

The Tribune

Established in 1881

Captain's faux pas

He must steer clear of gurdwara politics

THE Congress knew it would be impossible to defend what Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh had done and has quickly accepted that his presence in a Canadian gurdwara known to be the hub of separatists was a "genuine mistake". After his pictures with the old banner of "Khalistan zindabad" right behind him appeared in newspapers and on some TV channels, it was just not possible to dismiss everything as a figment of the Opposition's imagination. His explanation that he was not aware that he was addressing a gathering against the backdrop of "Khalistan zindabad" banners is hard to swallow. The gurdwara at Dixie has been for years known to be a hotbed of separatist activities and he just should not have gone there, least of all spoken there from the podium. It is rather intriguing that he allowed himself to be taken for a ride by whosoever invited him there or whosoever advised him to visit this particular gurdwara. A Chief Minister is supposed to be better informed about the places he has to visit, or not to visit. It was a faux pas, whichever way one looks at it. It is too clear that besides paying obeisance at the gurdwara, he had an

invitation to speak there. Apparently, the organisers of the function had deliberately put up the pro-"Khalistani" banners to embarrass him and the Chief Minister allowed himself to be embarrassed. The brickbats that he is now receiving are thus not undeserved.

Captain Amarinder Singh is not an ordinary person who can visit any place abroad at will. He ought to have sought and followed the advice of the Indian High Commission in Canada on whether he should visit this particular gurdwara or not. The photographs which have appeared in newspapers as well as on the TV channels will always be cited by his critics in his own party and the opposition to score points against him. He ought not to have given his friends a chance to laugh at him and his opponents a stick to beat him with.

The Congress party's avowed policy is to stand up for secularism and Captain Amarinder Singh over the years ought to have taken care that he does not indulge in gurdwara politics. It is a double-edged weapon, as he must have now realised to his chagrin. We hope the Captain has learnt a lesson from the gurdwara episode for the future.

Mega deal in Orissa

Boost to the state's economy

ORISSA is to have the country's largest steel plant that will cost Rs 52,000 crore, provide direct employment to 13,000 and indirect employment to 35,000, pay Rs 25,000 crore in taxes to the state government and

protests without even knowing details of the pact signed. The state government, which agreed to make available 600 million tonnes of iron ore for captive use in the plant, has allowed the Korean company to import iron ore of low

WHEN the rumour mill was at its peak about the disappearance from public life of Subroto Roy, the head of the Sahara Empire, because he was "seriously ill," he was compelled to go public and deny that he had AIDS. Though the word "AIDS" was that never mentioned in the lead story of a popular news-magazine, clearly the speculation was that he was HIV-positive. The economic implications of the speculation could have ruined the Sahara business. So, the denial with the assurance that he had undergone the AIDS test appeared as the lead story in a national daily and subsequently all news channels carried the report.

The kingpin in the stamp paper scam, Abdul Karim Telgi, used his HIV-positive status — that most people go out of their way to hide because of the fear, stigma and discrimination that goes with the infection — to get a reprieve from the long hand of justice and avail himself of better medical facilities.

Time magazine's recent cover story too was on the AIDS epidemic in India with a big question mark on the government's claim that the number of new infections in 2004 was just 28,000 as against 6 lakhs the previous year. Had a miracle happened in India or was the government, embarrassed by the rapid spread of the virus, fudging the figures?

During the same week or period of 10 days, the Sunday section of The Hindu as well as the Saturday section of The Tribune had cover stories on AIDS. While one reflected on the spate of suicides by the AIDS affected, both publications also carried heart-warming stories about HIV-positive women facing their status with amazing courage. They have come out of their shell and are speaking out and networking to fight for their rights and give hope to the new-comers to their fraternity.

