

THE LITCHIS OF WRATH

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

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The writer is a historian of Delhi

The Bitter Cry of Children was the title of a book (1906) by the American writer, John Spargo, one of the group labelled “The Muckrakers”. It described in graphic detail the conditions of child labourers. Earlier, in 1883, Mearns and Preston had published The Bitter Cry of Outcast London. History can be written as the tragedy of little children — subject to abuse by relatives and by employers, frightened and lonely in war and exile and, at the moment, felled by a disease that viciously targets only them.

Today, one does not have to wait for the definitive book. There are short-cuts to gathering information which bypass long spells of interaction as was done by Charles Dickens, and door-to-door surveys by social workers and academics (like Sidney and Beatrice Webb) and later by committed middle-class women in India in the 1930s and 1940s. Communications are faster, day-to-day news, statistics, videos are immediately available. But has this speeded up response? In the stillness of the night, the sobbing of the parents of [Muzaffarpur](#) gets no relief.

And what we see is only the tip of the iceberg — the children who actually got a few inches of bed-space in the hospital. What of those who could not make the journey? The shadow gets bigger, goes further. And before the deaths, there was the infection. And before that, there was hunger. The assumption that we are ahead of Africa in every way is given the lie by the statistics on malnutrition.

The Vellore doctors explained that litchis eaten after having had a full meal before bedtime does no harm, but eaten on a pitifully hungry stomach can be fatal. Reading that really hurts. I was reminded of Oxfam lunches for volunteers — the charge was 2 pounds, for which you got a slice of bread and a thin slice of cheese. It is not enough to give money to the hungry, they explained. You must experience hunger yourself.

Maybe it is the short-cuts that are the reason for us not showing any insaniyat (untranslatable). We talk, we write, and assume someone else somewhere is doing what officials refer to as “the needful”.

There was a report about the deputy chief minister of another state offering help to Muzaffarpur. The rest, including those of Bihar, resort to a standard answer, or rather, a counter-question: What did earlier political leaders do for 70 years? Or, what did the preceding government do? They hallucinate about the past, and fantasise about the future, while the present slips away under their feet. When the tsunami strikes, they will be standing on the beach, holding forth about an earlier tsunami, another time.

Officials and ministers are not over-eager to go and see the situation for themselves, photo-op though it is. And if they do, there is a lack of empathy — a telling phrase used by a TV commentator was “vyavhaar ka ahankaar”. Has it to do with age — are younger people, whose children are still small, more likely to react with passion? Does a long life spent thinking, acting, talking politics, inure you to the suffering of children? It is too much of an effort for tired minds and limbs, particularly when the World Cup matches are in progress. And, after all, to wish to

defeat Pakistan at cricket makes you a true nationalist, to comment on official apathy makes you anti-national.

It was not always so. In the 1940s, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a one-person National Disaster Management Agency. And how she galvanised middle-class women during the Bengal Famine, giving them a sense of exhilaration as they devised ways to help the hungry villagers (my mother-in-law told me how she started to rear poultry in the garden of their government bungalow, so that the children at Shishu Sadan could have an egg a day. Try to imagine the well-guarded sarkari bungalows in Patna or New Delhi doing that now!).

Social work was a vocation. For some years now, it has been a profession. Can we look to the students enrolled for under-graduate and post-graduate degrees in Social Work, and the volunteers of the National Service Scheme? In these vacation weeks, students could get some first-hand experience of how to make the life of the parents bearable, console the grieving, counsel the others?

The NDMA was set up in 1999. Its brief is to co-ordinate the response to “man-made and natural disasters”. Muzaffarpur is facing a disaster which is partly natural and certainly aggravated by being man-made. But it does not qualify. “Disaster” has to be dramatic. Floods and earthquakes elicit immediate response, but not long epidemics or drought. Muzaffarpur is a national tragedy, as much as the Gujarat earthquake was, or the Kerala floods. Has anyone given thought to next year, to a long-term policy? Or will June 2020 newspapers echo those of 2019?

(If the NDMA or the NSS is active in Muzaffarpur, and I have missed reading about it, I apologise. And the Ramakrishna Mission or KhalsaAid?)

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