



# Transparency Review

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## Poverty Line or Starvation Line!!

Alok Srivastava

Poverty Estimation has become a bone in the throat for Planning Commission of India! First, the Deputy Chairman of this august and expert body (although many have started feeling the existence of Planning Commission to be of no relevance any more) raised doubts on the data collected by National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), another government organisation. Now, using the same data (66<sup>th</sup> Round NSS, 2009-10) and the Tendulkar Committee's method of estimation, the Planning Commission or to say, the national government is claiming that the population below poverty line has come down by 7.4 percentage points to 29.8%. It was 37.2 % in 2004-05. Many don't agree! For instance, different states using different methods for estimating poverty are coming up with their own figures of population of poor while at national level, the figures are drastically different because the method of estimation is completely different. On one hand, this leads to lot of confusion in coordination between central and state governments as well as in utilization of funds and on the other hand, adds to inclusion and exclusion confusion in the community. In fact, CMS from time to time has raised concerns about the perils of different estimates of poverty. Do we need to rectify this practice?

No doubt, the pace of development and economic growth has played a role in improving the living standards of the population to some extent. The 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2012-17) has started. However, what is disturbing or shameful is the fact that even after six and half decades of so-claimed pro-poor policies, we still have around 30 percent

of population living below poverty line (BPL). In absolute numbers, the figure is more mind-boggling; around 360 million are residing below the official poverty line. One can imagine the figures if we go by other estimation methods as it would be ranging between 45% and 80% below poverty line.

Interestingly, a day after releasing its new estimates on population of the poor, the Planning Commission came out with the explanation and justification that the official consumption poverty line is not defined for a daily basis, as reported by most newspapers. It further added that the practice around the world is to define poverty lines in terms of a year or a month...as if the living conditions around the world are similar, the work, the wage rate and the payment culture is similar or the system of who will borne the expenditure on schooling of children or health is similar in India to what is being followed across the world. When these conditions vary vastly from country to country, why come up with these kinds of justifications?

Using the plea, Planning Commission converted per capita consumption expenditure on a monthly basis for a family of five. On this basis the family based poverty line per month for the country as a whole is shown as ` 3364 in rural India and ` 4298 in urban areas. The figures are misleading because the fact is that these amounts are not a fixed income which the household will get at the end of every month. Majority of the population below and around this figure have uncertain source of income. Moreover, with growing population in urban India (38% in 2011 from 29% in 2001) and the slower

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## ABOUT TRANSPARENCY

The CMS Transparency team focuses on issues of good governance, raising awareness about the Right to Information Act (RTI) and empowering citizens to benefit from the legislation.

The Right to Information Act 2005 represents a historic breakthrough in recognising the citizen's democratic rights to monitor measures affecting the public good. Following adoption of the Act by the Parliament of India, the CMS has set up a Transparency Studies wing to document, examine and publicise the interrelation between governance and society in all its aspects. It facilitates dissemination of relevant material, confers with experts and field workers and networks with the media to promote implementation and awareness.

Priority is given to right to education, especially of children; right to work; right to justice and associated human and social rights, especially at the grassroots. Path breaking initiatives such as the Citizens' Charter, performance appraisal and social auditing, national annual corruption survey, the Zero-level Corruption Initiative in partnership with the CVC, and creation of forums for discussing electoral and judicial reforms have earned the team praise at the national and international levels.



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rate of poverty reduction per year between 2004-05 and 2009-10 in urban areas (1.0) compared to rural areas (1.6) the estimated figure of BPL population needs to be carefully examined. It indicates that the population migrating from rural to urban areas continues to live below poverty line, the only difference being that they are poor now by urban standards. But even if we assume that their income has improved in urban areas it is in no way encouraging or substantial for adequate living. Reason is simple-the difference between consumer budget of a family residing in urban areas and rural areas is meagre, just `934. Most probably in urban areas in comparison to rural areas, this additional amount must be spent on paying the rent of a house, which might not be sufficient to get a decent or even a manageable house for a family of five. Subtracting this differential amount, are we made to presume that the rest of the expenses of households in urban areas are the same as that of families residing in a village? Should we believe that the prices of commodities in urban areas are same as those prevailing in rural areas? Even a lay person can find fault in this statement. So what does it mean? It suggests that either our bureaucrats are presenting these figures to please their political bosses or consider it more of an academic interest and less to do with its practical utility.

As a paradigm shift, what is required is to put in public domain the harsh facts even if they portray a poor picture of India but at least the Vision of the country could be drawn in a more realistic way rather than day dreaming. Even if the bold acceptance of facts will mean that more than two-third of our population is below 'Decent Index of Living (DIL)' rather than calling it below poverty line. Decent because it will take into consideration the realistic figure required for a living better than just survival. *DIL*, a Hindi word meaning heart with realistic calculation could be much closer to hearts of poor people of India. As a matter of fact, the currently estimated figure of `22.4 per capita per day in rural and `28.6 in urban areas for deciding whether a person is below or above poverty line



should be rather taken as 'starvation line' i.e., to assess whether the person having an income below this level is facing starvation like scenario not only in context of food but other basic and essential items such as clothing, shelter, health care, schooling.

Under given circumstances, the need is to adopt a reoriented approach with the basic principle that all social security or poverty alleviation schemes are not meant for ALL below the 'Decent Index of Living' (DIL) population. Rather, there should be conditional transfer of benefits and eligible beneficiary category should be identified on a scheme to scheme basis depending upon the nature and spread of the scheme. With availability of *Aadhaar* (UID number), the scrutiny for scheme-wise eligible population is possible.

No populist measures are required rather all policy level decisions should be more fact-based and less vote-based. Dole out syndrome should be resisted and more conditional transfer of subsidy should be practiced. Unlike what has happened recently where lot of hue and cry was made by one of the coalition partners about increase in rail fare?

Even if we justify no increase in unreserved and second class fares, what justification is there to roll back the increase in AC-3 rail fare? Does this mean that more and more people have started travelling in AC-3 class, indicating a change in economic status of a segment of population and should we allow them to avail the benefits of highly subsidized rail fare? Similarly Census 2011 figures show that more than half of the households have a mobile phone (53%). These are some positive indicators to show the proportion of population availing or possessing these not so essential services and items is increasing. So there is no need to give them access to all subsidized facilities meant for the real poor families. The more transparent, systematic and conditional transfer of benefits will be, more upward the movement in proportion of population below poverty line of living (or Decent Index of Living) could be expected in the next round of estimation of poor population.

# A Rapid Study of Information Commissions

## A Rapid Study by CHRI

**1**<sup>2<sup>th</sup></sup> May 2012 is the seventh anniversary of the passage of the *Right to Information Act* (RTI Act) in Parliament. This is an appropriate occasion to take stock of how the RTI Act has served the cause of transparency in governments and other public authorities. Given the quasi-federal nature of the structure of governance in India implementation data is not available with any one agency in aggregated form. Two country-wide studies undertaken during the years 2008-09 pointed to the need for making more serious efforts for improving implementation of the Central RTI Act<sup>1</sup>. A major issue brought up by both studies was the packing of the newly established Information Commissions with retired civil servants. These findings echoed a 2007 study conducted by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) about the background of individuals appointed as Information Commissioners<sup>2</sup>.

The first batch of Commissioners appointed in 2005-06 has moved out. New appointments are being made, albeit at a slow pace. CHRI undertook a rapid study of the membership of all 29 Information Commissions (including that of Jammu and Kashmir established under the *J&K RTI Act* in 2010). Apart from counting vacancies in the Commissions this study analyses the background of Information Commissioners against the qualification criteria mentioned in the two RTI Acts. The findings of the three earlier studies are used as baseline data for the current study with respect to these two parameters. Five new parameters have been identified for assessing the working of Information Commissions for which there is no baseline data. A summary of the main findings of this study and recommendations for change are given below.

### **I Current Composition of and Vacancies in the Information Commissions**

- In 2006-07 a little more than a half of the Information Commissioners (52%) were retired civil servants. In 2012 two-thirds (66%) of the 83 Information Commissioners (including Chief Information Commissioners) at the Central and State level are retired civil servants. While the posts of Information Commissioners doubled, the proportion of retired civil servants appointed to these jobs increased inordinately. Governments seem reluctant

to trust the eminence and expertise of citizens who have never been civil servants in their lives<sup>3</sup>.

- 30% of the posts of Information Commissioners in the States are lying vacant (as on 01May 2012). Only 83 Information Commissioners (including Chief Information Commissioners) have been appointed against 117 posts in 29 Information Commissions.

- Jharkhand has the maximum number of vacancies in any Information Commission (six) followed by Tamil Nadu (four). Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh have three vacancies each.

- The posts of State Chief Information Commissioners in three States, namely, Maharashtra, Manipur and Tripura have not been filled up yet.

### **II Background of Chief Information Commissioners**

- Nowhere across the country have eminent women been appointed as Chief Information Commissioners, ever. Similarly no eminent citizen with experience and expertise in the fields of management, science and technology, mass media, journalism and social service has been appointed Chief Information Commissioner anywhere in the country.

- 90% of the serving Chief Information Commissioners are retired civil servants. The field of expertise: “administration and governance” mentioned in the two RTI laws has become synonymous with the term “civil services”.

- 75% of the posts of Chief Information Commissioners have been cornered by retired officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS).

### **III Background of Central and State Information Commissioners**

- Less than 15% of the Information Commissioners (8 out of 54) across the country are women.

