AADHAAR

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Will Deaths Awaken the Sarkars Out of Systemic Stupor?

THE THIRD EYE

SHANKKAR AIYAR

Author of *Aadhaar: A Biometric History of India's 12 Digit Revolution*, and *Accidental India*

Earlier this week, 11-year-old Santoshi (Chando) Kumari died an untimely death at Karimati in Simdega district, Jharkhand. Her mother says she died of hunger, asking for '*bhat*' (rice). The government of Jharkhand says she died of Malaria. Across the country in Gokarna Gram Panchayat, in Karnataka, three brothers—Venkataraman, Narayan, and Subbu Maru—died a few weeks back. The family says they died of starvation. Officials from the government of Karnataka say they died of alcoholism.

Friedrich Nietzsche said famously, "there are no facts, only interpretations". Frequently, Sarkari—that is political and administrative—response to failings and failures in governance reveal the crafting of an alternate field of objective reality Nietzsche referred to. The result: people may say what they say, governments will claim what is convenient to claim. In Uttar Pradesh, when children died in a hospital, the narrative was reduced to death due to lack of oxygen versus death by disease. As structural issues are drowned in the din death is reduced to a mere incident, a statistic!

This has been enabled by politics of optics—a new hierarchy of morality, a false equivalence of what is politically defensible and what is not. Obfuscation has replaced assessment and the average John Jaani Janardhan is trapped between wily politicians and willfully negligent administration. Accountability is really a kho-kho competition of passing the responsibility, and rules are littered with commas and semi-colons. The epitaph for every failing in governance now has space for option, for an oblique 'people's version/government's version'.

The worst-affected are the poor and the most vulnerable sections of society—especially women and children. The irony is that the deaths —in Jharkhand, Karnataka and elsewhere—happen despite enactment of two major laws on delivery of welfare. The National Food Security Act of 2013 was passed as a justiciable law to prevent hunger—with particular emphasis on children below 14, such as such as Santoshi who was 11 years old. The Aadhaar Act of 2016 is meant to enable delivery of entitlements to families at the bottom of the pyramid and ensure succor to intended beneficiaries. But the quest is daunted by the state of administrative structure.

In Jharkhand, the family had Aadhaar cards, which were not linked; and in Karnataka, the family had BPL cards, but no Aadhaar. What does the law say? It clearly says: "If an Aadhaar number is not assigned to an individual, the individual shall be offered alternate and viable means of identification for delivery of the subsidy, benefit or service." On whom does the onus of ensuring the implementation of the law in letter rest on? Clearly, it squarely rests on the state governments.

It is not that these issues have not been flagged. Aadhaar is not a blunt policy instrument to cure everything that ails governance. Its expansion requires systemic preparedness. There are gaps in the processes of enrolment, authentication and cancellation. The government told the Parliament earlier this year that over 81 lakh Aadhaar registrations had been cancelled. Many did not know under what law, why or what their fault was. Most struggled to get rectifications done. This included professionals who could not file returns, pensioners who couldn't get their monies and the poor who were denied entitlements.

Santoshi Kumari (left) of Jharkhand who died due to starvation; her and her mother's Aadhaar cards

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Clearly, there is a need for a more humane, sensitive approach and capacity upgradation. The Economic Survey has highlighted the systemic issues twice. In its 2015-16 survey said, "The average state preparedness is 12 per cent". The 2016-17 Economic Survey points out that "authentication failures" revealed to be 49 per cent in Jharkhand and 37 per cent in Rajasthan result in exclusion of genuine beneficiaries.

There is an urgent need for an index that measures state of preparedness for use and expansion of Aadhaar. There is also need for real-time monitoring of systemic issues that go beyond authentication—in delivery of entitlements and services to ensure inclusion. Are the issues being addressed? Is there a monitoring of the same? Again, who is responsible for fixing the issues?

Governance is shackled in a systemic stupor at the intersection of political and policy failures. Last week, there was much debate about India's ranking on the Global Hunger Index. And one fact spells the state of sloth—every year over 12 lakh children, that is over 135 an hour—die before they reach the age of five. Every year, nearly three lakh children die of pneumonia and diarrhea. Despite many programmes India accounts for one in five deaths of children under five world over. An estimated 40,000 women die in childbirth every year—which means hundreds of children are rendered motherless every day. There are problems with the design of programmes and funding, but more importantly, it is about efficacy of implementation.

This Deepawali there has been much angst about the judicial pronouncement banning sale of fire crackers in the national capital. At best, it signaled the gravity of the situation and fire crackers are simply an aggravating factor. In September 2016, a World Health Organisation study revealed that severe air pollution claimed over 6.2 lakh lives—do the math for the daily toll. Yes, auto pollution is a culprit and the most visible villain, but there are multiple causes. Just construction generates over 500 million tonne of waste, and then there is burning of agri-waste.

A study by Lancet reveals that India topped the list of countries with pollution-related deaths in 2015. Air, water and other forms of pollution claimed 2.5 million lives. And policy response has been tepid and temporally transactional despite the annual parade of deaths.

In 2015, over five lakh persons were injured and over 1.4 lakh persons killed in road accidents. Translated, that is a shocking 400 deaths every day or 16 lives every hour. A UN study in 2016 revealed that India took a hit of over $58 billion a year (roughly 3 per cent of GDP) due to accidents. The cause of deaths is often listed as human error. Fact is, the killings are caused by a hugely corrupt system of licencing and failure to modernise regulations, train and expand capacity and induct technology.

At the crux is the fact that political and policy processes of governance are yet in the 1900s. The system of affords anonymity and immunity from action or inaction, acts of commission or omission. Yes there is always the promise of enquiry and probe reports. The issue is about who is responsible, but it is also about what must be done. Typically, evasion overwhelms correction. India needs to urgently rewrite the administrative code—one that ensures accountability, one where doers are rewarded and shirkers are hauled up.

Finally, India also needs a political consensus on national imperatives—surely, prevention of untimely death can be kept above party politics. The question remains: Will the deaths stir the living, will it awaken the Sarkars out of systemic stupor?

shankkar.aiyar@gmail.com