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AGRICULTURE

In 16 years, farm suicides cross a quarter million

P. Sainath

It's official. The country has seen over a quarter of a million farmers' suicides between 1995 and 2010. The National Crime Records Bureau's latest report on 'Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India' places the number for 2010 at 15,964. That brings the cumulative 16-year total from 1995 — when the NCRB started recording farm suicide data — to 2,56,913, the worst-ever recorded wave of suicides of this kind in human history.

Maharashtra posts a dismal picture with over 50,000 farmers killing themselves in the country's richest State in that period. It also remains the worst State for such deaths for a decade now. Close to two-thirds of all farm suicides have occurred in five States: Maharashtra, Karnataka, A.P., Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

The data show clearly that the last eight years were much worse than the preceding eight. As many as 1,35,756 farmers killed themselves in the 2003-10 period. For 1995-2002, the total was 1,21,157. On average, this means the number of farmers killing themselves each year between 2003 and 2010 is 1,825 higher than the numbers that took their lives in the earlier period. Which is alarming since the total number of farmers is declining significantly. Compared to the 1991 Census, the 2001 Census saw a drop of over seven million in the population of cultivators (main workers). The corresponding census data for 2011 are yet to come in, but their population has surely dipped further. In other words, farm suicides are rising through the period of India's agrarian crisis, even as the number of farmers is shrinking.

While the 2010 numbers show a dip of 1,404 from the 2009 figure of 17,368, there is little to cheer about. “There was a similar dip in 2008, only to be followed by the worst numbers in six years in 2009,” points out Professor K. Nagaraj, an economist at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, who did the largest ever study of the farm suicides covering a decade (*The Hindu*, November 12-15, 2007). “This one-year decline does not in any way indicate we have turned the corner. This dip happened mostly because of one-off falls in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. In fact, a look at the ‘Big 5’ who drive the numbers shows the fallout of the agrarian crisis to be as grim as ever. They have actually increased their share of the farm suicides.”

BOOK REVIEW

Not a wasted bouncer

ASHOK MALIK

Controversially Yours: An Autobiography

Author: Shoaib Akhtar

Publisher: Harper Sport

Price: 499/-

Shoaib Akhtar, despite glossing over his own mistakes, lays bare the maddening and dysfunctional world of Pakistani cricket, says *Ashok Malik*

It is appropriate this review appears at a time when Junaid Khan, a devastating new fast bowler from Abbottabad, has just made his Test debut and given the Sri Lankans a torrid spell in Abu Dhabi. Khan is weeks short of 22. He was born in December 1989, well after Imran Khan had ceased to be the magical bowler he once was — though the great man was still playing international cricket, primarily as captain and batsman. Junaid is also part of a series — an enviable and astonishing assembly line, it would appear — of fast bowlers who have emerged from the innards and inner cities of Pakistan, made an impact, and then disappeared without quite fulfilling their promise.

Will Junaid end up the same way — or will he survive to become one of the game's legends? The odds are he will vanish into oblivion, as every fast bowler from Pakistan has in the quarter-century since Imran handed his mantle to Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis. To understand why, one has to turn to Shoaib Akhtar's autobiography, *Controversially Yours*.

Akhtar bowled the fastest ball in cricket history — at least in the period after such things began to be recorded — and actually hit 100 mph, a speed that eluded even Jeff Thomson and Michael Holding and Malcolm

Marshall. He played cricket for Pakistan for 14 years, retiring after the 2011 Fifty50 World Cup. Yet, with only 46 Tests and just over 150 limited-overs caps, he must rank among sport's supreme underachievers.

Akhtar's problems were his injuries, his action — he was accused of chucking and then exonerated, a painful, wrenching episode that he tells of in this book — and his temperament: How many cricketers would beat up a fellow international with a bat, in the dressing room? His principal handicap was that Pakistan lacked a cricket structure, a sensitive officialdom or even the market-forces rigour of a booming cricket economy to keep him in check.

It's a wonder Akhtar survived a decade-and-a-half. Mohammad Amir's Test career was over in one year, claimed by a spot-fixing syndicate. There were so many others. "Mohammad Zahid," as Akhtar recalls, "was the quickest bowler the world had ever seen. He is now working somewhere in England... Brian Lara said that he was the fastest bowler he had seen in his life, but his own country's management failed to nurture him."

Predictably, much of the book is devoted to Akhtar's endless battles with Pakistani cricket officials, each more megalomaniacal than the previous. However, that is not all there is to *Controversially Yours*. Indeed, the book can be read at three levels.

First, it is trademark Shoaib Akhtar: Over the top, packed with braggadocio and an impulsive, even compulsive refusal to succumb to a modicum of authority. In Akhtar's entirely subjective rendition, he is never wrong and

is always wronged, ever the victim of a conspiracy or a difficult or jealous senior or manager.

His ability to gloss over his discipline issues — they plagued him from his national team to his English county years to his stint for Kolkata

Knight Riders in the Indian Premier League — is as remarkable as it is unconvincing. Even his attempts at presenting himself as the Pakistani equivalent of a ‘hail fellow well met’ and resorting to Punjabi one-liners now and then — a strange editorial interpolation for which his co-writer must claim responsibility — doesn’t quite work.