- 53% of the posts of Information Commissioners at the Central and State level have been cornered by retired civil servants. In Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal the State Information Commissions are filled with only retired IAS officers. J&K State Information Commission is the only multi-member body without any retired IAS officer on it.

- Less than 10% of the Information Commissioners are from the field of journalism and mass media.

▪ Three Information Commissioners served as members of political parties prior to their appointment (in Kerala, Nagaland and Punjab). Whether they resigned from the political parties prior to entering the office of Information Commissioner is difficult to ascertain as such information was not available on inquiry. Nor are the letters of resignation from the primary membership of the respective parties posted on the Commissions' websites.

▪ 50% of the membership of the Haryana State Information Commission is made up of a husband and wife team.

#### **IV Availability of Dedicated Websites**

▪ The State Information Commission of Mizoram is the only body without a dedicated website. It has a handful of pages on the Mizoram Government Portal.

▪ The State Information Commissions in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra have dedicated websites exclusively in the local language, Hindi and Marathi respectively. Several websites are bilingual to some extent. However the website of the Central Information Commission is available in English only.

#### **V Availability of Annual Reports of Information Commissions on Websites**

▪ Only the Central Information Commission and two State Information Commissions in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar have uploaded separate annual reports for all years: 2006-2011 on their websites.

▪ Eight State Information Commissions, namely, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh have not uploaded any of their annual reports on their websites.

#### **VI Availability of the Decisions of Information Commissions on Websites**

▪ Only 45% of the Information Commissions (13 of 29) have uploaded some or all decisions on appeals and complaints for all seven years of their existence. The Central Information Commission and the State Information Commissions of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir belong to this list.

▪ Two State Information Commissions in Assam and Mizoram have not uploaded any decision on their websites. The link for "Decisions" on the Assam State Information Commission's website opens up to a page which promises that decisions will be uploaded shortly.

▪ Unlike the decisions database on most websites of State Information Commissions, which are accessible to any person, the websites of Karnataka and Uttarakhand State Information Commissions are accessible only to parties to a case. Keying in the name of the appellant or the respondent or the case number is a gateway requirement to access the text of the decision. Neither website displays a list of cases decided by the respective Commissions.

▪ The website of the Central Information Commission (<http://cic.gov.in>) alone is search enabled through Google™. Any person may type in a keyword under this link and access a list of all documents available on that website containing that keyword.

#### **VII Availability of Cause Lists of Information Commissions on Websites**

▪ 59% of the State Information Commissions do not display cause lists on their websites. Only 41% of the Information Commissions (12 of 29) have displayed cause lists. Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh State Information Commissions display the cause list in the official language of the State.

▪ Cause lists can be accessed on the websites of the Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka State Information Commissions only by keying in the name of the appellant/respondent or by selecting a period of time.

#### **Recommendations**

1) Governments in collaboration with advocates of transparency must make an assessment of the pendency of cases in Information Commissions and determine the size of the body required to dispose them. If there is a need to expand more Commissioners should be appointed, if not a smaller body should be preferred.

2) Governments and advocates of transparency must work together to develop objective criteria for determining suitability of candidates for vacant posts in Information Commissions. Such a process must be based on the very principles underlying the RTI Act, namely, transparency, public participation and accountability. Cogent reasons must be given for the selection or the rejection of candidates. Efforts must be made to reflect the pluralistic character of society in the membership of Information Commissions with particular emphasis on the gender dimension.

3) All Information Commissions must ensure that their websites have some basic content (other than

decisions) in the official language adopted in their jurisdiction in order to enable easy access to the large majority of citizens who may not use English for communication. Eventually the entire website may be made bilingual.

4) All Information Commissions must fulfil their statutory obligations and compile and publish their annual reports in a comprehensive and timely manner.

5) Both Parliament and the State Legislatures must find the time to debate the contents of the annual report either in plenary or in an appropriate committee and scrutinise the actions of the Government, public authorities and the respective Information Commissions in implementing the RTI Acts.

6) All Information Commissions must upload all decisions and orders on their websites. Decisions in matters decided by past State Information Commissioners may be archived. As Information Commissions are quasi-judicial bodies their decisions become precedents for their own use and must be easily accessible to future Commissioners for reference. They would be of use to appellants and public authorities also who may want to quote precedents in support of their arguments.

7) All databases of decisions and orders issued in English must be linked to a robust search engine.

This would be of great assistance to appellants, respondents and researchers.

8) Where decisions are issued in languages other than English, it is useful to provide a summary of the decision in English containing details such as: information sought, grounds for second appeal/complaint and the decision/order passed by the Information Commission. The database would then become a resource not only for other Information Commissions but also for researchers who would like to study the trends and performance of the Information Commissions.

9) All Information Commissions must upload cause lists on their websites in the interests of improving transparency.

Publishing cause lists on websites in the official language of the State will make the facility more people-friendly<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> While a smaller study covering six States was commissioned by the Government of India and conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers, a larger study covering 12 States and the Central Government was launched by a civil society network-TI Assessment and Analysis Group (RAAG). For details see the Introduction section of this study at page 8.

<sup>2</sup> The PRIA Study covered seven States

<sup>3</sup> See two case studies of how "eminence" was determined while appointing candidates to Information Commissions at pages 13-16 of this study. Please visit the 'Tables' section (pp. 24-37) for parameter-wise data.

<sup>4</sup> The Main Report contains more detailed recommendations under each section.

## CIC, better not become Toothless

Shailesh Gandhi

**A**s Central Information Commissioners presiding over appeals on the Right to Information Act, my colleagues and I have the same conditions of service and salaries as Supreme Court judges. And yet, on several occasions, public authorities do not obey the orders we pass. When they are faced with action for non-compliance, they rush to the High Court and obtain a stay on our order. My question is simple. Long after the deadline for complying with our order has passed, should a person or organisation that has flouted our order get a stay from any court? Shouldn't there be some penalty for violating the orders we pass? If not, what value are our orders? Those who violate our orders get legal protection. If the orders of the Central Information Commission can be flouted so blatantly, should not the service conditions and salaries of the Central Information Commissioners be equal to that of a session's judge?

This is not simply a problem unique to the Central Information Commission. This is the case with orders

given by many other statutory authorities as well. For a long while, I have been thinking about this convoluted practice by which an order passed by an authority is first violated and then stayed in the High Court. If anyone,-a citizen, institution or government department,-does not obey a legally valid order, it should invite some punishment. Should those who violate legal orders be allowed to go scot-free? When the Court grants a stay on our original order after the order has been violated, it amounts to providing the fig leaf of legal sanctity to an illegal action. When granting such stays, the High Court usually does not give any reasons for doing so.

This means that there is no evidence of any justification for protecting those who defy the law and act in a lawless manner. The lawyers who help obtain a stay in the High Courts are known to charge a whopping Rs 1-5 lakh for a single appearance. I strongly feel that any action by an instrument of the State which diminishes respect for the rule of law must be stopped. What is the legal basis is as laid

down by the Supreme Court for these postulates? I trawled through several Supreme Court orders and found that the country's apex court appears to be similar to my contention. Take for instance a Supreme Court order passed in August 2004 which says, "*If any party concerned is aggrieved by the order which in its opinion is wrong or against rules or its implementation is neither practicable nor feasible, it should always either approach the Court that passed the order or invoke jurisdiction of the Appellate Court. Rightness or wrongness of the order cannot be urged in contempt proceedings. Right or wrong the order has to be obeyed. Flouting an order of the Court would render the party liable for contempt. While dealing with an application for contempt the Court cannot traverse beyond the order, noncompliance of which is alleged. In other words, it cannot say what should not have been done or what should have been done. It cannot traverse beyond the order. It cannot test correctness or otherwise of the order or give additional direction or delete any direction. That would be exercising review jurisdiction while dealing with an application for initiation of contempt proceedings. The same would be impermissible and indefensible.*"

I think it is logical to deduce from this, that if flouting an order invites contempt proceedings, a

stay on the order, obtained after flouting it, has no legal basis. Such a stay is not in the interest of nurturing respect for the law. Another Supreme Court order passed in 2002 states almost the same thing. Eight years ago, Justice SN Variava, in the Supreme Court made it clear that unless there is a stay obtained from a higher forum, the mere act of filing an appeal or revision will not entitle a person who is required to pay the penalty to not comply with the order of the lower forum.

I think it's self evident that no organ of the State can allow or encourage the defiance of orders of a statutory authority. If this is allowed to happen, it will be impossible for the state to function. If it makes no difference whether an order passed by bodies like the CIC is followed or flouted, what purpose does it serve to pass orders in the first place? Should the Nation even have such bodies?

I hope that, in a democracy like India, there can be a public discussion on this matter and the judiciary would consider not granting stays on orders when anyone approaches it *after* defying a legally valid order. If there are strong reasons for granting such a stay, they must be provided in the order. Our present practice in the Courts favours those who can spend money on hiring lawyers. Perhaps we could change it to favour the rule of law. Only respect for Courts will not make a better law-abiding Nation; respect for the law will.

## Towards Transparency

G Srinivasan

*The Public Procurement Bill, 2012, will help bring accountability in government purchase*

**I**n response to the criticism that the UPA-II is plagued by policy paralysis and suffering from reform-fatigue, the original economic and trade policy reform architect Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister for the second term is now reconciled to proceed on incremental reforms. This is understandable given the uppity state of coalition governance with even allies such as TMC protesting every reform to unshackle the binding constraints that the economy is saddled with. Thus, the government chose to stir from its self-imposed torpor to inform the investors, both domestic and global, that the Indian economy is a safe haven to play ball to get the value for their money.

