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Mental health is not a priority

The schoolboy's case underlines the neglect of this issue

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The recent incident of a Chandigarh schoolboy's claims of having been offered a job in the tech company Google is a sad tale of irresponsibility on the part of the school authorities, and an even sadder commentary on the importance paid to mental health issues in India. When the boy claimed that he would be paid ₹12 lakh per month by Google, the school and the government department, without pausing to check the veracity of the claim, released the name of the boy and his photograph to the press. When the news finally turned out to be false, the boy's name, address, photographs and many other personal details had already been widely publicised.

Unable to bear the ignominy that came after, the boy broke down and had to be admitted to hospital and has since been diagnosed with confusional psychosis; a state in which the troubled person is likely to suffer from delusions. The trauma the boy (and his family) is now going through is hard to imagine. The point that must be noted here is that until his condition became so grave that he had to be admitted to hospital, no one at his school or home noticed that anything was wrong with him. That the mental state of the boy went unnoticed, and his teachers and parents were all oblivious to his deteriorating condition shows how little we care about mental health issues. The fact that many educational institutions have no counsellors or healthcare professionals to deal with such issues shows that mental health is not considered a priority. The needs and problems of adolescents and young adults, if ignored at that stage, could affect the quality of their life as adults.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that in India, the burden of mental health problems is of the tune of 2,443 DALYs (disability-adjusted life years) per 100,000 population. The WHO also estimates that India faces an economic loss of $ 1.03 trillion between 2012 and 2030, due to mental health conditions. A lot more needs to be done to remove the stigma and taboos associated with mental health issues, because it is costing us more than just money.

Our jails are suffering from mismanagement

Overcrowded prisons fail to either deliver justice or reform criminals

Replying to a question raised in Lok Sabha, minister of state for home Hansraj Ahir said that more than 10% of prisons in India had an overcrowding rate of more than 200%. Of the 1,401 prisons across the country, 149 were holding more than double the number of inmates. This not only reflects poorly on the management of prisons but also the failure of the judicial process to dispose cases in a time-bound manner. Though the occupancy rate (number of inmates against the authorised capacity of 100 inmates) in prisons has been decreasing slightly over the years, it is still above capacity — at present the average in India is 114%.

Overcrowding in prisons has a direct, but often underrated, impact on the security of prisons, and health and hygiene of inmates. It, jail authorities agree, also has an adverse effect on the mental health of inmates. One of the reasons for overcrowding in prisons is the overwhelming number of undertrials awaiting a verdict. According to the Prison Statistics India 2015 report, published in September, 67% (or 282,076) of the total 419,623 inmates in India's 1,401 prisons are undertrials.

If trials and convictions took place in a timely manner and the judiciary was working at full force the number of inmates in prisons would have drastically reduced. According to the report, more than 3,500 undertrials have been in jail for more than five years awaiting a trail — in many cases the time these undertrials would have spent in jail if convicted would be shorter. Another reason why there are a high number of undertrials is that many of them do not have adequate access to legal aid.

The basic purpose of a prison in a modern democracy is that of a correctional facility — but that's not the case in India. Jails often become, and continue to be, places where criminals cool their heels while plotting future plans. The criminal justice system is not well served if jails continue to be in such a shambles.

COMMENT

Unipolarity is harmful for democracy

Opposition unity isn't possible without the Congress in the lead. But, it's in terminal decline

CHANDAN MITRA

Until popular unrest and voter fatigue broke the Congress party's overwhelming grip on political power for the first time in 1967, India's political cartography was very similar to what it is today except that the BJP has replaced the Grand Old Party of India to gain virtual monopoly of power. The components of this monopoly hardly bear recounting. Even in 1977, when Indira Gandhi was unseated in the aftermath of the Emergency, the Congress party's plight was not as pathetic.

Perhaps more importantly the prospects of a non-BJP alternative emerging in the near future look palpably bleak. In other words, a TINA (there is no alternative) syndrome has gripped Indian politics.

The turning point for this denouement was not the 2014 general election which brought the BJP to power with a clear majority in the Lok Sabha. Even after that, the party crashed to a stunning defeat in the Bihar assembly elections in 2015, giving leaders like Nitish Kumar hopes of stitching together a grand alliance or mahagathbandhan to challenge the BJP nationally. But the party's spectacular performance in the 2017 UP assembly polls put paid to such dreams. Since then, Opposition aspirations have crumbled. The switchover by Nitish Kumar, a prospective leader of a non-BJP front, appears to have interred those dreams for the foreseeable future.

It is accepted electoral logic that without gaining control of the Hindi heartland states, particularly UP with 80 Lok Sabha seats and Bihar with 40, it is virtually impossible to mount a credible bid for power at the Centre. In recent times, the BJP has made serious inroads into states where it barely existed before – Assam and its neighbours for example. Although the party is yet to pose a significant challenge in the South, it has ruled Karnataka before and appears poised to do so again after next year's assembly polls. The BJP is already in alliance with the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and is eyeing a tie-up with the TRS in Telangana. Tamil Nadu and Kerala may be out of its reach at present, but the case was similar with these states in the high noon of Indira Gandhi's supremacy.

But the TINA factor is not just on account of the BJP's geographical spread. Indira Gandhi managed to successfully joust her way back in the 1980 election. On that occasion, she was the undoubted alternative to the Janata Party, Lok Dal and the rest of the motley Opposition. In fact, during its brief stints out of power, the Congress party always lurked in the shadows as a "government in waiting".

The vacuum in Opposition ranks today is primarily on account of the Congress party's seemingly terminal decline, both at the national and regional levels. Without the Congress in command, the Opposition lacks a cementing factor. Previous experiments with a non-Congress, non-BJP alliance have come a cropper. Besides regional parties in the crucial Hindi heartland states are currently in disarray.

After its rout earlier this year, the Samajwadi Party is tottering, Lalu Prasad and his family members are battling a series of corruption-related legal tangles. In the absence of a feisty challenge from the Congress, which seems to have more leaders than foot soldiers, a fragmented Opposition can be easily gobbled up by the preponderant BJP.

Anybody with knowledge of building a stable and expansive political organisation knows that party workers must be kept busy by engaging them constantly in agitational and mass contact programmes. While the BJP does that on a regular basis, the Congress party's efforts at mobilisation are clearly lack-adaisical and mostly unfocused. Its cadre is galvanised only when any member of its First Family comes under attack. Protests by Congress workers in many parts of the country following the deplorable attack on Rahul Gandhi's motorcade in Gujarat last week, is a case in point. While such protest is justified, how does it really concern the common man? Nitish Kumar (shortly before quitting his alliance with Lalu Prasad) rightly asked as to whether the Opposition has an alternate narrative? Clearly it does not.

Congress and most non-BJP parties have failed to grasp that the country has moved beyond the secular-communal debate. So, apart from leadership and organisational deficiencies, the Opposition lacks an ideological and programmatic alternative as well.

Till such time as the Congress reinvents itself and promotes a new, younger leadership, the party does not seem to have a future ahead. The irony is that there is no dearth of younger leaders in the party.

A vibrant and vigilant Opposition is the sine-qua-non of parliamentary democracy. The BJP may have worked hard to gain its dominant position in Indian politics and even acquired TINA status, but unipolarity is harmful for a democracy in the long run.

However, an Opposition agenda and leadership will remain confined to the peripheries while Narendra Modi reigns supreme.

Chandan Mitra is editor of The Pioneer and has been two-time Rajya Sabha MP from the BJP
The views expressed are personal

▪ A BJP supporter wearing a Narendra Modi mask at a traffic crossing in Guwahati   PTI

MONEY MATTERS

▪ A molecular cytogenetics lab in Mumbai. India has spent less than 1% of GDP on research and hired just 40 researchers per lakh labour force for the last decade   HINDUSTAN TIMES

Indian science needs more faith and a lot more funds

Scientists who work on issues like food self-sufficiency and low-cost drugs need far more support than ever

CHETANA SACHIDANANDAN

Science has always been driven by wonder. The ancient man who watched the flow of water, the growth of barley seeds or the orbit of the sun did so for the wonder of it. The wonder that revealed the secret workings of nature, which we harness today to run our world of drugs and crops and computers. To equate science to technology or product development is short-sighted.

In the scientific method, I would notice an interesting behaviour of nature, create a hypothesis to explain the observations and then do experiments to test whether the hypothesis holds true or not. If not, I go back to the drawing board to start with a new hypothesis. So, science by definition, is about mistakes made and mistakes corrected. It is about being wrong until you arrive at the truth. This makes science a slow and iterative process that takes time, expense and effort.

The United States of America, the undisputed leader in scientific research and discoveries spends more than 2.5% of their GDP on research and development enterprises (according to a study by Nature in 2015). The USA employs an estimated 790 per lakh of their labour force in scientific research. In contrast India has spent less than 1% of its GDP on research and employed only 40 researchers per lakh labour force for the last decade or more.

Indian science has reached where it is now through 70 years of struggle; as India worked on building indigenous infrastructure, as we reeled under sanctions by international communities and as we learned to live in a globalised economy. The priority for Indian science was never a Nobel Prize, but food self-sufficiency, affordable drugs and low cost satellite launches. And Indian science has met these goals more than admirably. But the work is not done, not even begun. For India to be competitive and at par with the scientific enterprise in developed nations, we have to have consistent and generous funding for science.

Science is a way for us to solve the problems that humanity as a whole faces and the specific problems of malnutrition and poverty and disease that India faces. These are not new problems; they have been our companions since Independence. A concerted effort by successive governments to jump start the stalling engine of science in India is needed; along with increased funding, increased faith in science and increased trust in scientists.