Yet, there is another side to the book. It lays bare the maddening and dysfunctional world of Pakistani cricket: The crazy generals and larger-than-life officials who treat their country’s talent in the manner of cattle; the rampant factionalism in not just the national squad but even domestic cricket — Akhtar writes of his early contract with Pakistan International Airlines and how he ran away from its suffocating atmosphere in the midst of riots in Karachi — the dirty deals and the colossal waste, Akhtar writes, that has led to at least one former Pakistani captain now driving a taxi in England. Some of this may not be new. Even so all of it is somehow revelatory.

Finally, in his rough and ready way, Akhtar tells the story of cricket’s ultimate beasts of burden: The fast bowlers of the Indian subcontinent. In chronicling his rise from the “dust of Morgah” — a reference to the “dilapidated neighbourhood” in Rawalpindi, where a “one-room semi-pucca house with a shaky roof” was home to him, his parents, three brothers and sister — to the stratosphere of superstardom, Akhtar paints the forbidding and terrifying picture of what the art of fast bowling means in this part of the world.

The most gripping chapter in the book is ‘Soaring high on broken wings’. “Bowling fast is a hard job,” Akhtar writes here, “and the physical demands of the fast-bowling action can have a damaging effect on a bowler, especially to a self-taught one like me. With no one to explain the various techniques, I learnt to bowl by observing other pace men — and that too mostly on television. It was many years before I understood the principles of fitness and the consequences of ignoring proper training practices.”

As a result: “In my self-designed training schedule, running held a prominent place. I ran excessively and it ruined my knees. By the time I entered the international cricket arena, they were already in bad shape.” Without a Drona to mentor him, Akhtar was destined to remain cricket’s Eklavya.

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Review: Steve Jobs

Steve Jobs
Walter Isaacson
Hachette India
Rs 799
PP 656

Sometimes books are cursed as early as they are conceived. The weight of expectations makes them heavy. Steve Jobs by William Isaacson has that as its birthmark.

And when the man writing it has, in the past, written the biographies of both Albert Einstein and Benjamin Franklin, the expectations expand exponentially. Then, for a moment, consider the subject. A man who influenced not one business, but many: computing, design, music, movies, telephony and retail. Not many in history have distributed greatness so generously across business geographies.

Early on in the book, Isaacson talks about how Jobs was “abandoned” by his genetic parents and “chosen” by Clara and Paul Jobs. That to me formed the plinth of both the character and its chronicle. Jobs created a lifetime and career out of abandoning and choosing people, processes and purposes. The coldheartedness with which he did this was both genetic and adopted.

There is little that the book says that is shinningly new to people who have spent their living hours snacking on Steve trivia. So even while Isaacson did a grand job of the task at hand, the question is what was the task of the book? To present a flawed and fragile Jobs? To showcase a killer app of eccentricities? To embalm a rare genius who found

inspiration for product design from seeing a cow give birth? Or listen to a flawed recording of ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’? Or housing created by Joseph Eichler? Or to merely reinforce one of life’s most telling truths: that the most furiously functional are deeply dysfunctional? The book does have its ‘awww...’ moments.

The time when Paul Jobs is out of work and an upset Steve asks his teacher why his father had to be broke. Or when he really wanted Yo Yo Ma to play at his funeral. Or the chilling yet telling fact that he knew very early on in life that he was going to die young. Even that bit where he yanks off the surgical mask in the hospital purely because he hated the design.

The book is also invigoratingly inspirational. The parts that describe Jobs standing at the “intersection of humanities and science” are heroic. Biographies have the tendency to be laborious and tenuous. Isaacson’s style is gentle and gracious.

Good books pose different questions to different people. They provide different answers to different people. Some questions continue to remain unanswered in my mind. Why the book? Why now? Why for his children? Why would he want to change the way the world saw him by actually allowing someone to present him the way he was? Why would anyone want a fairytale to end with “he lived unhappily before”? Why a book that would be his funeral march? And why leave the kids with any other impression than the fact that their father was the most charismatic conductor of technology of both the times and the timeless? The book evades those answers.

But across its pages it drops, Iago-like, careful little kerchiefs worthy of consideration. I sense in each of these answers lay the detachment of Jobs.

He had “abandoned” the earth and had “chosen” to die. He no longer cared what the world thought about him. He was no longer worried

about how the kids would see him. He was on to the next best thing: Heaven.

In the book he says, his favourite character in literature was King Lear. In *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, the noted Shakespearean scholar, William Hazlitt, had this to say about King Lear: "The character of Lear itself is very finely conceived for the purpose. It is the only ground on which such a story could be built with the greatest truth and effect. It is his rash haste, his violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him... The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual; the explosions of his passions are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that rich sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare." Once again, Jobs had chosen well.

Swapn Seth is CEO, Equus and author of This Is All I Have To Say

CORRUPTION

West's collapse a warning for India

SWAPAN DASGUPTA

When the main news of the day happens to be the unnecessary cancellation of a rock concert in the National Capital Region and speculation over the likelihood of Anna Hazare reshuffling the so-called Team Anna, you can be assured that India is still recovering from its annual Diwali celebrations. The momentary respite from the over-hyped and occasionally contrived celebration of politics is well and truly welcome. Indians too need to re-focus on facets of life that are truly meaningful and move away from the purposelessness of mid-season politics.