India has the largest number of people in the world, after South Africa, living with HIV/AIDS - a whopping 5.1 million cases - and international donors, including the Bill and Melin-

da Gates Foundation, the Global Trust Fund and the Clinton Foundation, have been pumping billions of dollars into India for the prevention and control of the infection. Eager as the government and NGOs working on the issue are to get this bonanza of assistance, the government seems reluctant to admit that it has become a major health problem in this country. Its tentacles extend from the high-risk groups like the commercial sex workers, injecting drug users and male homosexuals to the general population and, more importantly, the rural or small town woman, the pativrata woman, who has only had only one sexual partner all her life, her husband. For all its surveillance, the government health machinery is unable to keep track of the infections. About 50 per cent of the infected and affected are women and the mother to child transmission is as high as 30 per cent.

Equally alarming is the fact that of the total AIDS cases in India, 35 per cent are 15 to 29 years of age. Eightynine per cent of the reported AIDS cases are occurring in the economically productive age group of 15 to 44 years.

The good news is that HIV/AIDS is acquiring a public face in India. No longer is it a problem to be brushed under the carpet. So a Subroto Roy or a Telgi actually speak about it whether to disclaim that they are infected or to admit that they have the virus and want proper medical treatment and the rest and care that are a part of their rights. The media too by and large is speaking in a more enlightened voice.

Instead of spreading panic and a scare about HIV/AIDS, there are some wonderful stories on how we are moving ahead in these turbulent days when 10 per cent of the world's total population living with HIV/AIDS is in India. So, in Surat there is a marriage bureau for HIV-positive people. These days with proper care and medical facilities, the affected people can lead normal lives for 15 to 20 years after getting the infection. Or even more so why not enjoy the compan-

ionship and joys of marriage? In Pune, on the other hand, people wanting to tie the knot are demanding a medical certificate that the proposed partner is not HIV-positive.

The biggest challenge for the government is to ensure that those infected have access to the latest drugs. It is estimated that only 7 per cent of the people who need antiretroviral therapy (ART) in developing countries have access to it. The medicines are expensive (costs varying from Rs 3000 to Rs 8000 a month) and out of the reach of the common man. The medical pro-

There are valiant efforts by NGOs working in the area of HIV/AIDS not just to boost the morale of the AIDS widows but also to stand them on their own.

grammes must also be sustainable to prevent the development of drug-resistant strains of the virus.

There are no figures on the HIV/AIDS orphans in India but it could be a big number. When both parents succumb to the virus it becomes a double whammy for the child. Grandparents may or may not be in a position to support the child. While the bigger social problem is whether there is anyone to take care of these children, the other is getting the medicines in palatable, liquid form. Some NGOs running Care and Support Homes are actually buying the liquid medicine from the market. Others have to go through the arduous process of powdering the tablets and mixing it with water, etc, before shoving it into the mouths of children.

There are valiant efforts by NGOs working in the area of HIV/AIDS not just to boost the morale of the AIDS widows — many of them positive themselves — but also to stand them on their own and make them bread-winners. In Shahadara I saw several HIV-positive women, who had never stepped out of their homes, acquiring tailoring skills and doing fabrication work. There have to be several Good Samaritans helping them acquire skills and confidence as they struggle along.

The Lawyers Collective as well as other lawyers have been joining hands with NGOs and working for the rights of HIV/AIDS-infected and affected. Pro bono they have helped them fight for their jobs, their property or even the right to inheritance. There is the moving story of the young Muslim widow of a DESU employee who was thrown out of her in-laws' house after the death of her husband who had contracted HIV/AIDS. They sealed their son's cupboards and wanted to keep her two children. Without even observing her mandatory mourning for a fixed period, the woman with the help of an NGO approached Lawyer's Collective and got the money her husband was insured for, the plot of land in his name and the custody of her children. The woman then approached DESU and got a job in place of her husband. After settling all her personal problems she formally mourned the death of her husband.

Another young HIV-positive woman, whose husband also had died of the infection, got her share of the family property with the help of Lawyer's Collective. The woman is on ART but fortunately her two sons have not contracted the infection.

