

On July 29, 1974, the Press Trust of India came out with a despatch revealing the real face of the dangerous American research projects under cover of the WHO. These research outfits spread all over the country are actually meant to serve the Pentagon. The PTI had a hard time unearthing the misdoings of these projects because of the resistance of the Union Health Ministry and such bodies as the Indian Council of Medical Research. Previous to this, *National Herald* had published on February 11, 1972, an exposure under the caption "Science or Neo-Imperialism" by "A Scientific Worker".

When the sensational PTI disclosures came up in Parliament on July 30, 1974, the Minister of Health and Family Planning dismissed them as "tendentious, unfair and misleading". But Parliament was obviously not satisfied with the Minister's cavalier conduct and the Public Accounts Committee of the Lok Sabha took up the matter. Its Report presented to the House on April 28, 1975, has brought out the enormity of this menace of the so-called "research" projects conducted by Americans in this country.

The fact that this undoubted national service was rendered by the Editor-in-Chief, Sri C. Raghavan, and its Science Correspondent, Dr K.S. Jayaraman, speaks volumes of their courage, sense of duty and patriotism. By all standards of purposeful journalism, this was indeed the Scoop of the Year. It has been a hard-fought battle against overwhelming odds. *Mainstream* invited Sri C. Raghavan to describe how this battle was fought and is happy to publish this account by him.

EDITOR

# The Story Behind WHO Exposure

C. RAGHAVAN

It took us nearly fifteen months of patient investigation, cross-checking of all leads, and reading up a great deal of technical material, to understand the ramifications of the various foreign sponsored research activities in the country.

Our main effort centred on the work of the Genetic Control of Mosquito Unit (GCMU), an outfit run by the World Health Organisation under an agreement with the Health Ministry in the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), and financed by the United States out of PL-480 rupees. In the course of our search for what was happening in the GCMU, we came across bird watching and bird studies, and study of arboviruses by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) under a variety of sponsorship and finance. Other schemes too came to our notice, the ultra low volume (ULV) spraying at Jodhpur to deal with malarial mosquitoes, and the microbial pesticide project at Pantnagar Agricultural University, the activities of John Hopkins University.

While it took us fifteen months to put together the story and issue it, it took the Minister just twenty-four hours of reading up on mosquitoes to dub the report as "tendentious, unfair and misleading".

It took nine more months of patient inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee before we were vindicated, and the Health Ministry indicted. In the process of digging up material to help the PAC's investigation and present a picture of what goes on in this land of ours, we came across so much material that perhaps would fill a book, and almost read like a thriller.

The obstruction and noncooperation of the bureaucracy to our attempts to get at the facts did not come as a surprise to us, though my colleague, Dr K.S. Jayaraman, who did all the legwork and reading and researching, was aghast, as a scientist, to find out that in the Health Ministry scientists and doctors could not freely discuss matters even on a scientific level without being afraid of action from

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the top.

What did shock and surprise us was what happened after the publication of our story. That the Minister would deny, dismiss and dub the story, as he did, was also not unexpected. That in both Houses of Parliament, members, with one solitary exception, should refuse to be taken in, was not only heart-warming but proved the utility and virility of our democracy and parliamentary institutions.

But the way most of the newspapers and news organisations accepted and published the misleading flow of official explanations (throughout the nine months when the PAC was investigating) without any effort to find out the facts or check things was most disconcerting. Even the papers which during the same period were attacking the Government, and rejecting every explanation of the Government on political and economic issues, had no trouble in accepting official explanations in this case and could not even see through the obvious contradictions in their story.

One news organisation went to the extent of publishing, as their own investigative story, something written up by one of the foreign consultants in the WHO-GCMU project. Explan-

ations that the experiments with aedes aegypti mosquitoes were justified because they were carriers of dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fevers, that the GCMU project had concentrated on these, rather than malarial anopheles mosquitoes because at the time the project was set up malaria had been wiped out, such were the silly explanations that were being handed out by the Ministry and swallowed up by the papers.