The weariness, fortunately, is not confined to India alone. In Europe, the seemingly endless bickering over the future of the euro is on the verge of completing its present season -- the drama will doubtless reappear after Christmas and the New Year. In the US, the comical facet of the presidential primaries is on show courtesy an advertisement of Republican challenger Herman Cain that shows an aide — yes, wait for it — smoking a cigarette! I wonder which is worse for the morally vulnerable: A flamboyant dictator being dragged out of the gutter and then getting his brains blown out by his own golden pistol, or some unknown guy smoking a cigarette. Is hate more acceptable to the legions of the politically correct than a self-indulgent smoke?

It is probably an ethical question which defies a single answer. However, you know that things aren't as bad as they seem when society becomes agitated thinking about the number of angels that can be accommodated on a pinhead.

The allusion is to a puerile movement called Occupy Wall Street that began with thousands of angst-ridden trumpets blowing in the US and

now seems to be in its final stages — hardly surprising because camping out is not terribly comfortable as autumn gradually gives way to winter. In many places, the OWS has fizzled out, in other places a gentle nudge by the authorities has been sufficient to clear public spaces, and in some of the remoter outposts of capitalism the protesters are still being egged on by subversive clergymen.

Actually, the London version of the OWS has proved to be the most interesting since it has produced an exotic *khichdi* of economics and Christian theology. Reverend Dr Giles Fraser, the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, resigned from his post because he could not countenance the idea of using either force or the law to evict those who earnestly believed that pitching their tents and blocking access to the Cathedral would — as the banners demanded — “End Capitalism.”

Rev Fraser is a sanctimonious simpleton. He was so overwhelmed by the Christian piety of the protesters that he proclaimed, “I could imagine Jesus being born in the camp.” He also declared that it was fitting that a tented community had sprung up around St Paul's because the Saint had been a tentmaker in real life — a factoid that should answer why the BJP feels it has St Paul on its side.

Most practicing Christians obviously disagree with Rev Fraser's misplaced benevolence. The OWS hasn't captured the public imagination in the same way as the anti-Vietnam protests did. In fact, even compared to the Tea Party movement against high taxes and federal intrusiveness, its impact appears to be minimal. The pious proclamation of a Warren Buffet that he should be taxed more hasn't endeared him to those ordinary people who believe that bloated Governments, far from resolving problems, actually prevent individuals and communities to empower themselves financially.

There is obvious concern in the West that the logic of capitalism is displacing them from the top of the pile and shifting the centre of gravity eastwards — to China, to India and even to Australia. But this unease

hasn't been sufficient to create a revolutionary movement against advanced capitalism, as Karl Marx hoped it would. The West has just too much to lose by allowing an economic system that it helped nurture to go out of control. This is why the focus in Europe is over how to prevent countries with responsible Government such as Germany from being dragged down by the profligate spending habits of countries such as Greece.

The tremors in the world's financial and capital markets have precious little to do with yearning for the true Christian spirit or nostalgia for 1950s style socialism. There is an awkward truth that is manifesting itself all over the world: Societies can't go on living beyond their means indefinitely. Sooner or later the non-viability of high debts begins to be felt.

The West is concerned that its economies are no longer generating the wealth that is needed to sustain a standard of living it has become accustomed to. Some are trying to meet the challenge by upgrading skills and by attracting capital with the assurance of rule-based societies. Yet others are unwilling to tolerate even temporary hardships and see their salvation in silly protests such as OWS that simultaneously help people salvage their conscience.

India doesn't have too many moral dilemmas. This Diwali saw a downturn in consumer oftakes but didn't dampen the overall celebrations. That's because the people have a long history of adjusting to temporary hardships. They know that corruption isn't a moral issue but a practical one involving fiscal adjustment. The Government, however, thinks differently. This is why it should open its eyes to what is going on in the world before undertaking pre-election splurges with your and my money.

Strange defence of Kiran Bedi

SURYA PRAKASH

Anna Hazare's campaign against corruption can lose its sheen after revelations of unethical conduct by a key team member. He should take decisive action, now.

Anna Hazare's tirade against the "gang of four" in the Union Government, which is resorting to every conceivable trick to run down his team and the anti-corruption movement, is understandable. In fact, the 'dirty tricks department' of the Government has been working overtime ever since he launched his first *satyagraha* at Jantar Mantar last April. We are all aware of it. It is the uncanny ability of ordinary people to discern such invidious moves by the Government that has brought nation-wide support for the movement.

This massive public endorsement of Anna's campaign is, however, subject to one condition: That Anna Hazare and his team work within the moral and ethical standards that they have laid down for those in politics and Government. Some recent events have left one wondering whether he is conscious of this. For example, his defence of Ms Kiran Bedi in regard to allegations which he describes as "air travel corruption" seems inexplicable.

The media has reported that in recent years Ms Bedi has been overcharging her hosts when seeking reimbursement of travel expenses. She would fly economy class but bill her sponsors executive class fares. A couple of dozen instances of such over-billing has been reported in the media. It has also been reported that she claimed a 75 per cent rebate on

Air India tickets as a gallantry award winner but charged the institutions that invited her the full fare.

Ms Bedi's first reaction was that she had done no wrong. The difference in fare — the excess amounts collected — went into the coffers of India Vision Foundation, her NGO, and not into her pocket. Secondly, it was even argued that she suffered the discomfort of travelling a class lower just so that her NGO got some funds for the noble work it was doing. But these explanations did not seem credible when a couple of organisations which had invited her told the media that they were unaware of the fact that Ms Bedi was not travelling by the class for which they had made payments. Her stand became even more untenable when Mr JS Verma, former Chief Justice of India, and retired Justice Santosh Hegde, former Lokayukta of Karnataka, publicly declared that they saw no merit in her arguments.

