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No compromise on child rights

The Aradhana Samdariya case fell apart thanks to police inefficiency and apathy

It should have been an open and shut case, but five months after 13-year-old Aradhana Samdariya died after a 68-day fast in Hyderabad, the police find they have to drop the case against those responsible for lack of evidence.

The police have either been extremely shoddy in their work or are acting under pressure from the powerful Jain clergy, which sanctioned the little girl's fast in the first place. After her death due to a cardiac arrest brought on by extreme nutritional deprivation, the police had registered a case of culpable homicide and one under Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, for wilful neglect of a child. It is inexplicable why this was not done during the highly publicised fast that the girl undertook ostensibly to improve her father's business fortunes. The explanation that there is no technical evidence or witnesses does not wash, the child was visited by several politicians during her fast, advertisements were taken out about it and her school knew of this. Above all, her parents knew, though they argue that she undertook this voluntarily.

But the question is, did her family and others who witnessed this fast not have the duty to stop it and save her life? The clerics of the community argued that this was a tradition in their religion and could not be questioned. But the death of a child cannot be explained away as being part of tradition, the coercive element in this fast amounts to child abuse which led to fatal consequences. Similarly, when children in Tamil Nadu undertook body piercing to appease the gods and save the late chief minister J Jayalalithaa, it was explained away as being part of tradition. Nothing justifies any tradition or religious practice which harms children. Aradhana's death and the fact that people who were responsible for her well being have got of scot free sets a dreadful example to other young children. It will also encourage religious groups and sects who prescribe dangerous practices for children — an example is burying children for a few seconds in certain areas of Karnataka to cure them of physical disabilities, another is throwing babies off a 50-foot tower to be caught below in Maharashtra to negate bad luck. These are practices that must be resisted in the interest of child rights. The Aradhana case should have been a test case, instead it has fallen apart putting the lives and well being of more children in danger.

Let's talk depression

The prime minister's appeal to encourage people with the condition to talk about their experience is the way ahead

The theme of World Health Day on April 7 is 'Depression: Let's talk' and Prime Minister Narendra Modi did just that, talk about depression in his first Mann Ki Baat radio address to the nation after the BJP tsunami swept away the opposition in Uttar Pradesh. "We (in India) are afraid to talk about it (depression) openly," said Modi on radio. "Suppression of depression is not good. Expression is always good. If depressed, share your feelings with others, it will make you feel better." Health themes often get airtime in prime minister Modi's speeches — he's spoken on tuberculosis, diabetes, organ donation, antibiotic resistance, dengue, mother and child health, drug abuse, exam stress and yoga for health in the past — what made Sunday's speech special was that he was addressing an invisible disorder that stalks millions for life. Globally, 322 million have depression, around 4.4%, of the world's population, with the disorder being more common in women (5.1%) than men (3.6%), estimates the WHO. Untreated depression disorders are the leading cause of the more than 788,000 suicides worldwide, which roughly corresponds to one death every 45 seconds. In India, 57 million persons have depression and 38 million have anxiety disorders.

More than the numbers, what's worrying is the stigma that prevents people with depression from seeking treatment. Depression is caused by an imbalance in brain chemistry, which is triggered suddenly or over time by genetics, changes in hormone levels, chronic illnesses, stress, grief or difficult circumstances, but it can be managed with medicines and therapy.

There are only 5,615 psychiatrists, almost all of them in metros, registered with the Indian Psychiatric Society. In the absence of specialists, families and general physicians have to spot the first signs of depression to encourage those affected to seek treatment to manage the disorder and. It's not that people are not seeking treatment — antidepressant use has shot up by more than 30% over the past four years — up from ₹760 crore in 2013 to ₹1,093 crore in 2016 — but those getting help is just the tip of the iceberg. Suicide is the leading cause of death among young Indians between ages 15 and 29 in India. We cannot watch our future die of an illness that is inexpensive and easy to treat.

It's no longer a magic bullet

The promise of nuclear power is fading in India due to poor economics and grassroots activism, writes BRAHMA CHELLANEY

It is often said that China could become the first country in the world to age before it gets rich. India faces no such spectre. However, India has already become the first important economy in the world to take on onerous climate-related obligations before it has provided electricity to all its citizens.

This reality has greatly accentuated India's energy challenge, which is unique in some respects. Consider the scale of its challenge: Before its population stabilises, India will add at least as many people as the US currently has. Even if India provided electricity to its projected 1.6 billion population in 2050 at today's abysmally low per capita energy consumption level, it will have to increase its electricity production by about 40% of the total global output at present.

India's domestic energy resources are exceptionally modest in comparison to population size and the demands of a fast-growing economy, with energy demand projected to rise 90% over the next 13 years. Unlike China, India does not share common borders with any energy-exporting country and thus must rely on imports from beyond its neighbourhood, making it vulnerable to unforeseen supply disruptions.