One such reform-oriented move was the Public Procurement Bill, 2012 tabled in Parliament on Monday. To put it in plain language, public procurement is nothing but government procurement of how the public authorities—the Central and State

governments, ministries/departments, public sector undertakings or state-owned enterprises—spend public money buying goods and services. The world over the reigning canon is that having open and transparent rules on procurement is the surest way to ensure and score value for money for government expenditures as they optimise competition.

Procurement is the purchase of goods and services at the best possible total cost of ownership, in the right quantity and quality, at the right time, in the right place from the right source for the direct benefit or use of corporations, individuals or governments or its outfits generally via a contract. Such a pellucid policy recognises the sanctity of contract and any wanton violation of contracts by either party is construed as a blatant bid in corruption and nepotism to secure pecuniary gains. Procurement covers the acquisition of goods, real property, capital equipment, built assets and services and quality and timeliness.

The appropriateness of the procured inputs by and large bear testimony to the triumph of public money well-spent and not frittered away. That the public works departments mostly splurge money on ill-built houses or roads is no secret as experience down the decades of development conclusively demonstrates.

But with the opening up of the economy in the 1990s and the advent of public-private partnerships (PPP) in many projects of the governments brought in a metamorphosis in the outlook with stakeholders pitching for quality of goods and services delivered to them that were built based on tax-payers' hard-earned money. With Railways, defence, telecom and health budgets setting apart anywhere between 35 to 50 per cent of their outlays to procurement, public procurement is purported to impact national security, health of the citizenry, safety of passengers and quality of infrastructure and services that the government extends to all of us. A back-of-the-envelope assessment reckons that India's public procurement systems account for more than Rs. 10 lakh crore of business every year which is more than 30 per cent of country's GDP.

Aware of the avalanche of accusations in shoddy services rendered by public agencies and in the light of anti-corruption crusade occupying centre-stage in public discourse, the government had to swing into action to stem the tide. Besides, there are

imperceptible pressures from trading partners such as the EU that India's public procurement be opened up for overseas participation to bring in competition and quality. Hence the Union Cabinet cleared the public procurement bill last month with the remit of "ensuring transparency, accountability and probity in the procurement process". This was promptly ensued by the introduction of the Bill in Parliament on May 14 which proposes even prison tenure of up to five years for bureaucrats caught taking bribes or otherwise vitiating the public procurement process by 'bid rigging' or enabling 'collusive bidding' or 'bid suppression' to aggrandise themselves at the cost of the public. The provisions of the Bill are for procurement of goods and services exceeding Rs. 50 lakhs by central ministries or PSUs or state entities. In the absence of any overarching legislation governing public procurement despite agencies such as the Central Vigilance Commission or Comptroller & Auditor General of India doing their bit with the General Financial Rules 2005 governing procurements by the Centre, the codification of the basic norms and standards governing public procurement is long over-due. This will definitely help bring accountability and probity in government purchase of goods and services and leash bureaucrats from sponging on the system and going scot free. [geeyes@thehindu.co.in](mailto:geeyes@thehindu.co.in)

*Courtesy: The Hindu (17 May 2012)*

## **Leaky Govt goes in a Daze as Secrets become Public**

**Soma Banerjee**

*RTI, weak governance helping info escape from govt hands*

**W**hat's common between foggy movements of two army battalions, the government auditor's assessments of large notional losses to the exchequer and a letter from the army chief to the PM on his unit's preparedness for war? The information in each of these instances in the past six months was marked 'secret' in official files, but screamed its way to the public, forcing the government into damage-control mode.

Information leaks in governments are nothing new, but they are stinging more now. "They are more frequent and the issues more critical," says independent journalist Nalini Singh. "In most cases, an institution of importance has been the target." The other difference is how the leaks are happening. Politicians and corporate, with their agendas, are

prolific generators and feeders of information to a scoop-hungry media, as was revealed in sordid detail in the leaked phone taps of corporate lobbyist Niira Radia in late-2010. The flow of such information is now being shaped by circumstances (infighting in government) and a potent information-gathering weapon (the Right to Information Act).

"The RTI Act and the current Parliament has led to more public debates," says NK Singh, former finance secretary and a member of the Rajya Sabha. Overall, it reflects in the lack of effective governance, dynamics of unsettled equations within the government and a weak leadership.

### **The CAG Files**

CAG draft reports have leaked consistently ever since it started making damning assessments of



government entities: for example, its comments on 2G telecom licences, CWG contracts, and RILs oil and gas field in KG Basin. V Narayanswami, minister of state in the PMO, says in most cases reports were leaked before the ministry concerned officially reacted to CAGs claims.

### **Ministries Asked to Track down Leaks**

In many cases, there is a substantial difference between the final and draft report, which is lost in the public debate,” he says. Narayanswami adds the government is concerned about the leaks of draft CAG reports and letters to the PM. “We are watching the situation. It is to do with the attitude of people who handle vital information.”

A senior government official says, on condition of anonymity, that the PMO has informally asked ministries to track down leakages at the department level; further, the Lok Sabha speaker and vice-chairman of Rajya Sabha have asked CAG head Vinod Rai the auditor is accountable to Parliament to pin accountability and evolve a system to stop the leakage of draft reports. “The government will step in once the House directs it to look into the matter,” he added.

### **Internal Affairs**

A New Delhi-based media tracker and lobbyist for a large business group says, on condition of anonymity, leaks are acquiring a life of their own because the government is at “war with itself.”

“You don’t need a Dhirubhai (Ambani) versus Nusli Wadia, or the two warring Ambani siblings, to raise a public debate on a secret government document,” he says. “The warring ministers have now replaced them.” One recent instance in which ministerial differences simmered and spilled on to the media, via managed leaks, was the standoff between the home ministry, headed by P Chidambaram, and the finance ministry, headed by Pranab Mukherjee, on the status and mandate of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI).

The UIDAI’s primary mandate is to give unique identity cards to all Indians. So, it receives its funding from the finance ministry, but its mandate overlaps with that of the National Population Register (NPR), which is housed in the home ministry. The second half of 2011 saw scores of stories on the UIDAI’s functioning and authority, based on letters and file nothings leaked from the two ministries.

### **RTI Revelations**

More formally, the RTI Act - which can be invoked by any Indian citizen to ask the government for certain information on its functioning - has become a weapon to ferret out information not in the public domain. For instance, the BJP, the main opposition party, has an RTI cell that operates at both the central and state levels. Headed by Supreme Court lawyer Vijay Garg, its stated objective, in his words, is to “weed out corruption” in high offices. He says officials of the cell not only source information through the RTI route, but also process it to pinpoint stories for the media.

“We were able to bring out the letters written by Pranab Mukherjee to the PM on the 2G spectrum scam after going through 1,000 pages of information,” says Garg, national convenor of BJP’s RTI cell. In 2011, through an RTI, Garg asked PMO for all communication on 2G licence allocation.

From this, he zeroed in on a finance ministry letter that was “seen” by Mukherjee and which essentially implied that P Chidambaram, the finance minister at the time of licence issuance, could have stopped the spectrum allocation on a first-cum-first serve basis but did not. This revelation played an important part in the Supreme Court subsequently over-ruling government policy and scrapping the 122 licences handed out in 2008.

Another prolific RTI activist Subhash C Aggarwal claims he was the first to secure this information – “20 days before the media made a headline of it” - but it was tucked away inside 500 pages of information. He says he never processes information and shares everything with recipients, be it journalists or civil-society activists. Aggarwal, a textile trader, says he has no political affiliations in these matters. “My idea is to expose anything that is in public interest, he says. “I have been approached by political parties, but I believe in remaining independent.” Aggarwal says he has filed about 4,000 applications since the Act was notified in 2005, and that he generates information ideas from conversations with “government insiders who meet him informally”, journalists and ex-government officials.

He has also sourced, among other things, information on land allotments to political parties, the poor attendance records of some cabinet ministers, and audio recordings of meetings of the joint drafting committee on the Lokpal Bill that showed the government subdued civil-society voices.

A senior official in the PMO says many of these activists know what they want and where to find it. As an example, he says, they quote numbers of specific letters and raise questions on them. "The arbitrary way in which information is sought by a single person, with detailed references, only reinforces the suspicion that it is being aided by people within the system," he says, not wanting to be named. "You could see it as an overdose of transparency," says former cabinet secretary TSR Subramaniam.

### **Corporate Chicanery**

While this might be the season of political intrigue, its corporates who are normally the source of powder kegs of information. Last week, for instance, a Delhi court allowed the prosecution of Reliance Industries and three of its officials under the Official Secrets Act. This matter dates back to October 1998, when CBI team recovered photocopies of four government documents in the office of RILs then group president V Balasubramanian; the documents were marked 'secret' and were allegedly of interest to RIL.

Most large business groups with interests in allocation of natural resources - for example, oil blocks, coal and limestone mines, telecom spectrum - have full-time employees who act as lobbyists, and public-relations firms, managing the ministry and the media. Lobbyists, typically, spend a few hours every day in the ministry relevant to them. They cultivate

relationships, shadow the movement of their files, keep a pulse on the policy drift, track the appointments of the minister and senior bureaucrats, and try to see file notings. On a parallel track, public-relations firms act as an intermediary between these companies and the media.

Both lobbyists and PR firms tend to have access to ministry documents. When the Ambani brothers wrangled over the supply of gas from the K-G Basin, necessitated by a split of their business interests, an abundance of ministry communication flowed to journalists.