Ms Bedi's stubborn defence of her conduct has put off many Anna supporters. Realising that the tide was going against her, Ms Bedi announced that her trust had held a meeting and 'directed' her to henceforth travel "strictly as per invite". Ms Bedi probably thought that this would silence her critics, but that was not to be because it only raised fresh questions. First, do you need such a *firman* from somebody to be honest while raising travel bills? Second, if indeed this was a legitimate way of raising funds, why did members of her trust direct her to return the excess amounts collected from her sponsors? It was a contrived and half-hearted attempt to retrieve ground.

Finally, when all this failed, Ms Bedi made a grand announcement that all the organisations which were over-charged for her travel would be reimbursed and that the travel agency that handled her ticketing had been directed to do so. These statements also led to fresh questions. If, as Ms Bedi claimed, she had done no wrong, why was she now ready to return the over-billed amounts to these organisations? Further, her claim that the travel agent would return the excess sums to these organisations

implied that he — and not Ms Bedi — was over-billing her sponsors. The travel agency in question has promptly challenged this claim and said it only billed the NGO for the tickets it bought on Ms Bedi's behalf and not for anything else. Watch this space for the next round of explanations from Ms Bedi.

What can we conclude from this narration? Ms Bedi over-charged her sponsors when she travelled to attend events; when this was exposed by the media, she stoutly defended herself, but eventually announced that she would return the excess fare charged by her to her sponsors; members of her trust have “directed” her not to over-charge sponsors in future and to travel only in the class for which she billed them; and, finally, despite the facts, Ms Bedi sees no need to apologise for what she has done.

After all this, we have Anna Hazare going where angels fear to tread. He defends her on his blog and offers a disingenuous argument to shield her. He says, “She has time and again made it clear that if she has done such a thing and used the money for the benefit of her family then the Government should take help of one of its own inquiry agencies and, if she is found guilty, it should take stringent action against her”. But, Anna Hazare adds, the Government is not keen on taking such a step. All that it wants to do is “accuse and humiliate” members of his team. There is “a gang of four” within the Government which is opposed to the Jan Lok Pal Bill and which is out to discredit members of his team.

The question is not whether Ms Bedi used the money for her personal benefit or for her “family”. The question is one of propriety. If a person working in a Government or a private organisation were to generate such bogus travel bills and collect sums far in excess of the actual expenditure he or she would have been dismissed from service and even booked for cheating under the Indian Penal Code. Even MPs and Ministers who fudge their TA and DA bills are thrown out of office when they are caught in the act. In the UK several MPs have had to pay the price for

presenting bogus receipts for reimbursements. The US House of Representatives reprimanded and fined its own Speaker, Mr Newt Gingrich, for misusing tax-exempt funds. It is, therefore, rather pathetic to see Anna Hazare rush to Ms Bedi's defence in the light of incriminating evidence of bogus travel bills.

Millions of citizens have invested in 'Brand Anna' in the fond hope of fighting corruption at various levels. The veteran social activist's defence of Ms Bedi amounts to betraying the primary stake-holders in 'Brand Anna'. He must be wary of the company he keeps and the causes he espouses. Since he wants to cleanse the system, he must demand exacting standards from those who surround him. In short, he must set his house in order.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

When policy goes for a toss

KALYANI SHANKAR

The National Development Council is no longer the platform it was for creating plans that would be seen as growth-oriented for the States. Instead, it has sadly become a venue for mud-slinging

The recently held meeting of the National Development Council in New Delhi was not given much publicity. Yet, there was a time when NDC meetings received a lot of coverage in newspapers and the Chief Ministers' speeches got publicity not only in their respective States but also in the national dailies.

This lack of media coverage shows the deterioration of the NDC's once high profile. Established on August 6, 1952, the NDC had a special role to play in formulating federal policy. In the words of the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, it was setup with three objectives: First, to strengthen the efforts and mobilise the resources of the country in support of the Five Year Plans; second to promote common economic policies in all vital spheres and third, to ensure rapid and yet balanced development of all parts of the country.

The NDC's functions included reviewing the working of the Five Year Plan, analysing the country's social and economic policies and recommending measures for the achievement of the Plan. The NDC is still the apex decision-making body and as Nehru had stressed, intimately responsible for the Plans in all its phases.

All Union Ministers, Chief Ministers and Administrators of Union Territories, Members of the Planning Commission, Ministers of State with independent charges, are invited to the deliberations of the Council.

This was believed to be a good opportunity for Chief Ministers, particularly, for they are not only responsible for their States but also expected to participate in national development as a whole — the NDC meeting was supposed to be a good platform to look beyond the local agenda.

So what happened to the NDC over the years? Clearly, the council's character and importance has changed, although its members have not. In the sixties and seventies, India had mostly Congress Chief Ministers and hence the default cohesion within the NDC. However in the eighties, as regionalism started raising its ugly head, cohesion was its first casualty.

Old timers recall that when former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister NT Rama Rao wanted to make a negative speech at the NDC, he was not allowed. So, he walked out in a huff. His walk-out was in the news while the deliberations of the NDC were ignored by media. As regional leaders have gradually increased in number, today, there are several discordant voices in the NDC. Also, the number of non-Congress Chief Ministers have risen with the result that NDC meetings have become more of a show of authority by regional satraps. Fruitful interactions unfortunately are few and far between.