Still, under the Paris Agreement, India has committed to reduce the carbon intensity of its economy by about a third by 2030, including by generating 40% of its electricity from non-fossil fuels. The single-minded focus on carbon threatens to exacerbate India's water crisis, given the water-guzzling nature of the energy sector — the largest user of water by far in the West.

What may be "clean" from a carbon angle could be "dirty" from a water-resource perspective. For example, "clean" coal, with carbon capture and sequestration, ranks along with nuclear power at the top of the water intensity chart. Also, some renewables, such as solar thermal power and geo-

thermal energy, are notoriously water-intensive. By contrast, two renewable technologies increasingly being employed in India — solar photovoltaic and wind plants — need little water for their normal operations.

In choosing its energy options, India must strike a prudent balance between carbon intensity and water intensity, or else it will get caught in a vicious circle, with attempts to address the energy crisis worsening the water crisis, and vice versa. The nexus between energy, water and even food demands a holistic, integrated policy approach.

The share of renewables in India's energy mix is set to increase considerably, given the tax and other incentives on offer. In contrast to the intermittent nature of renewables like solar and wind, hydro and nuclear power can be used both to cover the electrical base load and for peak load operations. Yet hydro and nuclear power face increasingly strong headwinds. Activist NGOs — many foreign funded — have made it difficult for India to build large dams, blighting the promise of hydropower. It is virtually certain that India (which generates more power from wind alone than from nuclear) will slip badly on its 2030 target to produce 12% of electricity from atomic sources.

Nuclear power growth is falling victim to larger factors. The first factor is the increasingly poor economics of nuclear power across the world. Skyrocketing construction costs, made worse by the post-Fukushima safety upgrades, and reliance on massive government subsidies are making nuclear power uncompetitive. A second factor is the dire financial state of the foreign companies that were planning to build nuclear power plants in India — Toshiba-Westinghouse and Areva. Their very survival is at stake today. France's state-owned Areva needs a government-led €5 billion bailout to stay afloat. It is also set to be split, with its reac-

tor unit being sold to EDF, also state-owned.

For Toshiba, the US nuclear market is proving to be its graveyard. On the brink of disintegration, Toshiba has posted a \$6.2 billion nuclear-business loss, mainly from its US subsidiary, Westinghouse. Its 2006 blunder in acquiring Westinghouse has been compounded by its 2015 purchase of nuclear plant builder CB&I Stone & Webster. Now Toshiba is jettisoning its lead role in projects to build nuclear plants in India and Britain, a move that would leave it merely as a nuclear equipment supplier. Add to the picture a third factor: Grassroots resistance in India to new nuclear power plants — a fact that resulted in delay in commissioning the Kudankulam plant and forced the shifting of Westinghouse's first planned project from Gujarat to Andhra Pradesh.

India, duped by its own hype over the 2005 nuclear deal with the US, announced plans for an expansion of nuclear power at a time when this energy source was already in decline globally. Its plans indeed motivated Toshiba to acquire Westinghouse. Now India faces an embarrassing situation: The nuclear power promise is visibly fading before it has signed a single reactor contract as part of the nuclear deal. More broadly, India's energy conundrum has been compounded by unrealistic targets, embrace of carbon-reduction goals at a time when Donald Trump was vowing to take America in the opposite direction, and inability to stem disruptive NGO activism. But for the near bankruptcy of Areva and Toshiba, Indian taxpayers would have been saddled with white-elephant projects similar to Areva's Finnish reactor at Oikiluoto, whose construction is running almost a decade behind schedule and incurring billions of euros in cost overruns.

Brahma Chellaney is a geostrategist and author. The views expressed are personal.

comment



Protests against the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu, India, duped by its own hype over the 2005 nuclear deal with the US, announced plans for an expansion of nuclear power at a time when this energy source was already in decline globally

newsmaker

YOGI ADITYANATH, chief minister, Uttar Pradesh

THE STATE GOVERNMENT WILL NOT TOLERATE ANY LAXITY IN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT SCHEMES. OFFICERS WHO ARE WILLING TO WORK 18-20 HOURS DAILY CAN CONTINUE WITH THE GOVERNMENT OR ELSE THEY ARE FREE TO LEAVE... I AM A WORKAHOLIC AND... THOSE WHO ARE READY TO WORK HARD SHOULD CONTINUE AND NON-PERFORMERS SHOULD LEAVE.



Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE

THINK IT OVER »

LEARNING HOW TO BE STILL, TO REALLY BE STILL AND LET LIFE HAPPEN — THAT STILLNESS BECOMES A RADIANCE.
MORGAN FREEMAN

thebuzz

KEEPING TABS ON THE POLITICAL GRAPEVINE

REPLICATING THE PUNJAB MODEL

For the municipal elections in Delhi, the Congress is deploying all those leaders who were involved in the party's campaign planning in Punjab. While chief minister Captain Amarinder Singh (in picture) and his cabinet colleague Navjot Singh Sidhu are much in demand, the Congress has also roped in all the coordinators, including Ajay Sharma, in the hopes of replicating the Punjab success in Delhi. A party functionary quipped that if the Punjab model works in Delhi it could be replicated in Gujarat and Himachal as well. It is also heard that Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi is monitoring the campaign planning.