India has come a long way from the first case documented in 1986. There was a time when parents were squeamish about sex education being taught in schools. Now they are seeking, it and schools are realising that it is the need of the hour. ■

AIDS challenge to India

Ensure the availability of latest drugs

by Usha Rai

With a pinch of salt

For Those Positive Vibes

Akankshya, a care home for the HIV/AIDS infected, is helping positive people rebuild their lives

BY USHA RAI

TRIBHUVAN TIWARI

IT'S a modest building that blends into the lower middle class ambience of Shahdara, Delhi. Despite the hustle and bustle of life all around, it is quiet and peaceful at CHELSEA's care and support home, Akankshya in Jyoti Nagar. It is difficult to believe that it is the lifeline for those infected by HIV/AIDS—widows who are rebuilding their lives and kids who have been orphaned because one or both parents have succumbed to the infection.

The home was started in 2001 by the Women's Action Group—CHELSEA. It is a group of retired army and air force officers' wives who wanted to give back to society the good life they had enjoyed. Doe Nair and Neelam Dang, two of the original group of 13 women who formed the action group in the '90s, have brought the army discipline into their working. The home is clean, efficiently run and the Shahdara residents have accepted its inmates. In fact, many want to work as volunteers here but they don't have the skills CHELSEA is looking for. There is also a team of dedicated doctors and social workers. Many caregivers and outreach staff are positive people who, because of their experience and ability to speak from the heart, have been able to attract many infected people to the home. At work they are like any other member of the staff, says Neelam.

Officially, only 10 people can be accommodated at Akankshya, but space is found for eight more. All the inmates are recovering from various ailments and have travelled from far-off villages or cities of UP, Gujarat, West Bengal and even Tamil Nadu. Forty-five per cent of Shahdara's population are migrants, says Doe Nair. The medical facilities attract them to Delhi and they stay on for care and work that seems more readily available in the capital.



Keeping the women of Akankshya happy

With about half a dozen local, national and international bodies funding their care, counselling and support services, CHELSEA works not only in Shahdara but holds prevention programmes in neighbouring areas like Sunder Nagari, Nand Nagar, Tahirpur, Harsh Vihar and the slums adjacent to Jyoti Nagar. They support positive people as well as those suffering from sexually transmitted diseases. Since early detection is vital to cope with HIV infection,

health melas with facilities for free medical checks are held routinely. With bands, puppet and magic shows they attract big crowds. A range of messages on health, sanitation and even HIV/AIDS are disseminated through popular modes of entertainment. At least five of those who have attended a health mela volunteer for the HIV/AIDS

test and are taken to the nearby Guru Tegh Bahadur Hospital daily. About 16 people test positive every month.

Community-based care and support of kids infected and affected by AIDS was started in 2002. When 14-month-old Ashu (name changed), an orphan

who had lost both parents to AIDS, fell ill it was a day and night vigil of prayer and care here. Today Neelam, Manju and others are his foster parents. Oblivious of the trauma he has been through, he gurgles and stretches his tiny, emaciated fingers to Manju. CHELSEA is looking after 300 such children.

CHELSEA's biggest challenge is finding employment for positive people. The team is constantly in talks with factory owners and others to find jobs for positive people. With the support of the ILO, income-generating activities have been started for the needy—many of them positive widows who have never stepped out of their homes. They are learning tailoring and have received orders for fabrication work for uniforms and dresses. A businessman has placed bulk orders with CHELSEA and daily the women complete their household chores to rush to Akankshya to work on the order. Their kids are looked after in the creche on the ground floor. At the end of the month, each of them could take home Rs 1,000.

'Keep them happy,' is CHELSEA's motto. "It adds to longevity and responsible behaviour," says Doe Nair. Get in touch with CHELSEA at: Akankshya Care and Support Home, B 17/4, West Jyoti Nagar, Shahdara, East Delhi-110093 Ph: 22130451/22130452, email: wagchelsea@vsnl.net and wagchelsea@yahoo.com

On a daily basis, at least five people who have attended CHELSEA's health melas volunteer for HIV/AIDS tests. Of these, around 16 test positive for HIV/AIDS every month.