If anyone had bothered to do the slightest checking up, it would have been discovered, for example, that as early as 1968, the Health Ministry's Annual Report to Parliament had already begun to speak of the resurgence of malaria. They would have discovered too that even before, that since they had officially announced early in the sixties that malaria had been wiped out, doctors in Delhi hospitals had to describe malaria cases as PUO (Pyrexia or fever of unknown origin).

What was sad was that the Health Ministry and its hierarchy should have continuously tried to mislead the Public Accounts Committee, and persist in its policies, and try to cover up. The PAC report is replete with these instances, and any serious inquiry by the Government and

its intelligence agencies, suggested by the PAC, would unravel many more.

But one need cite only a few examples of what was attempted.

At a time when the PAC (as its report shows) was trying to unravel the connections between the BNHS and its multiplicity of arrangements with diverse bodies to do "bird watching", and also collect smears and samples for examination abroad, including the role of the Smithsonian and its Dr Ripley, a former US intelligence man, officialdom managed to inveigle the Prime Minister to be photographed with Dr Salim Ali of the BNHS and Dr Ripley and splashed it across in newspapers. And this for the release of the seventh or eighth in a series of books by Salim Ali and Ripley on the birds of India! That the PAC, with its majority of Congress members, was unimpressed and pursued its inquiry is surely proof of the strength of our parliamentary institutions.

While the majority of the papers forgot or ignored the whole issue, the *National Herald* and the *Patriot* in the capital continued from time to time to publish special stories and articles on the GCMU, as also connected research, and its clear *biological warfare implications*. These went unread and unheeded in the Health Ministry, and even the Defence and the intelligence people did not, until about early January 1975. If they had, there is no evidence of it in the answers before the PAC.

After the Parliament debate, the Governing Council of the ICMR set up two subcommittees, one to look into the administrative aspects, and the other into the technical aspects. How lackadaisical the administrative committee's efforts were to even find out the full gamut of the WHO-US relations, have been amply brought out by the PAC, but it is worth noting that the Secretary of the Health Ministry, Sri Gian Prakash, who chaired the administrative committee, had been prior to that Chairman of the Government's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) in the Cabinet Secretariat. One wonders whether this was symptomatic of

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Development Bank meeting in Manila two weeks earlier, that US had given more to the member states "than the rest of the world combined". What was not mentioned was how many more billion dollars US has spent — and is still spending — in arms and wars in Asia than aid for peaceful projects, and through these also sneak in its war programme. Even a seemingly harmless mosquito eradication programme is taken up at the behest of the Pentagon, as revealed recently in this country.

The calibre of prostitution comes out in his very next sentence: "It is also good to remember sometimes that the Americans went into Vietnam not for imperial expansion but to stop the over-running of the South Vietnamese people by the superior force of a regime they

clearly did not want to rule over them."

This is supposed to provide the "perspective" for New Delhi if it wants "a genuine improvement in relations" with Washington. For, "it is absurd to see the American Government as composed of a set of brigands and exploiters who are never moved by high purpose". The Watergate Plumbers were no doubt "moved by high purpose".

We have no choppers to spare so that these Saigon prostitutes in our midst could be bundled out to land on the *Entreprise* deck or on the atoll heap of Diego Garcia.

The nation's shame, this tribe with the harlot's badge: "To Beg I am not Ashamed".

Scribbler

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# THE STORY BEHIND WHO EXPOSURE

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the intelligence community's approach too.

The expert group of the ICMR that went into the technical aspects, according to the minutes reproduced at p 53 of the PAC report, reviewed the work of the GCMU on the basis of "the general report of the work done by the Unit, compiled as special articles, published in the *Indian Journal of Communicable Diseases*". This is what the Director-General of the ICMR, who chaired the expert group, asked them to do and so they proceeded to do.

What was perhaps not known to some of the experts but known to the Director-General was that the special issue had actually been commissioned by the WHO and its Dr Rajendra Pal. All the articles to be published were "selected" by the WHO's Vector Biology Control Division in Geneva. Most of the articles were mere review articles and not really original papers. Also, the papers of the scientists in the GCMU, which raised inconvenient issues or posed serious questions (such as that about thiotepa or that cytoplasmic strains were really not genetic mutations but strains affected by rickettsia type disease curable with tetracycline) were excluded from the journal (and thus was not known to the expert group).