MOVES ON THE CHESSBOARD

With the talk of organisational reshuffle in the Congress gaining momentum, many leaders have started making a beeline to party vice-president Rahul Gandhi's trusted aide K Raju to push for their case. Many young leaders, including AICC secretaries, are aspiring to become general secretaries. There is also a buzz that many senior leaders will be sent to states to lend a helping hand to the party functionaries there. For his part, Raju has been taking the feedback of the young office-bearers from leaders and workers in states under their charge.

PERILS OF NOT BEING PRESENT

After getting a rebuke from Prime Minister Narendra Modi for not being present in the two Houses of Parliament, BJP MPs have become quite alert. Last Friday, the parliamentarians were seen running towards the Lok Sabha when they saw the PM coming from the Rajya Sabha and walking towards the Lower House. The BJP MPs have a grouse against some ministers though. It

was because of the absence of three ministers during the question hour in the Rajya Sabha that the PM had taken party parliamentarians to task.

KEEPING HIS IMAGE INTACT

Haryana chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar had some uncomfortable moments when he landed at the Bharatiya Janata Party office in Parliament. No sooner did he enter that people jostled to take selfies with the chief minister. "This selfie-ria is a new disease in India," Khattar quipped while posing for them.

NO MEET AND GREET YET

About 40 MPs from the states of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh landed in New Delhi on Sunday evening on being told that prime minister Narendra Modi will meet them. Most of them had planned to reach on Monday but when it involved the Prime Minister, nobody took the risk. Upon arrival in Delhi, however, they were left disappointed as the meeting was re-scheduled. The next date given to them is March 29.

Finance Bill

Centre should come clean on poll funding

A last-minute amendment removing the cap on companies making donations to political parties is causing alarm

SY Quraishi

One of the most significant features of Union budget 2017 was the intention to increase transparency in electoral funding. When it was presented last month, it seemed like a good beginning towards cleansing politics of money power. At that time, the finance minister had acknowledged that a transparent method of funding political parties is vital to the system of free and fair elections. He said that political parties continue to receive most of their funds through anonymous donations which are shown in cash. He categorically stated: "An effort, therefore, is required to be made to cleanse the system of political funding in India."

The most significant proposal was to issue electoral bonds which the donors could purchase from authorised banks. This will stop cash payments which were subject to abuse. Till now, all donations

above ₹20,000 are disclosed by the political parties to the Election Commission.

Questions were raised on whether donation through bonds would be disclosed to the Election Commission as well. Under section 182 of the Companies Act, no political donation can be made unless the board of directors passes a resolution authorising such a payment.

Today what has raised alarm is a last-minute amendment in the Finance Bill made quietly, which removes the cap of 7.5% of average three years profit that a company can donate to a political party. Experts are questioning this move, especially when the identity of the recipient will be kept a secret.

The finance minister, in his reply to a Rajya Sabha debate, assured the house that all the concerns will be addressed in the Electoral Bonds Scheme that is being formulated.

The government putting the transpar-

ency of political funding high on its agenda is most welcome. But its own actions must be fully transparent, too. The ideal solution would be to set up a National Electoral Fund to which all donors can openly contribute without expressing any preference for any political party. This will also address the donors' concern for secrecy.

Once public funding of political parties is ensured, private donations must be totally banned.

And since public funds will be involved, there must be an annual audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or an auditor approved by it. This will be the most decisive action electoral reform that the country needs.

SY Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner and the author of *An Undocumented Wonder - The Making of the Great Indian Election*. The views expressed are personal.

innervoice



Go on journeys to make your life so much richer

PP Wangchuk

After hectic outings to several places recently, I am convinced of the old saying that a journey can be the best teacher. If it can humble you when you are face to face with the grandeur of nature and its unlimited potential, it can also make you feel proud that you are lucky enough to be a part of all the best things that can happen.

Travelling can help us renew ourselves and see that the journey of life is on the right track. We have to be on the move to be progressing all the time, without permitting any loss of time in this precious life.

That is why German statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had this to say: "The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving." It is ultimately the one who keeps on the move who can keep getting the best of experiences and benefits.

The good thing about travel is that for many of us, once we begin travel, it becomes a part of our life journey forever. You keep on visiting, mentally, non-stop, with greater joy and fulfilment. And you rejoice over 'those were the days' flashbacks.

Co-travellers, at times, give you a chance to look at life from a different angle. Their approach towards life could be far different from yours, and it is quite likely that you get into a give-and-take experience that can make your life a remarkable one. As American singer Billy Joel says, "I'm no longer afraid of becoming lost, because the journey back always reveals something new, and that is ultimately good."

Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal. innervoice@hindustantimes.com