Indeed, the NDC gets scant respect from most non-Congress Chief Ministers — some like the Chief Ministers of Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Ms Mayawati and Ms Jayalalithaa respectively, do not even bother to attend the meetings. This time even the Congress Chief Minister of Kerala, Mr Omen Chandy, decided to stay away from NDC citing Onam as his excuse. In most cases, the Ministers either send over their speeches or depute a second person to attend the meeting. And then there are leaders like the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr Narendra Modi, who use the forum to vent their frustration against the “step motherly treatment” meted out to their respective States.

In such a situation, do the NDC meetings have any meaning? Have they seized to become relevant? While the meetings provide an opportunity for Chief Ministers from all over the country to have a first hand interactions on various developmental issues and economic policies, do the Ministers learn from one another?

Given that the levels of mutual tolerance between the Centre and State is are the decrease, and neither the Centre nor the all powerful regional satraps are willing to listen to the each other, there is little scope for a meeting ground.

Old timers point out that even Nehru was willing to listen to the dissent. He had respect even for those who were opposed his views. That kind of tolerance is a rarity today because vote bank politics has taken control of our politics.

Also, the spirit of federalism is on the wane because both Centre and States want to show off their strength and authority. Hence, there is virtual a tug of war.

To make matters worse, the coalition era, which is here to stay both at the Centre and the State, has produced a situation wherein the agenda of each party is different and power is the only binding factor.

The dual power experiment by the Congress is also another reason for the weakening of this system as power lies in one place and responsibility lies somewhere else. At a time where Congress Ministers themselves speak in different languages, how can one expect the NDC consisting of various hues to be a cohesive unit?

Finally, globalisation and liberalisation has changed the Government's values with the result that economic policies have undergone a tremendous change in the past two decades. Hence, bodies like the NDC and even the Inter-State Council, which does not even meet as often as it

should, have been significantly weakened.

Also, other newer bodies have now replaced the older groups. For instance, it is the National Advisory Council chaired by UPA Chairperson and Congress President Sonia Gandhi which decides on many important issues such as food security and communal harmony and has even masterminded various flagship programmes like MGNREGA.

Still, the NDC could assert itself if it wants to as the members of the NDC are the most powerful Chief Ministers. The question is will it?

LIBRARY

FIFTY FIFTY

Liberators of libraries

Kishwar desai

THE community of book lovers in the UK are resisting the closure of neighbourhood libraries. They are even ready to fund and run the libraries but the stubborn councils and courts have come in the way. One protest which has gone almost unnoticed in the current spell of citizenry worldwide demanding their rights (from Anna Hazare in India at one end to Libya's freedom fighters on the other) –has been the year long battle in the UK to save libraries from closure.



Authors, media personalities, musicians, other celebrities as well as ordinary readers have come together to stop the shutting down of these well-loved institutions, an unfortunate “fall out” of the cutting of local government budgets. And here I am not talking about the large and well funded British Library in London –but the small, neighbourhood libraries, which can often provide safe haven and a quiet space to those who live in crowded homes.

These libraries have offered a special egalitarian place in the UK, lending more than books, as they are also where people go for information about their community, with a usually well-informed librarian and a well stocked notice board. These are not unimportant items to lose from the landscape. Yet, as the “library” protests continue with demonstrations, sit-ins, and even legal battles—it is obvious that the protestors will have to fight on, perhaps into the New



Neighbourhood libraries in UK also double up as community centres

Year...

There are, apparently, hundreds of libraries all over the country which are facing eminent extinction —and this can only be a tragic outcome. Those of us who have used libraries know that these institutions not only give children and adults a chance to enjoy a good book —they also lead to a marked improvement in our reading skills. According to a recent survey, the National Literacy Trust (UK) has concluded that among children between the ages of eight and sixteen —two thirds of those who use a library regularly have reading levels above those who don't.

This in itself is a huge plus point : and there are other advantages as well. In an interview , Jonathan Douglas, director of the National Literacy Trust even pointed out that “In the UK today, one in six people struggles to read, write and communicate, which can affect their health, confidence and employability.” Naturally if our reading skills improved so would our overall performance, and our lifestyle. Most of us have downgraded the importance of books in our lives —quite forgetting how much pleasure and knowledge we get out of them.

The resistance

However, not everyone is ready or willing to succumb to the pressure of shutting down their neighbourhood library. Among these are the valiant supporters of the Kensal Rise Library in London which was opened by Mark Twain in 1900. And it is shameful that one century later, it might be rather unceremoniously closed . But its closure will also affect the Asian community in the area as it has very good Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu sections.

Nonetheless a bunch of determined readers and authors have got together to fight the Brent Council, which is trying to board up the library following court's orders. So for the past two weeks people have started a round-the-clock vigil. Even in the cold and the rain —fortified by coffee, hot drinks and sometimes Cuban rum —protestors have been

turning up, sitting on the doorstep, and even putting together a pop-up library, in defiance. Basically, the pop-up library comprises of books in cartons arranged around the periphery of the library wall. The books are all donated by supporters and people can borrow them. It has been a unique and very successful form of protest.

Maggie Gee, an author who is also spearheading the protest, describes how the protestors managed to survive the rain and the cold thanks to the community spirit "... The sit-in became more comfortable - armchairs arrived, someone donated a plastic gazebo, and people began to show amazing generosity - chefs brought stews in the evening and cooked breakfast in the morning, there was always coffee and sometimes Cuban rum, a one-man tent was put up for the night guard, and there was a constant coming and going of children and teenagers, as well as an armchair presence of older people - some reading, some, like me, working on novels! Now the pop-up library is running 9-5pm seven days a week."