"Technology has changed the modus operandi of such leaks," says former home secretary GK Pillai. Earlier, documents leaks were primarily photocopies. "All you need now is a smart phone," adds Subramanian. "Documents are scanned and mailed to the targeted recipient in seconds without leaving a trace."

Subsequently, company lobbyists engage in selective leaks. Typically, the greater the import of an issue for them, the more they invest in it. In one case, the winner of a 4,000 mw ultra-mega power project was disqualified after it emerged that the financial worthiness of the winning bidder was not in line with the project conditions. Though the eventual decision was taken by the government, documents casting doubt on the financial fitness of the winner found their way to the media in copious quantities and may have played a part in the government's decision to call for a rebid.

*Courtesy: The Economic Times (9 April 2012)*

## **RTI activists say politicians using RTI queries to spy on them**

**P**oliticians are not known to be fans of the Right to Information Act, but now they seem to have discovered that they can use the same law to obtain details on RTI activists' work, allegedly in order to know which activist they need to harass to prevent the next big expose.

RTI activists claim that political leaders are making their proxies use the sunshine law to know what information the activists have sought from government offices.

In one such case, a person by the name of Manohar Kamble sought to know details of all the information sought by RTI activist Vijay Kumbhar so far. Kumbhar and other activists in the city claim

this might be a tactic to put pressure on activists attempting to expose any illegal activities of politicians.

A few days ago, Kamble, a resident of Dhanakawadi, filed an RTI query under Section 11 of the RTI Act - the section deals with filing of an RTI application to get information on a third party - and sent the application to all PMC departments seeking to know what information Kumbhar had sought in the past seven days. Kumbhar got to know this had happened because according to Section 11 of the RTI Act it is also mandatory for the RTI officer to take the permission of the third party before providing such information to the person who has sought it.

“On April 9, I received a letter from the RTI officer asking my permission to provide the information about my RTI activities to Kamble. As all the information I have sought through RTI is in the public interest, I do not see any problem in providing the information sought by Kamble,” Kumbhar said. He added that such practices seemed to be nothing but tactics by politicians to put pressure on the whistleblower or make him stay away from filing RTIs. “The person who is seek information about my RTI activities doesn’t have any idea that since last week I haven’t asked for any information from the PMC through RTI, which shows that the person is just a proxy of some political leader,” Kumbhar said. He added that as there were many cases of wrongdoing that had surfaced with the help of the RTI Act, it seemed logical to assume that some people who were not too happy with all this were now doing things to deter activists.

Another RTI activist, Jugal Rathi, said he had also experienced a similar thing about a year ago when an unknown person filed an RTI application seeking information on how much money he, Kumbhar and one more RTI activist, Vivek Velankar, had spent on RTI activities. “The sole reason behind such activities is that the political leadership gets disturbed when we file an RTI query to seek information about their illegal activities,” he said.

Velankar said he was not afraid of such RTI applications as genuine activists anyway have no intention of hiding the information they dig out.

“There are certain elements in society who wants to trap us by filing RTI application on our activities, but whatever information we acquire we immediately publish on various websites and make it available for public purposes,” Velankar said. “Therefore, we do not have any issues with people who want to file RTI on our activities.”

Head of the PMC establishment department Kundalik Karkar, who is also the RTI officer for the department, said application like the one filed by Kamble were not new. “Every month we received around 10 such applications where people are interested in filing RTI on the information that had earlier sought by RTI activists,” Karkar said.

The RTI Officer added that in such cases they had to take the permission of the third party whose RTI activities the information-seeker is interested

in. “If the third party is not ready to provide the information, then it’s mandatory for us to not provide the information. The person seeking the information can then appeal to the State Information Officer (SIO) for acquiring the information about activities of RTI activists, but the SIO also takes permission of the third party before providing the information,” Karkar said.

### **Whistleblower Protection Bill in RS**

In August 2010, the Public Interest Disclosure and Protection of Persons Making the Disclosures Bill, 2010, was introduced in Parliament. The bill was renamed the Whistleblowers’ Protection Bill, 2011, by the Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice. The Whistleblowers’ Protection Bill, 2011, was passed by the Lok Sabha December 28, 2011. The bill is currently pending in the Rajya Sabha for discussion and further passage. The bill was introduced in the Rajya Sabha on March 29, 2012, by Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs V Narayanasamy.

### **Attacks on RTI activists in state**

There have been several attacks on RTI activists in the state over the past few years. Quite a few RTI activists have been murdered. In 2010 alone, six activists were killed and several assaulted, according to the Mumbai-based NGO Movement against Intimidation, Threats and Revenge against Activists (MITRA). Here is a list of the major incidents. January 2010: RTI activist Satish Shetty, who exposed a series of land scams, was hacked to death while on a morning walk near his residence in Talegaon Dabhade

April 2010: Vitthal Gite, an RTI activist who exposed irregularities in a village school in Beed, was killed in a clash between two groups

August 28, 2010: RTI Activist Ramdas Ghadegaokar was stoned to death at Nanded

January 2, 2011: RTI activist Arun Mane, who was pursuing land scams around the city, was attacked near Talegaon-Dabhade. He was hit with a blunt weapon

April 18, 2011: RTI activist Popat Barge was attacked in Phaltan village of Satara district with a sword by an unidentified person.

*Courtesy: Mahiti Adhikar Gujarat Pahel (19 April 2012)*

# Six Threatening Trends in our Poll Process

Dr N Bhaskara Rao

**W**ith by polls for 18 assembly and one Lok Sabha seat in AP a fortnight away, the Election Commission has already trapped cash worth nearly Rs 35 crore before it was to be used in the constituencies. This is more than what was caught in the 2009 polls in the state. The election fever gripped there is such that we need to be concerned of the threatening trends in our electoral practice.

## (1) Cash for Vote

Despite Election Commission's (EC) initiatives to curb money power, the menace is on the rise. In the year 2011, EC declared that 85% of illegal money seized during the assembly elections held in the five states of Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Puducherry was from Tamil Nadu. In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the total amount of black money seized across the country was over `100 crore with the majority of the cases being reported from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

In 2011, speed post and courier services as well as "corporate channels", "NGOs" and even students were availed for direct delivery of cash to voters. Money was even transferred into bank accounts and plastic tokens with colors for different denomination were used to en-cash the same at designated shops.

In 2008 and 2009 polls, in the first ever national study of its kind, CMS brought out what percentage of voters were offered money for vote-33.6 percent in Tamil Nadu, 13.4 percent in Kerala and 4.4 percent in West Bengal received cash in the previous elections. CMS survey earlier indicated that cash was being distributed not on the basis of any demand from voters, but it is done by candidates because of local compulsions and lack of direct relations of candidates with voters.

EC has already announced that it will crackdown heavily on use of black money during the upcoming assembly polls and stated that it has put in place stronger measures to monitor illegal cash movement. But there is a limit to what the Election Commission could do in this regard. Ultimately, it has to be the people, parties, media and civil society leaders who have to be proactive to safeguard the electoral process. The plague 'cash for vote' has a direct

bearing on governance and on level playing aspect of our polls.

## (2) Freebies as never before

Is it not bribing voters? Last year, in Tamil Nadu assembly elections, grinders, blenders, laptops, fans, etc were offered by the two main parties, DMK and the AIDMK. As parties do not provide good governance to the people when they are in power, their focus has shifted to luring the voters with "tempting offers" of consumables and household durables. In reality, Freebies are nothing but pampering the voracity of voters at the cost of their basic needs. Voters obviously do not realize indirect implications of such lures and the Election Commission on its part cannot intervene as these are viewed as part of poll manifestos of the parties.

## (3) Incumbency advantage

In a recent book on "A handbook of Poll Surveys in Media" (2009), I have written with specific examples on how and to what extent the party in power goes all out to reap benefits of its hold on the administration. The 2009 Assembly polls in Andhra Pradesh stand out as an example for this inclination. In Tamil Nadu (TN), despite Election Commission's new initiatives and all out vigilance, the incumbent tried to find ways of appealing with special inducements. In fact TN's outgoing CM M Karunanidhi's tenure was marred by widespread misuse of government machinery. The by-elections in Kadapa Lok Sabha and Pulivendula Assembly can be considered the most blatant instances of such abuse of authority. Fourteen Cabinet Ministers of the State legislature and four Union Ministers were assigned the responsibility to woo voters in specific clusters by locating themselves in the district. The Chief Minister visited the constituency as if the State Government's Headquarters had shifted to the district before the elections. One can imagine the extent of this tendency from the fact that in Tamil Nadu there were impromptu blackouts to facilitate cash distribution over night! The EC should take some tough measures to limit the extent of the incumbent party's clout on the eve of the elections for wooing voters.

#### **(4) Paid News**

Although the Election Commission barred Umlesh Yadav, the wife of gangster turned politician D P Yadav from contesting elections for three years after it was proved that she did not disclose the money spent on “advertisements masquerading as news” in two newspapers, this malpractice of fooling voters has not died down.

For instance, at the very outset of the campaign for the by-election in Kadapa (in 2011) more than a couple of complaints were lodged against a Telugu news channel and a daily owned by the candidate for its extensive coverage (mostly one sided and completely in support of the candidate / owner).

A post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) on the money spent by candidates to woo voters in Kadapa Lok Sabha by-election estimated that the average payment was well up to 500 for each vote, the highest so far anywhere in the country in Parliament polls. Three of the candidates in the fray reached out to nearly 5 lakh voters with money bags and half of them accepted the money from more than one candidate. A significant feature of the study two days after the counting of votes brought out that the three candidates between themselves paid 200 crore to voters and opinion makers.