Tigers are on the death row

They must be saved

by Usha Rai

THE tiger in India has been on the death row since the early nineties. After a tremendous pressure from NGOs, both national and international, there was acknowledgement that the tiger was facing a second crisis — the first being in the late sixties and the early seventies when Project Tiger was launched. After tremendous rallying around by tiger lovers, Project Tiger officials, NGOs and international donors, there was reprieve for the tiger but, alas, it seems to have been a short one.

Now a doomsday scenario is being enacted in Rajasthan, for the tiger has disappeared from most of its habitat in the state. According to Tiger Watch, except for Ranthambhore National Park, where the number of tigers has come down from the official 45 to about 20, there are no tigers in the Sariska Tiger Reserve, or in the Ramgarh Bisdhari sanctuary (14 in 1982), in Darrah, Vanbihar Ramgarh and Sitamata sanctuaries. In the last three sanctuaries tigers were last seen in 1993. In Sariska, not even the pug marks, a tiger kill or even the tiger scratchings on a tree have been sighted since the monsoon last year. The last tiger seen in the park was in June 2004. The fact that several leopards are being seen in Sariska is another indication that the tiger has either moved out or disappeared from the reserve.

In fact, tigers seem to have vanished from five of the 27 tiger reserves in India — Sariska, Palamau (Jharkhand), Namdapha, Dampa (North East) and Indravati (Maharashtra). Not even pug marks have been sighted in these tiger reserves, lamented Mr Valmik Thapar, now a member of the Central Empowered Committee for forests and wildlife, appointed by the Supreme Court of India. In fact, some angry and unhappy tiger lovers have even suggested that Sariska should be delisted and the money allotted for it better utilised in parks where there is still scope to save the big cat.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests has lost the clout it had when Mr Kamal Nath, Mrs Menaka Gandhi and Mr Rajesh Pilot headed it. Even

the bureaucrats in the ministry seem to be lacking the kind of commitment earlier seen in the ministry. How else can one explain the fact that the Steering Committee of Project Tiger has not met in the last two or three years. Even the Indian Board for Wild Life has not met for 17 months. There is total absence of the political will for environmental issues in the country. There is no sign of a Green Party.

In Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, the country had Prime Ministers who were concerned and committed to environmental issues. Now that the Congress is back in power, can one hope for the reversal of the tremendous setback that environment has suffered even if we cannot have a Green Party? Will there be the strong commitment needed to protect our coastlines and wild life in the sea and forests? Will there be an earnest effort to stop the decimation of

development schemes around the park, for which the World Bank and other big donors have pumped in Millions of dollars, have failed! The purpose of eco-development was to encourage the development of fuel, fodder and other necessities of people in the villages outside the park so that they do not scavenge in the protected area. Some of the money seems to have been spent on constructing a wall around most of the park. This wall has breached at several places so that villagers can walk in to collect firewood and graze cattle inside the park. The money would have been better spent in the advocacy of wild life with the villagers.

Hundreds of headloads of fuel wood go out unchecked — many times just a stone's throw away from a forest post. Tiger Watch, one of the best wild life NGOs in Rajasthan, estimates 1.5 lakh people of 96 villages still depend

openly, at prices cheaper than mutton, at Khandar, Kundera, Sanwata and Rajbag chowki areas. Each village has appointed a tribal shooter (Moghhiya) for protecting their crops from the herbivores of the park. Villagers and the Moghiyas benefit mutually. The Moghiyas protect the villagers' crops and they in turn protect the Moghiyas. At Uliana village, sambar and wild boar meat is available at Rs 40 and Rs 30 a kg respectively. Though no activity is allowed inside a national park, fishing takes place regularly at Mansarovar and Amli dah jeels.

Every dead leopard and tiger is cremated quickly without proper scientific investigation for their death. A 12-foot deep canal cuts through the prime tiger habitat to transfer water from Malik Talao to Raj Bagh. This canal has rightly been called the "death canal in tigerland."

