

His article in Indian Express Sunday
Negativity busters: Sudheendra Kulkarni: 14th October

Here is a heart-warming, inspiring and negativity-busting story, which, might interest readers of this column at a time when our Prime Minister has compelled us, with his highly disingenuous statement on corruption last week, to debate on what exactly has created an atmosphere of negativity and pessimism in the country, what is sapping the morale of the executive, and damaging India's image abroad.

On the day that the government was rocked—and India's image besmirched—by debilitating disclosures about the corrupt deals involving a member of the Congress party's 'First Family', I was sitting, cross-legged and awe-struck, on the floor of a small house of Anjali Uikey, a tribal woman in a village in a Naxalite-affected region of Maharashtra, listening to her achievements that would definitely light the lamp of optimism among Indians.

Like hundreds of her colleagues, Anjali serves as an arogyadoot (community health volunteer) with SEARCH, a Gandhian organisation at Shodh Gram in Gadchiroli, an underdeveloped tribal district. This non-profit organisation has been founded by Dr Abhay Bang and Dr Rani Bang, both internationally acclaimed for their pioneering work in community health. Their success in drastically reducing the infant mortality rate (IMR), maternal mortality rate (MMR), malnutrition and illiteracy in the region have made SEARCH the cynosure of the United Nations' mission to achieve its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

I was filled with joy when Anjali, her dark face beaming with pride, said that Bodhali, her village, became a bal mrityu mukt gram (a village with zero infant mortality) in 2007 and has remained so for the past five years. Well-trained in the extremely inexpensive, but compassion-intensive, model of home-based neonatal care devised by the Bang couple, she explained how it has helped her community outperform the UN-MDG targets in mother and child health. Overall, the IMR, MMR and malnutrition-related diseases in the 50 villages served by SEARCH's volunteers are 60-80 percent lower than in the nearby villages covered by the government-run rural healthcare establishment. How have they achieved this miracle? As Dr Abhay Bang described it vividly and evocatively, it is because the arogyadoots have "kandhe par aspataal, dimaag mein jnan, haath mein hunar, aur dil mein karuna". (A shoulder-bag containing a low-cost health-kit that serves as a hospital-travelling-to-people's-doorsteps; traditional and modern knowledge in their heads; healing skills in their hands; and compassion in their hearts). Community service of this kind has given tremendous self-respect, dignity and societal recognition to semi-literate Anjali and others like her.

This achievement needs to be contextualised. Nearly 3,000 children, mostly belonging to tribal families, die daily in India due to malnutrition-related illnesses. Dr Manmohan Singh showed his sensitivity early this year by describing malnutrition as "a national shame". Sadly, he has also shown his pusillanimity by not linking this shaming reality to the other shaming reality—the alarming level of corruption and institutional insensitivity in the political and bureaucratic executive.

Barring exceptions, why have the governments in India failed to deliver the desired results in ending hunger and malnutrition? In delivering basic education and health services to the poor? In ensuring clean drinking water, good sanitation, healthy habitats, and sustainable livelihoods to all? The chief reason is the cancer of corruption, which has spread to all levels and all limbs of the executive. But it always spreads from the top to the bottom.

Corruption abounds at the village and district levels in tribal welfare schemes, healthcare schemes, employment guarantee schemes, and myriad other development programmes because it abounds even more grotesquely in the higher echelons of the ruling establishment. Isn't it obvious that India's image abroad is sullied by our low Human Development Index, which itself is a result of our high Corruption Index?

That there is a numbing mood of negativity in our country is undeniable. Surely it needs to be busted, but how? My visit to Shodh Gram (it derives its name from Mahatma Gandhi's Seva Gram in the neighbouring Wardha district) convinced me yet again that this can be done only when those in leadership positions in our political and administrative establishment learn a lesson or two from India's true national heroes—Dr Abhay Bang, Dr Rani Bang, Anjali Uikey, and tens of thousands of such grassroots servants of society. Against all odds, these revolutionaries are persevering in their chosen missions. They have safeguarded their idealism, their honesty and integrity, their compassionate and service-oriented nature, and their determination to keep their own little lamps of hope burning in spite of the winds of vileness and temptation swirling around them. They represent the vast reservoir of positive energy in India, which our society and polity must tap.

Indeed, it was an earnest attempt to learn from this Mahatma-inspired social transformation project that took me, as a member of a BJP team led by our party president Nitin Gadkari and comprising the health ministers of BJP-ruled states, to Shodh Gram. In this first-of-its-kind initiative, our team visited villages where SEARCH has been active, and participated in a daylong workshop that concluded with the adoption of a five-point commitment by our governments to achieve UN MDGs in IMR, MMR and malnutrition. I have no hesitation in admitting that the BJP needs to do a lot more to demonstrate its commitment to combat corruption. Nevertheless, Gadkari's directive to the party to learn from India's grassroots nation-builders, and also from the good work being done by Congress and other parties' governments, is also a modest negativity-busting development.

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