However, with the EC’s formation of Media Monitoring and Media Certification Committees to monitor media conduct, in all the districts going to polls, it is being envisaged that the phenomenon of paid news would take a beating. These committees would measure the amount of coverage of electoral subjects, identify the presence or absence of news bias, assess the appropriateness of media access for political competitors, evaluate the adequacy of information conveyed to voters through news, direct political messages, public information programming and voter education announcements, identify the shortcomings in media’s conduct & document the abuse of the mass media’s power to affect voter choices including paid news. Yet, CMS Media Lab’s monitoring of poll coverage in the news bulletins indicates that it is not possible to altogether curb poll propaganda. Especially in the case of news channels, it is not always a case of deliberate favor to a party or a candidate. However, based on the ground realities of journalism, such coverage is not possible to avoid in totality. Perhaps, this can be done by avoiding special programmes (interviews, etc)

and repetition in news bulletins with balance in the time devoted to all the candidates.

#### **(5) Poll Surveys**

The Election Commission has announced that exit polls will not be allowed from the day when election campaigning (first phase) to the end of polling (final phase). Despite poll surveys losing their credibility, more than six surveys were conducted, mostly commissioned by one or other news media during 2011 assembly elections. Aaj Tak / India Today, Asianet, Deccan Chronicle, New Indian Express - among others, conducted poll surveys and prominently telecasted the surveys projecting advantage to one or other political party.

Despite Election Commission’s efforts to minimize the scope of poll surveys influencing voters, it has hardly made any difference. Further, the news media (newspapers, columnists and news channels) often refer to the findings of pre-poll surveys as part of their analysis or expert views even during the 48 hours before polling day.

#### **(6) War of Words**

The tenor of campaign speeches of leaders in election campaigns call for a critical look, particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Firstly, poll speeches were more personal accusations of each other rather than on issues or propositions. Second, the language used reflects the kind of impatience and intolerance that leaders have to each other. Belittling each other using “inflammatory” language has become common. This has become an easy way to provoke and get public attention, particularly increased media space. Congress General Secretary accused the BJP of being a corrupt party and also claimed that UP CM Mayawati was fooling the people of the state.

During the assembly elections in 2011, an important leader called opponents as “dogs”, the other one called the candidate as a “murderer”, and some others said the party a “gang of thieves”. Thirdly, those who get elected using such language and personal accusations, could they be expected to behave better on the floor of the Assemblies?

The Election Commission generally issues notices to leaders on the matter of such personalized attacks but it results in almost negligible impact as the personal attacks continue in subsequent elections.

However, it may be more effective for Civil Society leaders to come up with an appeal and with an action plan for the same. Even more, news media has an active role in this regard and, in fact, can do much more than the Election Commission -they could discourage such a trend by not covering such sentences and statements or bytes.

Without addressing these six trends in our electoral process, can we curb corruption in the country? Some years ago, I called “cash for vote” phenomenon as “the mother of all forms of

corruption” (because it is the beginning of the vicious cycle of corruption).

Without vigilance of news media and civil society groups, these leanings are difficult to curb. Therefore, this responsibility is not just of the Election Commission but of every citizen. Political parties in turn need to be more cadre based, grass roots concerned, issue based, more democratic and transparent in their functioning – without that we can not expect to rejuvenate our electoral process and consolidate the foundation of our democracy.

## **SC to consider extent of CIC Mandate**

**Abraham Thomas**

**W**ith Constitutional bodies increasingly feeling the RTI itch, the Supreme Court is all set to determine whether the Central Information Commission (CIC) has powers to demand even personal information under the garb of “larger public interest”.

First, it was Chief Justice of India SH Kapadia who took serious exception to RTI queries transgressing into his personal domain. The latest move is by the Union Public Services Commission (UPSC), another Constitutional authority, which has dragged the transparency watchdog to apex court,

challenging its powers to order disclosure of personal details like educational and professional qualifications of candidates who applied for a top post in the Government. The court stayed the operation of the order and sought response from CIC in this regard by August.

Information claimed under the Right to Information Act, 2005, is circumscribed with restrictions. Under the Act, UPSC claimed that what was sought for was “personal information”, which is held by it in fiduciary capacity and thus enjoyed protection from disclosure under Section 8(1)(e).

*Courtesy: The Pioneer (28 May 2012)*

## **DoPT plans RTI call centre, Web Portal**

**T**he Department of Personnel and Training which provides administrative support to implement the Right to Information Act on Monday announced a proposal to start a call centre and a website to make filing an Right To Information application easier for the common man.

“The initiative aims to make the RTI filing process citizen-friendly, and improve access for the illiterate and people in rural areas,” the DoPT proposal stated.

In 2009, DoPT sponsored a study on understanding ‘key issues and constraints’ in implementing the RTI Act. The report highlighted inconvenience faced by people in filing RTI and ineffective record management practices, which led to delay in processing RTI requests. The report also stated that awareness was low among the people about their rights under the RTI Act. The DoPT on Monday issued advertisements inviting proposals from information technology firms to set up a call centre and a website to handle RTI applications and appeals. The proposals must be submitted by July 10.

DoPT will rope in a professional implementation agency to “design, develop, set up, operate and maintain the integrated delivery system”.

According to the proposal, the call centre will feature voice calls, SMS and Inter Voice Response Systems to manage calls. The call centre will also have to maintain an RTI website and data server.

The agreement will be for five-and-a-half-year initially. Six months will be kept aside for design, development and implementation of the project, while actual operations will be for five years. The DoPT may extend the term of the agreement for two years.

The call centre operation will be based on ‘cost per connect minute’ basis, and will interact with people in Hindi and English. DoPT may provide support in regional languages in future. The call centre will work on all days between 8 am and 8 pm. The RTI Act came into force on October 12, 2005.

*Courtesy: Deccan Herald (14 May 2012)*

# Bring Voluntary Organizations under info law: Plan Panel

Mahendra Kumar Singh

The Planning Commission has suggested that the voluntary sector be brought under the umbrella of the RTI Act, along with developing a code of conduct to ensure “greater transparency and accountability”. At present, only those voluntary organizations which receive public funds come under the ambit of the RTI Act.

The plan panel’s steering committee also suggested committee also suggested bringing voluntary organizations with a corpus beyond a stipulated amount under the purview of state Lokayuktas.

The panel also supported the move for promotion of an apex body, empowered to govern the entire voluntary sector, by laying down certain norms and standards for self-regulation which could be termed as ministry of voluntary affairs along the lines of ministry of corporate affairs.

The argument for regulation of the sector stems from the fact that voluntary organizations use public funds, are exempted from tax, work in the public

domain and, their actions have a direct impact on people and society.

“The code of conduct should deal with issues of responsible governance practices, adhering to existing laws and also address issues like harassment of human rights activists and whistle-blowers and those who express their dissent against the state,” the committee said.

It was argued that a system needed to be developed to examine adherence to the code by voluntary organizations and a mechanism for dealing with complaints and grievances of various stakeholders could be framed within the terms of a code of conduct. The committee also emphasized the need to encourage a ‘self-regulatory mechanism’ within individual organizations.

It said that every voluntary organization shall put its audited statement and annual report in the public domain, follow the policy of proactive disclosure of information under RTI Act and follow all mandatory rules such as registration, taxation, FCRA etc.

*Courtesy: The Times of India (7 May 2012)*

## Groovy Grannies

Bharat Dogra

*Meet grandmothers from Rajasthan who have done their villages proud*

She may have some problems in seeing and hearing properly, but 84-year-old, Galku Maa of Paner village (Ajmer district) is still willing to stand up for a good cause. It has become almost a habit, as for the last 30 years she has been involved repeatedly in one public cause after another.

The age of 54 may be late for others to join social movements but not for Galku Maa. Surrounded by her grandchildren and great grandchildren, Galku Maa recalls the days when she first got involved with a woman’s group in her village after they invited her to look after a creche. This is why many grown up men remember her as a mother-like figure as she provided them loving care when they were small children. Soon Galku got increasingly involved in women group’s protest actions. She camped at Jaipur’s historic dharna for right to information (RTI) for 53 days at a stretch where she was a much-in-demand speaker. She forced the pace of a movement for claiming long delayed wages to such an extent

that officials had to arrange payment at night. Her growing popularity led to her election as a ward member.

Rukma Maa (65) of Pingun village has also been active in struggles for three decades. She bravely faced strong repression when the police tried to break her protest fast for payment of minimum wages. When a landlord obstructed rainwater flowing to a common village pond to irrigate his own field, Rukma helped to mobilise over 2000 women from surrounding areas so that the flow of water to the village pond could be restored. Mangi Maa (60), a Dalit from Singla Ka Dhaani, is a woman of multiple talents - she works as a midwife, looked after a creche, constructed smokeless hearths, made decorative craft items, and after training worked as a mate to supervise drought-relief work, checking many irregularities. She mobilised women to check exploitative money lending and to correct the BPL (below poverty line) list. She participated

in social audits, RTI campaign and protest actions. Methi Maa (65) overcame great adversities in her personal life to become such a skilled midwife that people came even from other villages to seek her help. She was elected as a ward member from a general seat. She mobilised women to evict a liquor vend which was becoming a nuisance for the village.

When a woman from a poor family was declared a witch, Methi bravely came to her help and did not rest till this stigma around the victim was removed.