There is obviously a systemic failure that tigers should be disappearing in this manner. There is no proper management of the parks — be it Ranthambhore, Sariska or the parks outside Rajasthan. Earlier, when there were committed people at the ministry, park managers were chosen with great care. They were the brightest of forest officers with a deep understanding of wild-life needs and management. Now the system is top heavy. Since 1987 no subordinate forest official has been appointed. The result is that there are just a third of the forest guards needed to protect the park. Mr P K Sen, former Director of Project Tiger, now with WWF-India, says 4000 vacancies of forest guards have not been filled. In Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh, six directors have been changed in four years. Some continuity of tenure is needed for directors to protect the parks.

The other big problem is that the funds from the Centre reach the parks only in January/February when the financial year is almost coming to an end. With mammoth efforts by all concerned, the tiger may still be saved.

Once the tiger disappears, the forests will disappear. No amount of money can bring back the tiger to the area from where it has been wiped out. Is someone listening? ■

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our green cover and mining in forest areas and tiger reserves?

As Mr Ranjit Singh, a former Additional Secretary in the Environment and Forest Ministry and the author of the Wild Life Act, pointed out, some national parks and tiger reserves have become "isolated zoos" because people go there on a picnic to see a tiger. Tiger tourism is ruining Ranthambhore National Park. A common sight is the tiger encircled by jeeps with 30 to 40 cameras trained on it. Quite obviously, the animal is uncomfortable and does not know where to run. Many of the vehicles being used are of diesel though they are not supposed to be used because of the noise and diesel pollution they cause. This is hardly the atmosphere conducive for the breeding of tigers.

The people per se have failed the tiger. We have not been able to create public opinion in its favour. Even the eco-

on forest wood. Goats and sheep graze freely in the core and buffer zones, and since one sees more cattle than tigers, one may well ask: "Is this a tiger reserve or a cattle reserve?"

RNP has some 400 km of road inside the park but unnecessary roads are still being constructed in the breeding valley of the tigers — Chandhali. Hundreds of green dhonk trees have been cut during construction. There is uncontrolled movement of pilgrims to the Ganesh temple and on festive days it can go up to 10,000 pilgrims. After the mela they cook and use gas cylinders. This is really dangerous for legally not even a match stick should be allowed inside a park.

There is even poaching inside the park. Recently a dead jungle cat and some foot traps were seized 50 metres from the main forest office. According to Tiger Watch, bush meat is being sold

An occasion to mourn

There is little to celebrate Women's Day

by Usha Rai

WE should stop celebrating Women's Day. In fact, it should be a day of national mourning. We should collectively hang our heads in shame. Or maybe we should observe two minutes' silence today for all the lives that have been snuffed out in their mother's womb.

The Nazis tried to eliminate the Jews. The rich and the elite in India are quietly but systematically eliminating the female sex. The Census Commission's latest analysis shows that the female sex ratio in the zero to six age group has fallen in all the metro cities of the country with the exception of Kochi, Asansol and Madurai.

There has been an 80 to 90-point drop in the female sex ratio between 1991 and 2001 in Ahmedabad, Agra, Kanpur, Amritsar, Jabalpur and Faridabad. In Delhi the drop is of 50 points.

The PNDT Act has been in force for several years now. In fact, sex selection before conception is also recognised as a crime. All ultrasound clinics have to be registered. The Medical Council of India can suspend/cancel the registration of doctors caught doing sex selection or an abortion based on sex selection. However, despite all the thunder and fury of legal action, sex selection and elimination of the female foetus has not declined. In fact, it has increased.

A study of the births registered in the Delhi hospitals by the MCD between January and June 2004 shows there are 819 female births to 1000 male births (950 females to 1000 males would be considered normal). The residents of South Delhi are truly girl-haters. The female sex ratio in this region, called the south zone, is an abominable 762, followed by Rohini 784, Najafgarh 792, central, Shahdra and Narela zones 805, 806 and 808 respectively. In Delhi alone some 2100 ultrasound clinics are under government scrutiny. The falling sex ratio has sent out clear signals that these clinics are promoting and practising sex selection.