Other authors who have also been fund raising for the court case include Zadie Smith and Phillip Pullman as well as Jacqueline Smith. As volunteers sold mugs, T-shirts, posters and even CDs—a fund of 30,000 pounds was raised to fight the court case. Even though the judgment has gone against the protestors—they have now won the right to appeal. All they are saying is that they do not even want the government to fund the library anymore, they are willing to find the money and run the library themselves as part of the ‘Big Society’ concept that David Cameron’s Conservative party had mooted. Even though that idea, too, has been rejected by Brent Council which runs the library—this determined gang of library-liberationists has not given up.

Possibly because this library-fight has become a larger symbol. As Maggie Gee says “If libraries are allowed to close without a fight, how long will that other service that was once the envy of the world, the NHS (National Health Service) survive? Oh, and the books. The stories that

help us understand each other, the non-fiction that gives us the tools to survive in the world, the picture-books that help toddlers make sense of themselves – are they to be only for rich people now? Brent’s Labour Council should hang their heads in shame.”

One can only hope that they will win their battle soon –and not have to sit in the winter snow with their pop-up library. Though somehow I think if these enthusiastic book-lovers have to do it, they will!

RIGHT TO INFORMATION

THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT

Fear of 'too much' transparency

Aruna Roy & Ruchi Gupta

Six years after the Right to Information Act was passed, there is no evidence to suggest that disclosures made under it have led to undesirable consequences. The disclosures have exposed inefficiency, negligence, corruption and complicity. Thus, there is enough reason to strengthen it further

IN a span of mere weeks, the Corporate Affairs Minister, the Law Minister and the Prime Minister have all fired salvos at the Right to Information Act. The popularly acclaimed RTI Act 2005, brought in by their own government, has been charged with “transgressing into government functioning”, affecting “institutional efficacy and efficiency”, and even potentially, “discouraging honest, well meaning public servants from giving full expression to their views [and] adversely affect the deliberative processes in the government”.

These considerable negatives are ostensibly traceable to the disclosure of “file notings”, which the government has repeatedly attempted to exempt from the ambit of the RTI Act.

This is not the first time that the amendments bogey has reared its head. And file notings are not the only set of grouses that the Government has with the



An awareness campaign in Bihar for Right to Information

Act. The Act has been said to facilitate blackmail, flood hapless public departments to the point of stymieing work, been misused by civil servants disgruntled at being passed over for promotion, and has, of course, derailed the deliberative process (and therefore governance itself), by rendering officials into paralysis at the mere thought of being pulled up for some file noting.

From these repeated waves of complaints, it seems clear that the government is unable to enthusiastically embrace the radical shift it has introduced in the structure of Indian Governance. The negative outcomes on governance are a misrepresentation, because uncompromising transparency at all levels of Government would, amongst other things, be the best way of dealing with corruption, through a set of preventive measures, rather than the painful prescription of retributive justice.

Since the RTI was passed, sustained, innovative and varied efforts have been made to dilute the Act – through proposed amendments; proposed rules which went beyond the Act; nodal ministry FAQs; notifications; and departmental circulars. Even without amendments, new forms of secrecy have eroded the RTI. Section 24 of the Act allows blanket protection to Intelligence and Security Agencies. It has been used by the Government to notify agencies that fall outside its definition, including most recently the Central Bureau of Investigation.

Sensitive information

The nodal Ministry, the Department of Personnel and Training(DoPT), seemed to be finally accepting and adopting its role of fostering better implementation. However, there are mixed messages emanating from there as well. There is reportedly a cautionary note issued that Public Information Officers (PIOs) should not divulge too much information. There is even talk of making the process of providing information more politically sensitive by shifting the level of the PIO to a higher official,

who would presumably check with the political bosses before releasing “politically” sensitive information.

This time around, the statements of distress with the Act come on the heels of the RTI facilitated disclosure of a finance ministry note on the 2G spectrum scam. The note alleged that the then Finance Minister, Mr. P. Chidambaram, could have intervened to cancel the telecom spectrum licenses awarded on a first come first serve basis. The note went through the present Finance Minister, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee’s desk. This has been variously interpreted as a public escalation of a battle rumored between the two most powerful ministers in the UPA-II cabinet.

Far from being indicative of a flawed analysis, this is simply an attempt to evade accountability. There is no causal link between the exposure and need for secrecy. Rather it explains the reason for not amending the Act. In fact, during the six year experience of the RTI Act, there has been no evidence of disclosures that have been disastrous, or where basic interests of the people of the country have been compromised. It is time to take dispassionate stock – to examine the alleged negatives, the undoubted positives and determine the way forward.

The RTI Act is premised on the fact that in a democracy, the state is accountable to the people. This accountability can be mandated only through pervasive transparency; hence the citizen’s right to information. The constant proposal to deny access to file notings must be seen through this prism. Can a file and its particulars, whether of project or policy, be seen in isolation of the public functionaries who deliberated upon it? Or the reasons for a decision being taken be separated from the decision itself ?

It has been said that perceptual distortions due to undue politicisation or trial by media will paralyse or impede administration. Officers will be “reluctant” to “record their opinions” for fear of being targeted later. Moreover difference of opinion by individuals or ministries too will be opportunistically politicised.