Methi went to Delhi and many parts of Rajasthan to participate in RTI dharnas and rallies. What is common to all these women is that they have been associated with the women's groups formed by the Barefoot College in Ajmer district of Rajasthan. The villages are rightly proud of these grandmas who have contributed so much to the welfare of the villages. They overcame many difficulties of their own life to contribute to the creation of a better world.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (3 April 2012)*

## **CIC to dig deeper into RTI activist's death**

**Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar**

**T**he mysterious death of RTI activist Ravinder Balwani has now brought into focus a key resolution moved by the Central Information Commission in which it was resolved by the Commission that "if it receives a complaint regarding assault or murder of an information seeker, it will examine the pending RTI applications of the victim and order the concerned Department(s) to publish the requested information *suo motu* on their website as per the provisions of law".

Incidentally, the Commission had taken up the matter in the wake of a series of attacks on RTI activists across the country.

The meeting in September 2011 was attended by Chief Information Commissioner Satyananda Mishra, Information Commissioners Annapurna Dixit, M. L. Sharma and Shailesh Gandhi, Secretary B. B. Srivastava, and other officers.

The first agenda of this meeting itself was the circulation of a draft resolution by Mr. Gandhi to take up the issue of "surge in attack on the RTI activists".

The draft resolution had stated that "the Central Information Commission expresses regret and takes note of the reported killings of and assault on the RTI users across the country. The Commission

underlines the need to take urgent steps by the respective Governments for the safety and protection of the RTI users".

In the resolution, the Commission had stated that it "strongly believes that it is the duty and responsibility of the respective Governments to safeguard the life and liberty of the RTI users for which purpose they should invoke the relevant penal provisions for the prevention and detection of such heinous crimes".

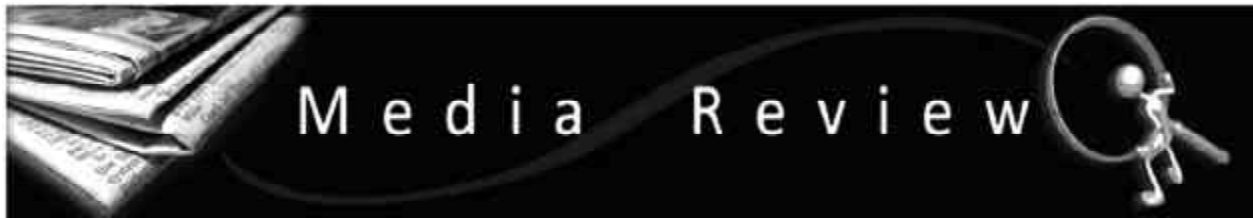
Further, the Commission had, therefore, resolved if it would receive a complaint regarding assault or murder of an information seeker, it will examine the pending RTI applications of the victim and order the department(s) concerned to publish the requested information *suo motu* on their website as per the provisions of law.

The Commission had also resolved that it will take proactive steps in ascertaining the status of investigations/prosecutions of the cases involving information seekers and endeavour to have these processes expedited.

Talking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Gandhi said the Commission would be approaching the family of Mr. Balwani to know the exact nature of the complaints and would take the matter forward from there.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (10 May 2012)*





## Missing from the Indian Newsroom

Robin Jeffrey

*The media's failure to recruit Dalits is a betrayal of the constitutional guarantees of equality and fraternity*

There were almost none in 1992, and there are almost none today: Dalits in the newsrooms of India's media organisations. Stories from the lives of close to 25 per cent of Indians (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) are unlikely to be known — much less broadcast or written about.

Unless, of course, the stories are about squalor and violence. An analyst once summed up the treatment of African-American and Hispanic issues in the American media: such people “rarely travel, eat or get married,” if all you knew about them was what you learned from the media.

Is it a calamity that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are almost completely absent from newspapers and television? Of course it is. It's a calamity for at least three reasons.

First, it means that the Constitution is not being lived up to. The Constitution promises “equality” and “fraternity.” There's something deficient about “equality” if a quarter of the population is missing from the Fourth Estate. And it's hard to fraternise — to practise fraternity — with people who aren't there.

Second, a fitting presence in newsrooms, and the varied coverage that it brings, mitigates the resentment of people who are ignored and discriminated against. Recognition of tribulations and achievements combats discrimination. And if meaningful changes do not happen, resentment will bubble up destructively — as it already does in areas of Maoist influence in eastern India. Constant, probing stories about the triumphs and agonies of people on the margins help to effect remedies and turn barriers into bridges.

### A section overlooked

Third, genuine media people, who believe in the old *New York Times* tag about ferreting out “all the news that's fit to print,” can never be satisfied with producing a newspaper, a magazine or a bulletin that

robotically overlooks a quarter of the population (except when there's violence and squalor of course). Grizzled city editors (city editors are always grizzled) used to pose a single question to self-satisfied reporters at the end of the day: “What REALLY happened out there today, boys and girls?” It ought to flash in lights in every newsroom.

The Dalit absence from the media has been focussed on sporadically since 1996. That's when Kenneth J. Cooper, the *Washington Post* correspondent, himself an African-American, tried to find a Dalit media person in New Delhi. Cooper wrote about his failure to do so, and B.N. Uniyal publicised Cooper's inquiries in the *Pioneer*. “Suddenly, I realised,” Uniyal wrote, “that in all the 30 years I had worked as a journalist I had never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit; no, not one.”

### Not a single SC, ST

Nothing had changed by the time I published *India's Newspaper Revolution* in 2000. Nothing had changed by 2006 when a survey on the 10th anniversary of the Cooper-Uniyal inquiry found not a single SC or ST among more than 300 media decision-makers. And nothing much had changed a year ago when the Tamil journalist, J. Balasubramaniam, wrote a personal account in the *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Kenneth Cooper, now a media consultant and editor based in Boston, began a distinguished career on the *St Louis American*, an African-American daily that was commercially successful. If there are similarities between the plight of African-Americans in the past (and present) and Dalits today, then why are there no Dalit-oriented media voices like *Ebony* or *Essence* magazines or the old *St Louis American* or *Chicago Defender*?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that Dalits lack advantages that Black America enjoyed (though “enjoy” is hardly the right word) even in the 1920s. Most important was a black middle class of shop-

owners and professionals. Such people could buy advertisements and put up capital to back a publication. Black America worked in a single language, English, and had networks of churches and their pastors who provided respected leaders, education and connections. Martin Luther King was one of many. Black America was also less divided internally: caste among African Americans was not a problem, though skin tone may have been.

If you're inclined to say, "Good journalists, regardless of caste, cover stories objectively" or "Quotas and reservations are the bane of modern India — only ability counts," consider the nationalist experience. Did the old elites who confronted British rule feel they were satisfactorily represented in *The Statesman* and the *Times of India*? They didn't. And *The Hindu*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, the *Hindustan Times*, *Young India* and many others were the result. Babasaheb Ambedkar said it well: "with the press in hand it [is] easy to manufacture great men."

What might be done to put a Dalit presence into media? Two suggestions. Neither an answer, but both worth considering.

### **Two suggestions**

To begin with, the Editors' Guild could commit itself to carrying out an annual census of newsroom diversity of the kind that the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) began in 1978. In that year, "people of colour" were 4 percent of people in U.S. newsrooms, though they were close to 30 percent of the American population. The target was to reach more than 20 percent by 2000. They missed the target. In 2011, "minorities" were about 13 percent of American newsrooms, though they constituted 36 percent of the U.S. population. (That includes African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asians). The new ASNE target date has been set to 2020.

Such targets in India would be difficult. (Targets, remember. Not "reservations" or "quotas"). Caste is so raw and sensitive. But if major organisations took a lead in conducting and publishing an annual audit of diversity, and included women and Muslims in such an audit, an embarrassment factor would kick in. Lesser organisations might feel obliged to follow or be singled out for ridicule.

A middle class is growing slowly among people at the bottom of India's pyramid (BOIP). People near the bottom, most of whom are Dalits, need a

publication that looks at the world from their perspective — bottom up, not top down. A BOIP middle-class needs a first-class publication — an *Ebony* or an *Essence*, two of the glossy magazines of Black America that report achievements as well as outrages.

### **Classy & different**

A slick, view-from-below magazine (English and Hindi) would cover stories from the margins in ways that people at the margins would recognise. And its journalism could be so compelling that others would want to read it for its classiness and its difference. In a tiny, budget-conscious way, the Dalit-focused publisher, Navayana, already tries to do this in the book trade.

Such a publication would need to be run by a trust, and some of the capital would need to come from a Dalit middle-class itself. But the corpus of the trust could be built from donations from people-of-goodwill from all backgrounds and from one-off contributions from governments. Rs. 100 crore would make a realistic target — a mere \$20 million, the cost of a couple of mid-priced battle-tanks or a small slice of 2G spectrum.

What about television? For about a year-and-a-half before I first came to India in 1967, I wrote a daily television column for a small-town newspaper in western Canada. I watched a lot of U.S. and Canadian television. There were no Black people on TV. When I came back to North America in 1970, Flip Wilson, an African-American comedian, had a popular TV show. Something dramatic had happened. Thirty-eight years later, the U.S. elected a Black President.

Are there any Dalits anchoring a programme or going regularly to camera on a major Indian television channel? My contacts tell me there aren't. It will be a big moment when that changes — and a daunting burden on the person who breaks that barrier.