Female foeticide is such a murky and

clandestine business that it is difficult to give an exact figure. But it is estimated that between 1.5 million and 5 million female foetuses are being destroyed in India every year. With the emergence of new technology, female infanticide has been replaced by female foeticide. And if you thought that the big bad wolves gobbling up the unborn foetuses are only in the cities, think again. A staggering 204 districts of the country have a lower child sex ratio than the national average of 927 in the zero to six age group. Forty-eight districts have a female sex ratio of less than 850.

Alarmed at the falling female sex ratio among the affluent people of Punjab, a few years ago Akal Takht Jathedar Joginder Singh Vedanti had notified that female foeticide was against the Sikh tenets and offenders

unwittingly trampling on it. But apparently they are not so squeamish about doing away with the life struggling for existence in the womb. After the Sikhs, the Jains have the worst record for sex ratio-870 females to a thousand males.

The Muslims in the country have been much maligned for having too many children. But as a religious group they are more gender-just than the Sikhs, Jains, Hindus and even the Buddhists. They have a robust sex ratio of 950 females to 1000 males. The Christians have the best record - 964 females to 1000 males.

The two-child policy being practised by at least half a dozen states in the country has only compounded the problem. With the strong son preference in India, the slogan of yesteryears, "We two, ours two," which pushed for a small family of a daughter and son,

al Population Policy of 2000. There is no insistence on a two-child norm in the family planning programme and couples can have as many children as they want, the government affidavit stated. It had no intention of implementing a centralised, target-oriented family planning programme, it added, and to the relief of NGOs, confirmed "the programme was voluntary." So families can decide in their bedrooms the number of children they want instead of it being decided in the corridors of Nirman Bhavan.

The bigger challenge for the government and civil society is changing the mindset of people — to give equal status to daughters and sons and stop this senseless killing of the female foetus. There has also to be serious implementation of the PNDT Act and PCPNDT (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act. There are 25,569 registered ultrasound clinics in the country. No one knows how many are unregistered. Despite all the hue and cry about the missing daughters, till the end of January this year just 308 cases had been prosecuted but not a single person has been convicted. Eighty per cent of the cases registered are for non-registration of the ultrasound clinics or machine. The rest are for non-maintenance of records, communicating the sex of the foetus and for advertisements that promote sex selection.

There has been national euphoria over the victories of Sania Mirza in tennis and Anju Bobby George in athletics. Kiran Mazumdar Shaw's achievements in the corporate world are trail blazing, Aruna Roy and Arundhati Roy won the Magasaysay award and the Booker Prize for the right to information movement and for literary work respectively. Smart young women walk the ramp, are journalists of eminence, scientists and corporate and information technology whiz kids. Where would they all have been if their mothers had practised female foeticide! It is high time we stopped mourning our missing daughters and started celebrating their birth. ■

The bigger challenge for the government and civil society is changing the mindset of people — to give equal status to daughters and sons and stop this senseless killing of the female foetus

would be ex-communicated. One has not heard of a single case of ex-communication in Punjab. Were these empty promises? An analysis of the census data reveals that among the various religious communities, the Sikhs have the worst track record for sex selection. There are just 786 females for every 1000 males in the zero to six age group. In fact, in Punjab both Hindus and Sikhs do not want to have girls because they do not want daughters to get a share in their agricultural landholdings, which are already shrinking. With daughters now legally entitled to a share in ancestral property and land, they are not welcomed.

The Jains are known for their pacifist behaviour. The traditional Jain religious leaders wear a mask around their mouth and walk without shoes or chapals because they do not want to kill any living being either by inhaling it or

is unfortunately being interpreted now as two sons. They are seen as indispensable for conducting the last rituals of parents and for carrying forward the family name. With the demand for dowry increasing, girls are seen as a liability. In fact, the slogans seen in different parts of Haryana before the clamp down under the PNDT Act was "Spend Rs 5000 now (on a sex test and abortion) and save Rs 5 lakh as dowry later. With the sex selection business going underground, the fee for a test-cum-abortion has gone up to Rs 10,000. The amount has to be paid in advance. If the test reveals a male foetus, Rs 6500 to Rs 7000 is returned.

Fortunately, the Central Government was pushed into realising the consequences of a two-child policy recently when a public interest litigation was filed in the Delhi High Court for the implementation of the Nation-

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Population is India's asset, forget two-child policy

ARGUMENT | Usha Rai

The two-child norm has been seen by several state governments as a simple shortcut to reducing the number of people in this country. Six states of the country — Rajasthan, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh — introduced the two-child norm for those contesting elections to the panchayats and local bodjés. The desire to reduce India's population at all costs snowballed after the 1991 census showed a tremendous increase in our numbers.

In 1992, a committee on population was set up under the National Development Council and it recommended introduction of a legislation that prohibited those with more than two children holding any elected post from panchayat to Parliament. Rajasthan was the first to introduce the two-child law at the panchayat and municipality levels in 1992. Others followed in quick succession. What should have been the decision of young couples in the privacy of their bedrooms soon became a diktat of state governments.

Some 60 lakh young girls are missing in this country due to sex selection, the strong desire for male progeny and short-sighted policies like the two-child policy. A study of births in Delhi's hospitals over six months last year has revealed that in South Delhi the female population at birth has dropped to an abysmal 742 against 1,000 boys. The female sex ratio is likely to drop further as more and more states root for the two-child policy. After visiting China, doctors of the Indian Medical Association are now saying that India should go the way of China and adopt a one-child policy.

Fortunately Himachal Pradesh has responded positively to the strong lobby against the two-child policy. If pursued, the policy will result in a further fall in the female juvenile sex ratio of the country, marginalise dalits and the poor (who have more children either because more children means more hands to work, or because family planning services are not available) and push women, striving for political empowerment after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, out of the power circuit. Himachal Pradesh last month rescinded the two-child norm.

However, the Gujarat government has announced it would soon introduce the two-child policy. In Maharashtra, agriculture minister Ajit Pawar has said water will be denied to farmers with more than two children. Already under the two-child norm, those with a third child are deprived of development benefits — housing, TRYSEM, DWCRA, and sanitation schemes. Other citizenship rights denied are maternity-related benefits, subsidy for referral transport, costs of institutional delivery and their children are deprived of free education and ration cards.

Other rights denied are appointment to public service, promotion for five years, no bonus or other benefits, stoppage of annual increments for two years and not entitled to housing or loans. The disciplinary action for not informing the government about the



Priya Nagarajan

third child could be termination of service. Political leaders and bureaucrats seem to forget that India is a signatory to the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, goals that moved away from numbers and targets for reducing the world population to a more human-centred, rights-based approach to reproductive health.

The National Population Policy of 2000 affirms the commitment of the government to voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens while availing of reproductive health care, and continuation of the target-free approach in administering family planning services.

Even Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has stated that "a sensible approach to the regulation of fertility must respect the fundamental rights of parents to make informed choices about the number of children they wish to have and types of spacing they would prefer in deciding about their family size."

In the last one year, however, the debate on the two-child policy has seen-sawed. Before the last elections, Mr L.K. Advani had said the two-child norm would be mandatory and it was included in the BJP's election manifesto.

After the elections, the common minimum programme of the UPA government made ambiguous references to a population control programme without a clear reference to the two-child norm. Last October, the minister for health and family welfare, Dr A. Rama-

doss, said the two-child norm would not be enforced but people would be urged to adopt family planning voluntarily. In February 2005, Dr Ramadoss' ministry filed an affidavit in the Delhi high court stating, "There is no insistence on two-child norm in the family planning programme and couples can have any number of children they like. They are free to decide the size of the family."