Transparency of the deliberative process is pivotal to ensure that people in Government do their job. There should be no choice for a serving civil servant, to refuse to put their opinion down on paper, pleading fear of reprisal. Access to information and file notings, will help identify inefficiency. The ordinary citizen will be empowered to establish individual accountability.

The only tool we have alternatively is collective accountability (elections), which only peripherally impacts bureaucracy's action. The arguments of negative fallout of a transparent deliberative process, is typical bureaucratic sophistry. Transparency of file notings will, in fact, strengthen the honest functionary's hand by demonstrating independence and lack of complicity in corruption. It might even push the less honest ones take a position in consonance with ethics and the rule of law.

The Prime Minister is right when he avers that decisions often appear incorrect post facto with access to relevant information. The Indian populace's forbearance with respect to policy misadventures has lulled the administration to complacency. Information disturbs the complete control over policy and decisions. However, the popular anger we have recently witnessed against blatant corruption, makes transparency and accountability pivotal.

In any case, the government and individual functionaries are happy for accountability of implementation at the grass roots but hedge and fight against transparency and accountability at higher levels. The purpose of the democratic process is to serve the interests of the people, and not perpetuate those in power irrespective of performance. Transparency identifies malfeasance, but also the benchmark of competence. Participation of citizens in the process of scrutiny is likely to result in better and more effective policies.

More transparency

The present speculation and sensationalism on RTI is a red herring to side track from the scams. The scams are clearly an outcome of the lack of transparency and accountability in government functioning. What India needs is more transparency, not less.

The RTI has forced and facilitated the beginnings of a change in mindsets. Citizen groups have been demanding action and accountability on a variety of issues. These constant exposures of incompetence and corruption should be used by honest bureaucrats and visionary politicians to initiate the next generation of transparency reforms. These could contribute fundamentally to change governance in creating a culture of Transparency. However, this requires careful and detailed work on aiding preventive measures and expanding platforms for participatory decision-making.

A much delayed and urgent area of reform is universal implementation of Section 4 of the RTI Act, which mandates proactive disclosure by public authorities. It also makes it incumbent upon them to “publish all relevant facts while formulating important policies or announcing the decisions which affect public” and “provide reasons for its administrative or quasi-judicial decisions to affected persons”. The DoPT had set up a task force for improving implementation of proactive disclosure under section 4. Political support from the highest levels is needed before Section 4 can help transform governance at all levels.

Citizen groups used the RTI Act to expose the scam and filed complaints. However, mandatory proactive disclosure of “the manner of execution of subsidy programmes, including the amounts allocated and the details of beneficiaries of such programmes” and the “particulars of recipients of concessions, permits or authorisations granted by it” (Section 4(1)(b)(xii) and (xiii)) by the Adarsh Society could have thwarted the politician-builder-bureaucrat nexus at the very beginning.

Proactive disclosure of information will also reduce the number of complaints, of officers claiming to be bogged down by RTI applications.

The greater the information proactively disclosed, the less the need to use the RTI. It is also likely to mitigate the ongoing threat to life and harassment faced by a new generation of activists using the RTI Act.

Voluntary and ongoing disclosure of information will make it harder to target individual activists, and in any case render many such attacks ineffectual, because others will be able to use the information, which the attacker is trying to suppress. A recent resolution by the Central Information Commission is a step in this direction, wherein the Commission has resolved that if any RTI activist is attacked, the Commission will order the concerned department to suo moto post the information sought online.

The Prime Minister has expressed concern for the people who had been attacked, and promised a whistleblower protection law will be passed soon. This cannot be a substitute for political will. Nothing prevented action being taken in cases where RTI users have lost their lives. Because they are determined, but fairly ordinary people, these cases have not been pursued with the kind of high profile determination that becomes a deterrent for others.

The RTI has been owned by the ordinary person. For the protection of the RTI user, and to make the Act a vehicle for the next generation of reform, vision and commitment is needed from the top leadership. This government should be wise enough and have the good sense to use this extraordinary legislation to demonstrate its determination to make governance in India, transparent, accountable and corruption free.

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Don't sweep RTI under the carpet

Subhash Chandra Agrawal

A hyper-imaginative opposition and sensational media are not good enough reasons to throw out the baby with the bathwater

PRIME MINISTER Dr. Manmohan Singh, while inaugurating the sixth annual convention of Central Information Commission in New Delhi on October 14, indirectly hinted at the need for amending the RTI Act, mainly in respect of 'private' deliberations and notings on files.



Magsaysay award winner Aruna Roy with other activists

This was evidently prompted by disclosure of notings, blown out of all proportion, by the Union Finance Ministry on the 2G Spectrum, referring to the then Union Finance Minister (now Home Minister) P. Chidambaram. Unfortunately, the opposition parties believe it to be their birth right to embarrass the government, and media to sensationalise many non-issues.

There was nothing unusual in the officer writing 'FM has seen' for several hundred pages of documents coming back from the table of the present Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee. No minister can practically see each and every word so minutely as desired by the media or opposition-parties.

The very same documents (61 pages) were e-mailed by me earlier to about 700-800 journalists, but were not noticed by any reporter except one. If reporters are not expected to read each and every word or page of

important mail sent to them, then it is unfair , and unnecessary, to target Pranab Mukherjee on a non-issue.