Achieving "equality" and "fraternity" in India may be harder even than the path that African Americans have had to follow. There are more divisions, fewer resources and huge disparities. But until there is diversity on television screens and printed pages, the promises of the Constitution will be unfulfilled, unthinking prejudice will persist and simmering resentment will grow. Media diversity is a matter of national self-interest as well as justice.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (9 April 2012)*

# News Media and Irrational Belief

P N Vasanti

*The strategic use of television channels (even prime time), Facebook, Twitter and regular congregations has produced massive support for the baba from the evidence on screen*

What we see, we believe, right? After all, seeing is believing. It is because of this belief that today we have so many news channels. To influence and tap the beliefs of the millions who watch them.

A classic example would be the numerous shows featuring Nirmal Baba (alias Nirmaljit Singh Narula) on almost 35 channels, including 15 news channels. Paid slots showing a large number of devotees getting advice and solutions to problems have made this former businessman into a *baba* reportedly worth crores (a few reports claim an annual turnover of more than Rs 200 crore!).

Many such gurus have been produced earlier by our media, but the massive scale of the impact of Nirmal Baba over a very short period overshadows earlier efforts. The strategic use of television channels (even prime time), Facebook, Twitter and regular congregations has produced massive support for the *baba* from the evidence on screen. After all, Indians like to believe in miracles, especially when they are enacted and endorsed on our television screens.

The upsurge of television channels in our country has provided time slots for sale and it is hardly unusual to find spiritual shows at odd timings on multiple channels. I really have nothing against such shows and sermons—I am sure many find their peace and comfort from them. They may find a place on our numerous channels, especially the dozen-odd spirituality channels such as Aastha TV, Sanskar TV, MH1 Shradha, Sadhna TV, Dharm TV, Paras TV and Sanatan TV. They may even help hold up ratings on a general entertainment channel.

But what irks me is how news channels are resorting to these shows to sustain television rating points. My issues are twofold. One, these are paid slots and not news or current affairs programmes, so what are they doing on a news channel? Many channels do not even inform the viewer that it's a paid programme and not produced by their channel. Second, where is the moral and ethical responsibility of any news media in promoting such blind faith and superstition?

Television as a medium uniquely cuts across literacy, class, caste and socio-economic divides. Television was introduced in the country in the 1960s for educational purposes, especially to reach out to

a large number of those who could not read and write. Among the other noble purposes in investing in this medium were national integration, education and inculcating a scientific spirit among Indians.

Many of these original reasons may have been forgotten in our heavily commercial and entertainment-oriented television today. While some of those challenges still remain, such use of this lucrative medium may seem very utopian in the current media landscape. However, using the same medium for promoting just the opposite seems ironic. Today, instead of scientific temper, we seem to be promoting superstition through such programmes, selling good luck charms, etc.

On a news channel, these get the added endorsement of verisimilitude. The reason that news and current affairs channels are treated differently and hold a special place in our democracy is their important role in reporting the happenings and providing a discourse on critical issues to do with our society. To misuse this special role for promoting such blind faith and that too without any disclosures, does not seem ethical.

In September 2011, the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) issued an advisory to its 45 member channels “to voluntarily improve the broadcasting standards by desisting from airing such reports (on matters propagating, promoting and advocating superstition, occultism and blind belief)”. More recently, earlier this week, there were newspaper reports and television programmes on the methods of the *baba* mentioned above and also the misuse of his funds. And yet, we see a large number of NBA members such as Star News, Aaj Tak Tez, IBN7, India TV continue to promote and regularly show paid programmes featuring Nirmal Baba, even today.

Interestingly, in response to the recent media criticism, the *baba* has now asked his supporters to file complaints against these reports with NBA. As an aggrieved customer, perhaps he sees it as a right to complain.

What about the noble goal of promoting scientific temper? Why is the government turning a blind eye to this obvious promotion of irrational belief?

If what we see is what we believe, then clearly, we are seeing and believing some really absurd things!

*Courtesy: The Mint (18 April 2012)*

# Reaping gold through cotton, and Newsprint

P Sainath

*Three and a half years ago, at a time when the controversy over the use of genetically modified seeds was raging across India, a newspaper story painted a heartening picture of the technology's success. "There are no suicides here and people are prospering on agriculture. The switchover from the conventional cotton to Bollgard or Bt Cotton here has led to a social and economic transformation in the villages [of Bhambraja and Antargaon] in the past three-four years." (Times of India, October 31, 2008).*

*So heartening was this account that nine months ago, the same story was run again in the same newspaper, word for word. (Times of India, August 28, 2011). Never mind that the villagers themselves had a different story to tell.*

"There have been 14 suicides in our village," a crowd of agitated farmers in Bhambraja told shocked members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture in March this year. "Most of them after Bt came here." *The Hindu* was able to verify nine that had occurred between 2003 and 2009. Activist groups count five more since then. All after 2002, the year the TOI story says farmers here switched to Bt. Prospering on agriculture? The villagers told the visibly shaken MPs: "Sir, lots of land is lying fallow. Many have lost faith in farming." Some have shifted to soybean where "at least the losses are less."

Over a hundred people, including landed farmers, have migrated from this 'model farming village' showcasing Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech's Bt Cotton. "Many more will leave because agriculture is dying," Suresh Ramdas Bhondre had predicted during our first visit to Bhambraja last September.

The 2008 full-page panegyric in the TOI on Monsanto's Bt Cotton rose from the dead soon after the government failed to introduce the Biotech Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill in Parliament in August 2011. The failure to table the Bill — crucial to the future profits of the agri-biotech industry — sparked frenzied lobbying to have it brought in soon. The full-page, titled Reaping Gold through Bt Cotton on August 28 was followed by a flurry of advertisements from Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech (India) Ltd., in the TOI (and some other papers), starting the very next day. These appeared on August 29, 30, 31, September 1 and 3. The Bill

finally wasn't introduced either in the monsoon or winter session — though listed for business in both — with Parliament bogged down in other issues. Somebody did reap gold, though, with newsprint if not with Bt Cotton.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture appeared unimpressed by the ad barrage, which also seemed timed for the committee's deliberations on allowing genetically modified food crops. Disturbed by reports of mounting farm suicides and acute distress in Vidarbha, committee members, who belong to different parties, decided to visit the region.

Bhambraja, touted as a model for Mahyco-Monsanto's miracle Bt, was an obvious destination for the committee headed by veteran parliamentarian Basudeb Acharia. Another was Maregaon-Soneburdi. But the MPs struck no gold in either village. Only distress arising from the miracle's collapse and a raft of other, government failures.

The issues (and the claims made by the TOI in its stories) have come alive yet again with the debate sparked off by the completion of 10 years of Bt cotton in India in 2012. The "Reaping Gold through Bt Cotton" that appeared on August 28 last year, presented itself as "A consumer connect initiative." In other words, a paid-for advertisement. The bylines, however, were those of professional reporters and photographers of the *Times of India*. More oddly, the story-turned-ad had already appeared, word-for-word, in the *Times of India*, Nagpur on October 31, 2008. The repetition was noticed and ridiculed by critics. The August 28, 2011 version itself acknowledged this unedited 'reprint' lightly. What appeared in 2008, though, was not marked as an advertisement. What both versions do acknowledge is: "The trip to Yavatmal was arranged by Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech."

The company refers to the 2008 feature as "a full-page news report" filed by the TOI. "The 2008 coverage was a result of the media visit and was based on the editorial discretion of the journalists involved. We only arranged transport to-and-from the fields," a Mahyco Monsanto Biotech India spokesperson told *The Hindu* last week. "The 2011 report was an unedited reprint of the 2008 coverage as a marketing feature." The 2008 "full-page news report" appeared in the Nagpur edition. The 2011

“marketing feature” appeared in multiple editions (which you can click to online under ‘special reports’) but not in Nagpur, where it would surely have caused astonishment.

So the same full-page appeared twice in three years, the first time as news, the second time as an advertisement. The first time done by the staff reporter and photographer of a newspaper. The second time exhumed by the advertising department. The first time as a story trip ‘arranged by Mahyco-Monsanto.’ The second time as an advertisement arranged by Mahyco-Monsanto. The first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

The company spokesperson claimed high standards of transparency in that “...we insisted that the publication add the source and dateline as follows: ‘This is a reprint of a story from the *Times of India*, Nagpur edition, October 31, 2008.’ But the spokesperson’s e-mail reply to *The Hindu*’s questions is silent on the timing of the advertisements. “In 2011, we conducted a communications initiative for a limited duration aimed at raising awareness on the role of cotton seeds and plant biotechnologies in agriculture.” Though *The Hindu* raised the query, there is no mention of why the ads were run during the Parliament session when the BRAI Bill was to have come up, but didn’t.

But there’s more. Some of the glowing photographs accompanying the TOI coverage of the Bt miracle were not taken in Bhambraja or Antargaon, villagers allege. “This picture is not from Bhambraja, though the people in it are” says farmer Babanrao Gawande from that village.

### Phantom miracle

The *Times of India* story had a champion educated farmer in Nandu Raut who is also an LIC agent. His earnings shot up with the Bt miracle. “I made about Rs.2 lakhs the previous year,” Nandu Raut told me last September. “About Rs.1.6 lakh came from the LIC policies I sold.” In short, he earned from selling LIC policies four times what he earned from farming. He has seven and a half acres and a four-member family.