The India March for Science, which follows and has the support of the international March for Science held across 600 communities in April, was led by such a need. The March should remind us that science is part of our everyday lives - that science is important, essential and that we cannot live without it!

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The views expressed are personal

Civic bodies should learn smart ways to raise funds

Other than central grants, municipalities must also look at debt financing and user fees to support their projects

PERSIS TARAPOREVALA

The Smart Cities Mission (SCM) is slowly creating a new rhythm in municipal finances in the country. The 90 cities have proposed a substantial budget of ₹1,91,205 crore, sourced through traditional and relatively unorthodox financial mechanisms. This development raises two important questions: What do the finances of the mission bring to the table and at what cost?

The Centre for Policy Research has analysed the finances of the top 90 cities and found that a little over 80% (over ₹1,55,500 crore) of the funding is directed towards 'area-based developments,' which focus on improving small portions (a little over 4%) of total area of the cities. The rest of the funds are directed towards 'pan-city' projects that impact a larger geographic scale.

The yearly instalment of funds is released to special purpose vehicles (SPV) after they meet the following conditions: Timely submission of the City Score Card every quarter, satisfactory physical and financial progress, achievement of milestones given in the roadmap contained in programme, and fully functioning special purpose vehicles as set out in the Guidelines and the Articles of Association.

The funds for these projects are raised from a variety of public and private sources. The primary mechanism of funding projects comes from the smart cities budget. The Smart Cities Mission offers cities ₹1,000 crore per city over five years, and this accounts for over 50% of the budget of the top 90 cities. The Smart Cities Mission funding was initially imagined as seed money that could help cities venture into the debt market, however this funding seems to be used more as a regular grant.

Over 20% of funding for the 90 cities is sourced through a process of 'convergence' wherein the cities incorporate the budgets of other government schemes such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the affordable housing schemes etc into the smart city proposal budgets.

The private sector provides an equal percentage of funding through public-private partnerships and corporate social responsibility. Finally, loans provide around 7% of the proposed budget for the top 90 cities. A very small portion of funds were officially sourced from the newer forms of fund raising — municipal bonds and the debt market, land monetisation and user charges. As the Smart Cities Mission progresses however, cities are taking a renewed interest in these forms of raising capital.

For instance, while only Warangal in Telangana officially mentioned municipal bonds in the proposals, over 20 cities are today seeking this form of finance. The advantage of debt financing is that a large quantum of capital can be procured in short time. These processes might result in citizens repaying the infrastructure costs over a period of time, unlike most government grants, which need not be repaid. The same holds true for user charges, which could increase the rates of basic services (water, electricity, roads, transportation) and could ostensibly further disadvantage vulnerable communities that might not be able to afford the new charges.

While the Smart Cities Mission does not utilise these methods extensively, they could reframe the discourse of urban infrastructure financing in the future.

The Smart Cities Mission is supposed to act as a 'lighthouse' and inspire similar development across the existing smart cities and in new cities and in a situation with feeble access to municipal finances and greater motivation to undertake urban development projects could lead to a situation where the State weans municipalities from government funding and promotes the use of debt market and fee-based mechanisms of raising finances to improve Indian cities.

While the grants-based finance system was potentially more inclusive, the reality is that it might not be sufficient for the demands of a burgeoning urban population.

Indian municipal finances are in a poor state, and while there are several solutions including an efficient and uniform implementation of the 74th amendment (which pushes for a devolution of several powers including taxation) to the municipal government, it is also possible to consider the Smart Cities Mission approach to urban development financing.

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The views expressed are personal

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CHANGE THE WORLD AROUND YOU, ONE COMPLIMENT AT A TIME

Himika Chaudhuri

On a recent metro ride that I took, there was a mother with her two little children seated close to where I was standing. At one station an elderly woman, who seemed to have some difficulty in walking, boarded the train. No one offered her a seat.

Then suddenly, this lady stood up and asked the elderly woman to sit down. Her daughter, perhaps, a 12-year-old, quipped, "Why did you get up mama?" To which, her mom gently said, "Because daadi's legs are paining and she needs to sit." The journey continued, but I could not resist the temptation of telling the lady what a beautiful example she had set for her kids.

As I complimented the gracious lady whose name I still don't know, her daughter looked at her mom, and smiled with pride in her eyes. Very often we forget to do that one simple good deed that can add some positivity to the world, and even more often we forget to appreciate it. For that lady, giving up a seat for someone she thought needs it more than her, may have come naturally. Yet, to be admired for it openly may have only added a touch of happiness to her soul, and made her a hero in the eyes of her children.

A compliment, no matter how small or cliché, always brings a smile to the face and a shine to the heart, and promises to make the world around you a few shades prettier.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.)
The views expressed are personal
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