

Still in India

Still in India, I cannot ignore my feelings of pain for my country. Although I live abroad now, I was born in India, studied and worked in India for several years and continue to have keen interest in the developments and progress of India. I am an Indian to the core and feel proud of her achievements; but lament with the terrible persistent problems continue to haunt India in many aspects of day to day life.

My heart swells with pride and joy when I see an article published in a medical journal by an Indian author or when Indians are recognised for their work internationally. Some names of international fame and accomplishments come to mind. Amartya Sen, Kishore Mahbubani, Shashi Tharoor, Raghuram Rajan, Manmohan Singh to name just a few. Nobel laureates like Rabinder Nath Tagore and Khurana of Indian origin. Prominent Indian origin in Singapore, who have made significant contributions nationally and internationally in various fields and posted Singapore as an exemplary country in the East. CEOs of a number of mega companies are Indians today. For years the National Health Services in the UK was propped up by Indian sub-continent doctors, contribution by Indian doctors in USA and other parts of the world, accountants and information technologists behind great achievements in information technology in the world.

What hurts me most is the denials to accept our failures in India. Unless we see our weaknesses we will never improve. We are proud of our country but don't feel ashamed of the terrible things happening in our country. Poor state of hygiene, status of women and to be called rape capital of the world, corruption at every corner and extreme selfishness with no compassion for the deprived do not bother us. One is confronted with stark poverty on one side and vulgar display of riches on the other; and the majority of middle income people are sandwiched between the two, always striving only towards riches at any cost.

In spite of green revolution for over fifty years and abundance of available food, the state of rural India remains bleak and making peasant farmers poorer rather than more prosperous. In 1970, Indira Gandhi in the *New York Times* (October 22, 1970) said, "Unless the Green Revolution is also accompanied by a revolution based on social justice, the Green Revolution may not remain green". No one is talking about green revolution today but the topic of discussion is abysmal state of social justice, both in the populace and the government, doing little to address it.

Infants and mothers die disproportionately in India in spite of the knowhow and ability to provide services to people. Both in rural and urban areas, malnutrition among children under five years of age is shocking. India's health indicators remain poor even in comparison to some poor countries in Africa. Our neighbours Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Malaysia are setting example in improvements in health indicators for other countries.

India's expenditure on health remains one of the lowest, at just above 1% of GDP (South Africa 8.5%). All importance is given to when someone gets ill or disease ridden, and then all medications are available, only for those who can pay out of pocket. According to Obesity Foundation of India, 30 million Indians are obese and it is predicted to double in the next five years. Diabetes, which is rampant in India is treated quickly with anti-diabetic medications. Little thought is given to the risk factors, obesity and the way we consume sugar, fats and overeat; and the lifestyle we lead with little physical activity. Illness care gets all the attention and primary health care is ignored.

One of the most distressing spectacle in India is the rubbish strewed all around the country; and it is a big country. My recent travel by taxi from Delhi to Jalandhar and auto-rides in Jalandhar itself,

disgusted me with rubbish throughout the roadside, both along the road and in the city itself. Without exaggeration, this is the story of the whole country. There is no city in India which can be considered clean. **Swachh Bharat Mission** campaign is on full swing but has little impact in reality. One of my friends commented that we have too many people and it is difficult to manage waste disposal. The reason is that we have not done anything about it for the last seventy years. India may learn from Singapore how to keep the country clean, not necessarily to copy how Singapore achieved perfect cleanliness in the country, but there is a lot to learn from their experience.

(<http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20181025-the-cost-of-keeping-singapore-squeaky-clean>)

My personal experience with this is worth stating to assess the situation. Wherever rubbish bins are placed, rubbish is thrown outside and around it, rather than into the receptacle. Men urinate indiscriminately anywhere on the roadside. Surprisingly, you don't see women doing the same! Could men learn from women in India, at least for discretion? When I was living in Gurgaon I took Metro from my house to Delhi for work daily and every morning I had to pass men peeing under the foot bridge to the metro station, in spite of the fact that there is a toilet at the metro station and another one in the adjoining mall. I made it a point to rebuke everyone I saw for doing so, much at the risk of being thrashed.

Where do we look to, to undo what has already happened and the hope for any changes?

What we see in India today is the result of failure in educating the masses. Social justice, hygiene and respectful manners have never been important as part of the education system.

We have failed in educating children at home and in schools. Parents and school teachers also need to be educated, as they have missed that opportunity when they were in schools. Seventy decades since independent should have made a difference, but it has not. Taking the broom and sweeping the street to show off is of little help. I was waiting for my turn to get a taxi at Indira Gandhi International Airport when a well-dressed, seemingly educated, lady dropped unwanted piece of paper on the clean floor. I picked up the discarded paper and suggested that she might have accidentally dropped it. She looked at me rather surprised. I pointed her attention to literally two dust bins just next to the desk of the taxi kiosk. Same thing happened at a crowded tourist site, where a lady was finishing some food out of a paper plate and she dropped it on ground as she was walking, without making an effort to discard it in the rubbish bin provided. One sees people chucking rubbish out of a car or a bus window on the road. People throw house refuse just outside their house on to the road or discreetly into the neighbour's yard. It is the rich who practice such habits as the very poor cannot afford to even throw away a piece of paper, as it would be reused again.

It finally boils down to our selfishness and dis-respect for our neighbours. It applies to individuals, groups of people, institutions and large companies. Unless our mentality is changed, the situation will not improve. Social justice starts from awareness of small things and cumulatively it builds up to make a difference. Finger pointing is dangerous and self-defeating. We have to point the finger at ourselves and act today to make a difference.

To conclude, what is stated here applies not only to India but to any country which may have these problems. However, we must recognise our own faults and begin to correct them.

Sincerely hoping for a better world!

It is not difficult to find rubbish dumping sites in and around India in any city or town. Some of the pictures to go with this week's blog, that I could not post earlier, below: