

cians. Earlier at least the secular parties used to resort to exploiting communal sentiments in a subtle way. Now they do so in such an unabashed way that it becomes difficult to distinguish them and the communal parties. Resorting to communal propaganda constitutes a malpractice under our electoral law. But when blatant communal propaganda is carried on, as in the Aurangabad municipal elections, or in the Udampur, Faridabad and Allahabad by-elections, etc, no one thinks of challenging it in a court of law. Who will? Everyone is guilty.

If we have to maintain the integrity of our country, if we have to build up a modern democratic political culture, if we want to promote secular values, we should not take the Palwal marriage incident

lightly. Without respecting individual rights we cannot build a democratic culture. If an individual's decision to marry a person from another community leads to a serious communal problem, it is high time we think more seriously than we often pretend to do as to what is wrong with our attitudes. Those affiliated to political parties cannot do this for obvious reasons. Only independent activists can muster courage to do that. It is only independent activists who have taken up unpopular causes like sati, environmental pollution, women's rights, etc. Here too only independent activists can intervene effectively and help raise public consciousness. The case of the forcible remarriage of Raj Rani should be taken up by feminists groups as well.

they had been privately installed. Murthy claimed that water samples from these pumps were tested every three months, but could not lay his hands on test reports. He qualified this statement by saying "public health and sanitation are not DDA's forte, but we do our best". Chauhan, chairman, MCD, confirmed that all water samples collected from hand-pumps and tube-wells were found when tested to be unfit for human consumption. Even after it was found that the water from the available sources was contaminated, no attempt was made to provide tankers to supply drinking water in these colonies.

The main causes of the spread of cholera were lack of a sewage system, open drains left uncleaned for months together, garbage not removed since February or March 1988, no sanitary disposal of excreta and contaminated water supply. Delhi's sewage system can only treat 50 per cent of the city's sewage before releasing it as waste water, the rest of the sewage flows in open drains.

While all this was happening, no official, including the Lt governor who is normally in the habit of appearing incognito like Haroon Al Rashid, removing his shroud and shouting at officials and indulging in other forms of 'dramabazi', had visited these colonies. They were busy trying to make sure that the incidence was not declared an epidemic and underplaying it. Despite all talk about the 21st century, there were not enough jet guns to inoculate the people. B N Tandon of the All-India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) made a statement, quoted in the *Hindustan Times* of July 21, that "no good vaccine is available in India to prevent cholera and other water-borne diseases and the ones in use are only partially successful". He also said the spread of gastro-enteritis is not the fault of a family or an individual but a pointer that the system has gone wrong.

Yes, the system has gone wrong. We can import super-computers, luxury goods, Bofors guns, but not enough vaccines or jet guns for inoculation. It required a visit by the prime minister after his four-nation holiday abroad to make the officials follow in his trail into the lanes and by-lanes of these colonies and see for themselves for the first time the condition of the colonies. Do we need the prime minister to visit every garbage dump in the country before it can be removed? How have trucks, water tankers, jet guns and vaccines appeared suddenly after the prime minister directed immediate action on a war-footing? How are the Lt governor and the chief secretary, who said they had no control over DDA and MCD, acting now? How have the officials of DDA and MCD, who were accusing each other in press conferences, sunk their differences now? Our system has certainly broken down if we need a prime minister to intervene to make it perform its ordinary functions.

Defining an Epidemic

M A Sundaram

As children were dying like flies of cholera in the capital's resettlement colonies, the municipal commissioner was asserting that it was not an epidemic; he would call it an epidemic, he said, only if a million people had been affected.

DURING the last several weeks, death has stalked the 44 resettlement colonies in the trans-Yamuna area in Delhi claiming over 150 victims from 7,000 reported cases of cholera. These are official statistics and the actual incidence according to all reports is much more. While children were dying like flies, we have the bizarre spectacle of the municipal commissioner, P P Chauhan, defining what an epidemic was and claiming that what was happening in the trans-Yamuna area was not an epidemic. He said he would call it an epidemic only if a million people had been affected—no less. He said that an epidemic was something "in which every family is affected". To stress the point he claimed that cholera was nothing but an acute form of gastro-enteritis and what had happened was only "an outburst of gastro-enteritis in some areas of the capital". Dr C P Singh, head of the department of medicine at Safdarjung Hospital, said "the spread of gastro-enteritis had not assumed the form of an epidemic and this was a natural phenomena after rains due to contamination of water". Another official said "it had not assumed significant dimension". Commissioner (slums) of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Manjit Singh, said "epidemic has some legal definition—ask the health ministry". In the health ministry, a senior official who did not wish to be named said, "ask the Delhi administration".

Bureaucrats were busy not only tossing the definition of the word epidemic among themselves but also blaming each other for the spread of the disease in the

resettlement colonies. The DDA and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) accused each other. DDA officials said that they had handed over these colonies to MCD on June 1 this year and it was the MCD's responsibility. Delhi administration officials stated the administration had no control over DDA or MCD. An estimated 25,000 truck-loads of garbage were lying uncleaned since April 1 when DDA stopped this work entrusted to contractors and wanted surplus departmental labour to take up the job. DDA claimed that the colonies were in a satisfactory condition when they were handed over to the MCD. The chairman of MCD and mayor, Mahinder Singh Saathi, at a press conference on April 20 said that the DDA had stopped cleaning the colonies since February 1988 much before they had handed over the colonies to MCD. V S Murthy, member (engineering), DDA, said "DDA had no complaints of water contamination" and they had spent Rs 54 crore on maintenance of resettlement colonies till May 1988. It has been accepted by all that one of the major causes of the disease was contaminated water from hand-pumps. The main sources of water supply in these colonies are public hydrants, 24 tubewells and 2,449 hand-pumps. It is alleged that these hand-pumps were installed in a great hurry before the civic elections in February 1988. The pumps were not deep enough and were actually supplying sullage and sewage water, particularly water flowing from open drains. While Murthy, member (engineering), quoted statistics and claimed that these pumps had been installed by DDA, Mathur, chief secretary, stated that