But that is no reason for the Prime Minister, instead of making his spokesmen react strongly to counter the irresponsible behavior of opposition parties, to toy with the idea of diluting the RTI Act as a remedy. On October 13, 2011, a day before the RTI conference, correspondence between the PM and former Telecom Minister A. Raja in 2007 on the 2G Spectrum scam, revealed through a RTI petition, drew attention of even the Supreme Court. If the RTI Act had been diluted, perhaps such correspondence and big scams like the 2G and the Commonwealth Games 2010 would have never been exposed.

Likewise, file notings has been instrumental in exposing the irregular appointment of P.J. Thomas as Chief Vigilance Commissioner, who was subsequently removed by the Supreme Court.

Union Ministers like Veerappa Moily and Salman Khurshid, incidentally both being ministerial members of the joint drafting committee for the Lokpal Bill, have caused major embarrassment to the Union Government, first on the issue of the Lokpal Bill, and now for talking about diluting the RTI Act.

What does our government want? Should guilty not be punished? Should scams be allowed to happen? Should truth not be allowed to prevail?

A Public Information Officer told me in confidence that a senior Union Minister changed his decision when one of my RTI applications reached his department. The RTI Act in its bold form has been instrumental both in exposing earlier scams, and more importantly, in putting lids on future scams.

The author is a well-known RTI activist

SOCIAL POLICY

The Shrinking Universe: How convenient is your marriage?

Vijay Nagaswami

If a lot of the old marriages are stable, it is because they lack emotional investment, prioritising convenience and mutual tolerance over companionship.

I am not any more surprised when young urban Indians tell me that they don't think of marriage as an absolute necessity in their lives, and that they'd much rather stay single than be trapped in a loveless marriage. For, marriage has moved from being a 'stage of life' phenomenon to a commitment that requires more forethought, application and responsible mutuality. But I'm always pleasantly surprised when older people who've been through all the tribulations that marriage has laid at their doorsteps, also seem to increasingly express the same opinion. They hasten, of course, to clarify that they have no regrets about being married, but don't seem overly perturbed when their grandchildren of 'marriageable age' express this sentiment.

Admittedly they are still a small tribe, even if a growing one. Admittedly, the large majority of Indians are still obsessed, not just about mileage, but also about marriage and start planning for their children's weddings, about a week or so after they are born. Admittedly also, most older Indians still believe that their younger counterparts place too much of premium on the mystical emotion of love rather than approaching their marriages with responsible stolidity as generations of their forefathers have done. After all, weren't marriages more stable in those days, is their argument clincher.

Reasons for stability

However, what I find promising is that over the last decade or so, more people are beginning to realise that an important reason for this apparent stability is that large numbers of couples settled into 'marriages of convenience', wherein, regardless of the lack of connectedness between each other, they didn't want to break away from each other. Equally, they were not prepared to make the effort to get their marriage to a more companionable platform. They led their own independent and parallel lives, neither questioning what the other did, neither making any demands of the other, and neither evincing any great interest in the life of the other. They were pretty much like roommates who have learned to give each other a wide berth (take it from me, this is not giving each other 'space').

Such marriages of convenience are not necessarily an 'olden days' phenomenon. Just look around you and you'll realise that they are in abundance today too. More often than not, there is very little bitterness, hostility or acrimony in such marriages. There may have been in the past, but not any more, since couples in marriages of convenience have chosen not to have any real emotional expectations of each other. They have worked out how to have their basic needs taken care of. Their conversations are limited to practical realities of day-to-day living. They come together around the children and do engage in some joint socialisation. However, they have their own individual lives which the other is not privy to, and is in fact, not even interested in. If there are any peccadilloes, neither wants to know about this. Discretion is the primary requirement of each other.

I'm not for a moment suggesting that all stable marriages of yesteryears or today are based on convenience. I am perfectly aware that millions of couples have had, and continue to have, loving and companionable relationships after having worked through whatever issues bedevilled the early days of their married lives. But, it simply cannot be ignored that a significantly large number of marriages last the long haul because both partners prioritise convenience over companionship and may come

together only to discharge the responsibilities of marriage, in an almost fiduciary manner.

Complex phenomenon

You might well ask me how convenient such marriages are and why people stay in them. The reasons are pretty complex. For starters, such people subscribe to a basic belief that whatever happens, one must hang in there, and divorce can never be a serious option and often use the 'known devil' explanation to rationalise their marriages. Sometimes, the reasons are economic. Put simply, neither partner can really 'afford a divorce', so they plod on together, doing the minimum required for each other to ensure that the marriage still chugs along. Oftentimes, couples feel that they have to live with each other for the sake of the children which, as I have argued ad nauseam in this column, is arguably the worst thing they can do for the kids. But the more important reason is the vague sense of security we feel with something or someone familiar that counterbalances the fear of the unknown.

You might also well ask, what's wrong with a marriage of convenience? After all, there is no hostility or resentment. Both partners seem to be sufficiently satisfied and everybody seems okay. If this is the question that springs to your mind, you obviously believe that marriage is just one of the many responsibilities that are placed in our paths as we struggle through our lives — just one more role we have to play in our lives. However, if you believe, like many younger, and some older Indians do, that marriage has a greater purpose than mere responsible procreation, then you'd probably like to get more out of your marriage by creating a platform of mutual companionship and harmony, rather than settling for mutual tolerance and lack of disharmony. If this is the case, you'd probably feel that close up, a marriage of convenience isn't really as convenient as it may appear from a distance.

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