The price of the journal had been increased for the special issue, and bulk copies had been purchased by the WHO itself. It was, thus, like one of the supplements that Indian newspapers and periodicals frequently bring out.

No wonder the expert group, which was invited by the DG, ICMR, to have "a free and frank discussion on all aspects of the work done in the Unit", on the basis of this special issue of the journal, came out with a clean chit to the Unit and congratulated it on its "excellent performance". The experts never discussed the biological warfare aspects, for though the DG, ICMR, spoke of

"all aspects", the parameters of this was confined to health aspects. (Biological warfare was a defence aspect). The expert group also praised the safety precautions already adopted by the Unit, without going into the question of chemosterilisation or use of thiotepa!

Despite all these handicaps, the expert group recommended that before genetically manipulated strains were released in field trials (as was proposed to be done in Sonapat), they should not only be tested for their vectorial capacity in respect of dengue and chikungunya as now "but this safety measure should now be expanded to cover other important viruses as well". (p 56, PAC report).

The expert group "realised in this connection, that it would not be realistic or feasible to include all conceivable viruses for this purpose. However viruses which are considered by the Expert Committee on Virus and Arthropod Borne Diseases (ECVABD) to be of major importance and relevance and capable of posing public health hazards have to be included for such screening. The group pointed out that in fact such safety measures in experimental approach have been stressed by the WHO".

This was on October 16, 1974. Till today, the ECVABD has not been summoned to meet. The DG, ICMR, decided that a meeting of the committee could be dangerous for his purposes and objectives.

That bureaucratic boondoggle, decision by correspondence, was resorted to. The DG addressed letters to individual members of the ECVABD, and sought their views on the viruses to be tested. The members were not given the benefit of knowing what other members might suggest or had suggested, nor could they have the benefit of a discussion. Obviously, the DG, ICMR was afraid of another round of open discussion among his experts because

the discussion might throw up new ideas (and names of new viruses to be tested).

On the basis of the correspondence, the DG, ICMR, selected the virus to be tested. The November 2, 1974, meeting of the Governing Council records: "The (expert) group suggested testing of the vectors with new strains for their potential to transmit yellow fever." Thus, "viruses... of major importance and relevance" to be decided by the ECVABD had been reduced to by the DG, ICMR, to one virus, "the yellow fever" (which because of the public concern roused could no longer be eliminated).

How far was the decision to select the virus by correspondence the result of the mention in the ICMR subcommittee of the new exotic viruses with which the US was known to be tinkering with — lassa fever, marburg agent? One characteristic of the latter is its ability to attack the testes of the male and thus produce sterility. If a proper strain could be developed, and delivered through the mosquito, what a boon for the United States which was constantly worried by the population explosion in the countries of Asia and Africa and now talked of triage.

But even the yellow fever virus "decision" became inconvenient. For, the US was pressing, through its project administrator and through WHO, for early conclusion of the Sonapat experiments.

If the genetic strains were to be tested for their yellow fever vector capacity, the tests would have had to be carried out in labs outside India, but with participation by technically competent Indian personnel. Import of yellow fever virus, even for experimental purposes, into India is absolutely prohibited.

The WHO group — Dr Paul Bress and Dr Rajendra Pal — who came for the semi-annual technical review meeting in November, tried to persuade the Indian experts that testing for yellow

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fever was not necessary and that if the susceptibility of the strains to dengue or chikungunya were not altered, their susceptibility to yellow fever was also not likely to be affected. All the Indian experts accepted this viewpoint but one member (who is not named but is not Paul Bress so the PAC has been told) apparently insisted on its being recorded in the minutes that "there was no experimental proof for such a viewpoint" (p 121, PAC report). The paragraph quoted by the PAC clearly brings out the anxiety of the WHO review group to "permit a start of limited field releases without waiting for the delays that would be necessary to undertake the test with yellow fever virus".