However, the Supreme Court has been consistently giving orders for implementing the two-child norm. In July 2003, a three-judge bench said that "disqualification for having more than two children does not contravene any fundamental right, it is a disqualification conceptually devised in the national interest."

In October 2004, the Supreme Court reaffirmed this decision and on February 23, 2005 the Supreme Court issued notices to the Centre and six states to implement the two-child norm to curb the alarming population growth in the country.

When informed persons in the government take such contradictory stands, it becomes difficult for the lay person to decide if the two-child policy is in the interests of the people or not.

Ms Nirmala Buch, former chief secretary of Madhya Pradesh and currently president of the Mahila Chetna Manch, Bhopal, did a study for the United Nations Population Fund on the impact of the two-child policy in five states and found that "women, dalits and

young persons form a disproportionately large section of those disqualified. In the male-dominated Indian society, when women are faced with a choice between parenting and political leadership, parenting wins. Often it is not a matter of choice but of family pressure. Ms Buch says the two-child policy has often been used by the upper castes to stifle the aspirations of young, ambitious dalit leaders by getting them disqualified and replacing them with compliant older dalit men with many more children. (The norm applies only after a cut-off date.)

The route to population stabilisation (not control) is through enabling people to exercise voluntary and responsible informed choices about their family size and not through coercive measures. The two-child norm is a coercive measure and is not in accordance with the National Population Policy.

Health activist Abhijit Das of Sahyog points out that "the two-child norm violates the principles of equality (a fundamental right) as well as that of equity which is part of the directive principles of state policy as well as the spirit of the 73rd and 74th Amendments."

So will Dr Ramadoss stand by his commitment made in the affidavit to the high court, or will he listen to the Supreme Court? In an interview to this correspondent, Dr Ramadoss said, "I am accountable to Parliament and not to the Supreme Court."

Here are some ground realities to keep Dr Ramadoss from swerving from his promise. Nir-

mala Buch's study on the two-child norm has shown:

- There were cases of desertion and bigamy when the husband wanted to continue in his position in the elected body and considered his wife dispensable.
- There were cases of pre-natal sex determination and induced abortion.
- Children were being given away for adoption, leading to the forcible separation of the mother and her child.
- Some women were exposed to violence from their opponents, including physical and psychological violence.
- A disproportionately larger number of women have been disqualified.

These facts were re-affirmed at a public tribunal in Delhi in October 2003 on the two-child policy.

Women in their twenties from Andhra Pradesh testified before the tribunal that they were lured to undergo tubectomy after two children but had still not been given the promised green card. Over eight lakh tubectomies were conducted in the state but no record was kept on how many had failed. Due to early and inexpertly conducted tubectomies, many women in the coastal region are now undergoing hysterectomy.

There has been a phenomenal impact on the sex ratio of the children too. Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat are places where the drop in sex ratio has been the most rapid, reflecting on the poor status of women and children. A study by the NGO Sutra in Himachal Pradesh shows that the districts with the largest number of disqualifications are those with the lowest sex ratios. In Haryana, where there is a shortage of girls in the marriageable age group, poor girls are literally being bought from neighbouring states for household chores and to keep the family lineage going. There have even been instances when a woman is shared as a wife by five brothers.

China is touted as the wonderful example that India should emulate. But it is forgotten that the greatest decline in population growth rate occurred after the Communist revolution and before the one-child norm was applied. The decline in population growth rate even after the one-child law was enforced in China is marginally less than in Kerala where literacy and social development propelled women to have fewer children. In China, as in India now, there was a great deal of sex selection and infanticide. The number of girls declined so sharply that the government had to relax its rules and allow couples with a girl to go for a second child. Now China is contemplating a law banning sex selection. There has been a shortage of brides in China and incidents of rape, abduction and other kinds of violence against women has risen.

People are India's resource. Instead of applying coercive methods to reduce numbers, we need to provide proper contraception, healthcare and education and the numbers will come down automatically. No one wants more mouths than they can feed, not even the poorest of the poor.

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