But the TOI story has him earning “Rs.20,000 *more per acre* (emphasis added) due to savings in

pesticide.” Since he grew cotton on four acres, that was a “saving” of Rs. 80,000 “on pesticide.” Quite a feat. As many in Bhambraja say angrily: “Show us one farmer here earning Rs.20,000 per acre at all, let alone that much more per acre.” A data sheet from a village-wide survey signed by Mr. Raut (in *The Hindu*’s possession) also tells a very different story on his earnings.

The ridicule that Bhambraja and Maregaon farmers pour on the Bt ‘miracle’ gains credence from the Union Agriculture Minister’s figures. “Vidarbha produces about 1.2 quintals [cotton lint] per hectare on average,” Sharad Pawar told Parliament on December 19, 2011. That is a shockingly low figure. Twice that figure would still be low. The farmer sells his crop as raw cotton. One-hundred kg of raw cotton gives 35 kg of lint and 65 kg of cotton seed (of which up to two kg is lost in ginning). And Mr. Pawar’s figure translates to just 3.5 quintals of raw cotton per hectare. Or merely 1.4 quintals per acre. Mr. Pawar also assumed farmers were getting a high price of Rs.4,200 per quintal. He conceded that

**“Not a single person from the two village has committed suicide”**

this was close to “the cost of cultivation... and that is why I think such a serious situation is developing there.” If Mr. Pawar’s figure was right, it means Nandu Raut’s **gross income** could not have exceeded Rs.5,900 per acre. Deduct his input costs — of which 1.5 packets of seed alone accounts for around Rs.1,400 — and he’s left with almost nothing. Yet, the TOI has him earning “Rs.20,000 more per acre.”

Asked if they stood by these extraordinary claims, the Mahyco-Monsanto spokesperson said, “We stand by the quotes of our MMB India colleague, as published in the news report.” Ironically, that single-paragraph quote, in the full-page-news story-turned-ad, makes no mention of the Rs.20,000-plus per acre earnings or any other figure. It merely speaks of Bt creating “increased income of cotton growers...” and of growth in Bt acreage. It does not mention per acre yields. And says nothing about zero suicides in the two villages. So the company carefully avoids direct endorsement of the TOI’s claims, *but uses them in a marketing feature where they are the main points.*

The MMB spokesperson’s position on these claims is that “the journalists spoke directly with

farmers on their personal experiences during the visits, resulting in various news reports, including the farmer quotes.”

The born-again story-turned-ad also has Nandu Raut reaping yields of “about 20 quintals per acre with Bollgard II,” nearly 14 times the Agriculture Minister’s average of 1.4 quintals per acre. Mr. Pawar felt that Vidarbha’s rainfed irrigation led to low yields, as cotton needs “two to three waterings.” He was silent on why Maharashtra, ruled by an NCP-Congress alliance, promotes Bt Cotton in almost entirely rainfed regions. The Maharashtra State Seed Corporation (Mahabeej) distributes the very seeds the State’s Agriculture Commissioner found to be unsuited for rainfed regions seven years ago. Going by the TOI, Nandu is rolling in cash. Going by the Minister, he barely stays afloat.

Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech’s ad barrage the same week in 2011 drew other fire. Following a complaint, one of the ads (also appearing in another Delhi newspaper) claiming huge monetary benefits to Indian farmers landed before the Advertising Standards Council of India. ASCI “concluded that the claims made in the advertisement and cited in the complaint, were not substantiated.” The MMB spokesperson said the company “took cognizance of the points made by ASCI and revised the advertisement promptly.... ASCI has, on record, acknowledged MMB India’s modification of the advertisement...”

We met Nandu again as the Standing Committee MPs left his village in March. “If you ask me today,” he said, “I would say don’t use Bt here, in unirrigated places like this. Things are now bad.” He had not

raised a word during the meeting with the MPs, saying he had arrived too late to do so.

“We have thrown away the moneylender. No one needs him anymore,” *The Times of India* news report-turned-ad quotes farmer Mangoo Chavan as saying. That’s in Antargaon, the other village the newspaper found to be basking in Bt-induced prosperity. A study of the 365 farm households in Bhambraja and the nearly 150 in Antargaon by the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti (VJAS) shows otherwise. “Almost all farmers with bank accounts are in critical default and 60 per cent of farmers are also in debt to private moneylenders,” says VJAS chief Kishor Tiwari.

The Maharashtra government tried hard to divert the MPs away from the ‘model village’ of Bhambraja (and Maregaon) to places where the government felt in control. However, Committee Chairperson Basudeb Acharia and his colleagues stood firm. Encouraged by the MPs visit, people in both places spoke their minds and hearts. Maharashtra’s record of over 50,000 farm suicides between 1995 and 2010 is the worst in the country as the data of the National Crime Records Bureau show. And Vidarbha has long led the State in such deaths. Yet, the farmers also spoke of vast, policy-linked issues driving agrarian distress here.

None of the farmers reduced the issue of the suicides or the crisis to being only the outcome of Bt Cotton. But they punctured many myths about its miracles, costs and ‘savings.’ Some of their comments came as news to the MPs. And not as paid news or a marketing feature, either.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (10 May 2012)*

## Between Fact and Fantasy

Bharat Dogra

*Crime and violence on TV and cinema has sometimes led to terrible real-life consequences*

In a recent tragic incident in Pune (*The Hindu*, April 2) three teenagers who tried to imitate their favourite TV serial CID ended up kidnapping and murdering a friend. This brings back memories of several such incidents when crime and violence on TV and cinema had terrible real-life consequences. A teenager in Delhi who forged his own kidnapping was influenced by a Hindi film ‘Khiladi’. In Amravati, two boys influenced by another Hindi film ‘Divyashakti’ kidnapped a girl and drew dirty pictures on her body.

A French youth died in an explosion after he tried to imitate the hero of an American TV serial by

manufacturing a bomb using easily available ingredients. In a shocking incident in San Diego, a high school student killed his parents and sister after watching a crude TV fictionalization of an axe-murder case. The film ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ reportedly led to a series of crimes.

“I suspect that exposure to violent video films may in part be an explanation”, this was the comment of a shocked British judge Morland when a case was brought before him in which two 11-year-old boys killed a two year old baby.

Even younger children have been led to acts of violence and self-destruction under the impact of

TV, cinema and video films. Smaller children who fail to distinguish between fact and fantasy are most vulnerable, particularly when they watch TV or video alone without any guidance or explanations.

From Malaysia there have been several reports of small children imitating 'Superman', taking off from roofs. This led to several deaths and injuries. A similar incident was reported in India relating to imitation of a local comic and TV hero Dhruv.

Two cartoon characters in the US, Beavis and Butt-head became notorious for their tendency to start fires anywhere. Trying to imitate them a five-year-old boy in Ohio ignited his bed clothes with a lighter. His two-year-old sister died in the fire. These cartoon characters were also criticized for their repeated tendency to "mistreat animals, scream and lust at girls, tell dirty jokes, sniff glue and revel in maximum havoc." One wonders why such cartoon characters are created at all.

A similar question may be raised in the context of WWF wrestling matches that involve cruelty and perversion. Luridly dressed persons inflict torture on each other to the cries of 'crush him', kill him'. Yet such wrestling serves as entertainment among children, much to the distress of several parents.

Beyond various specific instances, there are several well-researched reports which document the impact of cinema and TV violence on real life

tragedies. According to a study by Prof. Centrowell of the University of Washington, the introduction of television in the US and Canada led to the doubling of the homicide rate in the 1960s and 1970s which was maintained in the 1980s and 1990s. In addition there was a big increase in other crimes too. A group of 25 prominent British child psychologists led by Prof. Elizabeth Newson have also concluded through a study the link between violence portrayed in video films or TV and aggression among youth.

While freedom of media is extremely important and should be zealously guarded, surely responsibility should co-exist with freedom. Steps should therefore be taken to ensure that at least the more obviously harmful depiction of violence and crime on TV or cinema/video is checked to a reasonable extent and warnings issued alongside.

Parents too should try not to expose children of tender age to violent programmes, or even those seemingly harmless ones (involving huge jump and take-off scenes) which if imitated can lead to accidents.

When such episodes occur in the course of normal watching of TV or films, children need to be gently guided so that they understand the difference between fact and fantasy, and do not try risky imitations.

*Courtesy: The Hindu (9 April 2012)*

## Groundbreaking Television

**C**elebrated film star Aamir Khan's new weekly television show Satyamev Jayate, launched last Sunday, breaks new ground in a field far removed from his own. It could perhaps be described as a tel-documentary done in a newsmagazine format in which Mr Khan is the anchor.

The anchoring is of quality. The actor takes up a serious social theme (female foeticide, for example), and summons the drama element through extremely empathetic, on-stage or on-location interview with victims. The first episode had women talking about how they were forced or tricked into aborting their female fetuses, one even narrating a harrowing tale of how her in-laws attempted to kill her twin daughters.

Doing just that would have produced only a tearjerker (it was hard to hold back tears, even for Mr Khan). This essentially journalistic effort was backed with information - how the problem began, how it grew, its alarming proportions and its unlikely victims, as well as myth-busting factoids.

The platform for the show is a well-known entertainment channel, as well as Doordarshan and six regional channels. That means a lot of viewers. The super-celeb anchor is naturally the show's big draw. But only to begin with. Slowly, the people he interviews take over the tele-magazine, and in the end the star anchor doesn't really matter. We shall have to wait and see if Mr Khan sticks only to important but safe social issues, or risks getting into razor-sharp issues such as class (poverty), religion, region and language in a manner that causes some amount of discomfort not just to aam aadmi, but also to the powers that be.

*Courtesy: The Asian Age (9 May 2012)*



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