The WHO could not have its way about testing of strains. So they decided to abandon the move to conduct the Sonapat experiment with genetically manipulated strains of aedes aegypti mosquitoes, but to do so with chemosterilised mosquitoes, by using thiotepa.

If the earlier actions of the Health Ministry and the ICMR were merely "gross negligence" — though even this is a serious matter where public health is involved — their silence, inaction and connivance even after the publication of the PTI report and Parliamentary debate, as shown above, is surely proof of something far more serious.

Only a full fledged intelligence probe, tracing the links of the personnel of the ICMR and the GCMU and their past and present connections, weaknesses,

and favours received or being looked forward to, will help the smashing up of the foreign data collection link-up to which the PAC has drawn pointed attention.

The GCMU, its WHO leaders, and the DG, ICMR, decided in December to go ahead with their preparations for the Sonapat releases in February with thiotepa treated chemosterilised mosquitoes, and put out pamphlets telling the people of Sonapat that this was all intended to rid them of the dengue and dengue haemorrhagic fever. In the light of their own evidence before the PAC (now revealed in its report), and the fact that no one challenged within the ICMR expert group, Dr Pandit's warning about cross-protection of dengue to yellow fever, a warning backed by Theiler's own studies, how did the DG, ICMR, and DGHS agree to this? Why were they so beholden to the WHO that they were throwing their full weight behind it?

The GCMU and the ICMR brushed aside advice to hold up the experiment. Not only that, bureaucratic tactics of delaying replies to questions posed by the PAC were adopted (the PAC report is replete with answers yet to be supplied, even to such simple ones as whether the Government and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases had accepted the resignation of Dr Rajendra Pal, who had a ten-year-old lien on it, after the Parliamentary debate exposing Pal's role). And field work at Sonapat were speeded up.

But, fortunately, other forces intervened. One of this at least was the Chairman of the PAC, who would appear to have written a letter to the Prime Minister on January 31, 1975 (p 225 of the report) asking the PM to set the best intelligence services at her disposal on to this and other connected projects. The Defence authorities too belatedly woke up and became alarmed and alerted by the articles in the *National Herald*. The Haryana Government too intervened — and on February 17 or so, would appear

to have physically caught hold of the GCMU leader of the project on the outskirts of Sonapat and let her go only after extracting a promise that no experiments would be conducted in Sonapat without the Haryana Government's specific approval.

The Prime Minister would then appear to have intervened and instructed the Health Minister to abandon the experiment.

But the Health Ministry would not give up. The Ministry was intent somehow or other in preserving the link with WHO, and with the USA if the latter could be made "invisible". The US was willing to be semi-visible, but not totally invisible. And the price of the semi-visibility was to get some "co-operative" Indian, particularly those maintaining Indian nationality but working in the USA and whose profiles had been studied, appointed as project leader in place of the American Dr Brooks. Plans were also made to shift nominally the unit to Pondicherry, weather out the PAC Report and Parliament, and get rid of persons within the project who were considered not pliable enough and who were raising inconvenient questions.

There was open talk, attributed to the DG, ICMR, that the project should maintain a low profile until April 30 when the Chairman of the PAC and the Committee itself would go out of office. The GCMU's project leader hinted as much in talk with agitated field employees who were getting worried about their future and threatening to gherao the GCMU and the WHO.

Any processing of the PAC report and the machinery for considering its serious recommendations having a bearing on the security of the country should be viewed against this background. Moves are already afoot to continue the project with a WHO link in the shape of a 100,000 dollar grant from it. Also some of the key personnel, involved in the wider data-gathering network are being posted in new key positions.

### READERS, AGENTS

The printing of this issue of *Mainstream* has been delayed owing to the sudden load-shedding in Delhi caused by acute power shortage. It is possible that the supply of power to industrial units including the Shaheed Prakashan Press where *Mainstream* is printed, will remain inadequate in the coming weeks also. We earnestly hope that our readers and agents will kindly bear with us and excuse the delay in receipt of their copies.

MANAGER