 150 districts and City Gas Distribution (CGD) projects in six cities.

He is also the director in one of the company's new joint venture Indradhanush Gas Grid Limited (IGGL) for implementation of North East Gas Grid.



M V Iyer takes charge as GAIL's Director (Biz Development)

NEW DELHI: M V Iyer assumed charge as Director (Business Development) of GAIL (India) Limited today. Before this, he was working as Executive Director (Projects) with the company. An Electrical Engineer, Iyer has



33 years of rich and diverse experience in GAIL in projects execution amounting to Rs 40,000 crores, including current projects worth Rs 25,000 crores spanning 16 states, 150 districts and City Gas Distribution (CGD) projects in six cities. As a target-oriented professional, he has consistently delivered results in Projects, Operations and Maintenance roles. He has been part of the core team of GAIL for implementation of various long term and short term strategies in GAIL. He is also Director in one of the GAIL's new Joint venture company Indradhanush Gas Grid Limited (IGGL) for implementation of North East Gas Grid. **MPOST**



एम वी अय्यर ने गेल के निदेशक का पदभार संभाला

नयी दिल्ली, फोकस न्यूज, एम वी अय्यर ने सार्वजनिक क्षेत्र की गैस कंपनी गेल (इंडिया) लि. के निदेशक (व्यपार विकास) का पदभार बुधवार को संभाल लिया। गेल ने एक बयान में कहा कि इससे पहले वह कंपनी में



कार्यकारी निदेशक (परियोजना) थे। पेशे से इलेक्ट्रिकल इंजीनियर अय्यर के पास गेल में परियोजनाओं के क्रियान्वयन को लेकर 33 साल का अनुभव है। वह गेल की नई संयुक्त उद्यम कंपनी इंद्रधनुष गैस ग्रिड लि. (आईजीजीएल) में भी निदेशक हैं। पूर्वोत्तर गैस ग्रिड के क्रियान्वयन के लिये यह संयुक्त उद्यम कंपनी बनायी गयी है।