

# Joke on poor and poverty

Dr Ashwani Mahajan

## Regulations for sale of acid

**C**ontrol on the sale of acid and other corrosive substances has become unavoidable essentially for the reason that serious crimes of pouring acid on human beings have been committed. Instances of people with criminal mentality pouring acid and other corrosive substances on women have come to our notice. This was a serious issue and the Supreme Court in a petition filed by a victim of acid attack directed the States including J&K to frame laws for the sale of acid and other corrosive substances. Those who committed this type of crime usually purchase acid from pharmaceutical retailers and that had to be controlled. The State Government constituted a Committee with representatives from all concerned departments and desired it to submit its report on the sale of acid and other corrosive substances within fifteen days. Four months have elapsed and the report has not seen the light of the day. It is learnt that the main contribution in advising the Government what should be the parameters of regulations to be made for sale of acid has to come from Health and Medical Education Department. Unless this department gives the technical advice on the definition of acid the committee cannot frame its suggestions and presently the response from the Health and Medical Education Department in this regard is awaited. The delay in framing the regulations for the sale of acid imposes no responsibility or conditions on the sale of acid to anybody, anywhere and in any quantity. Thus the criminal elements are free to acquire the deadly substances from whatever source they can and use it against the one they would like to destroy. Though acid attack is declared an offence under the Jammu and Kashmir Criminal Laws Amendment Bill, which was introduced in the Legislative Assembly during the Budget Session of 2013, but there are no laws that govern the sale of acid. Incidentally our State does not even have the Poison Act so that acid attack could be brought under its jurisdiction or the Act could be amended to cover acid attack also.

The medical use of acid is something, which only the Health Department can comment upon. Since mostly acid is sold in open by pharmacies, it is essentially the responsibility of Health Department to make suggestions about who and how of the sale of acid and corrosive substances. Delay in submitting suggestion is inadvisable. All precautions have to be taken to ensure safety and security of individuals as desired by the constitution and law. The Government would very much like to impose blanket ban on the sale of acid but that is not possible because of the use of the substance for medical purposes. We fail to understand why the Government does not get into touch with other State Governments to know from them the broad outlines of a law to regulate the sale of acid and other corrosive substances or for definition of terminology to be adopted in framing the law. Society cannot be endangered just because a certain member of the duly constituted committee is non-responsive. The law on stocks and sale of acid should come in as early as possible.

## Promoting sports activity

**W**henver a great sports event like Commonwealth Games, Asian Games or Olympics is discussed, we often become eager to know how many golds and silvers and bronzes Indian sportsmen and athletes have won. We are sad to know that a country with such a large population is not able to win a gold. Let us be frank in admitting that our country lags behind in promoting sports with full zeal so as to win medals in international meets. This is true of our State also. We are always told that owing to winter conditions, we have only six months at the disposal of sportsmen/women. This is not acceptable. In western countries, the weather is harsher than in our State. But yet they are far ahead of us in all sports and athletics. The Minister for Youth Services and Sports has recently chaired 129th meeting of Standing Committee of J&K State Sports Council where he has announced various steps to promote and encourage sports in the State. These are all appreciable decisions and hopefully the idea of having stadia at each block will materialize some day. We have very satisfactory talent of sports but we lack facilities to exploit the talent at proper time. The talent has to be caught young and put to hard training. They have to be given incentives to prove their capability of making a mark in their respective field. The good thing is that there is no shortage of funds for the promotion of sports. The Prime Minister has sanctioned 700 crore rupees for promotion of sports in J&K State and this has to be utilized properly to reach the goal of creating teams of sportsmen and women who can compete and win the day.

Planning Commission presented data on poverty for the year 2011-12 and claimed that poverty in the country has receded to 22 percent in 2011-12. As per Tendulkar's methodology this figure stood at 37 percent in 2004-05. In this way according to Planning Commission number of people living below poverty line have declined from 40.5 crore in 2004-05 to 26.9 crore in 2011-12, out of which 21.7 crore live in rural areas. On definition of Poverty line, Government says those with income less than monthly expenditure of Rs. 816 in rural areas and Rs. 1000 in urban areas are only considered to be poor. This implies that if a person has expenditure of rupees 27.2 in rural areas and rupees 33.33 in urban areas, is considered poor. As per these figures, according to Government today only 25.7 percent population in rural and 13.7 percent population in urban areas are poor.

Now if we compare this definition of poverty with that of 2009-10, we note that for 2009-10, cut-off line was rupees 26 and rupees 32 in rural and urban areas respectively. That implies that in the last two years, cut-off line has been raised by only rupee one in each case. It is notable that in these two years price of Food Products have increased by 17 percent. By this immature act Government is seemingly trying to wrongly add a feather to its cap, by showing major achievements in poverty eradication.

Two years ago, when the Government published poverty figures for 2009-10, even then Supreme Court, while hearing a Public Interest Litigation, questioned these poverty figures in view of widespread poverty and hunger in country, and had said that Government has been adopting grossly inappropriate, illogical and impractical definition of poverty, according to which, number of poor were underestimated. There is no denial of the fact that methodology adopted by Tendulkar's Panel was better than

the criteria adopted earlier, according to which in 2004-05 only 27 percent population was defined to be living below poverty line. Prof. Tendulkar's Panel amended the same and decided raised cut-offs at rupees 578.8 and 446.7 in urban and rural areas respectively; which led to declaration of higher incidence of poverty at 37 percent of population, as compared to 27 percent earlier (according to previous methodology).

Last time when Government published poverty figures, Supreme Court asked the Government to file an affidavit to this effect; which could not make the Government budge from its stiff stand and stated once again that poverty line would be rupees 32 and rupees 26 in urban and rural areas respectively (for 2009-10). Today, when the people are reeling under hyper inflation, adamant stand of Planning Commission has caused major embarrassment for the Government. Latest data published by the Government has once again added salt to the injury. Under these circumstances, Government's adamant stand on cut-offs for poverty line, has given birth to a new debate that whether Government is serious about eradication of poverty from the country.

Insensitive Government continue to defend the figures of Planning Commission and is trying to argue that poverty has actually receded significantly due to expenditure on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Programme (MGNREGA), Mid-day Meal Program, Public Distribution of Food grain etc. It is notable that to arrive at poverty figures, Government is also taking into account the expenditure made on these programmes (without considering, whether these benefits are actually reaching the poor). Government is also claiming that incidence of poverty is coming down also due to Prime Minister Rural Roads Programme, National Health Insurance Scheme etc.

But if we go deep into the issue we find that Government is

still adopting the same old definition, which has been objected to, by Supreme Court. Government also fails to provide any logic behind raising cut-off by merely one rupee, despite the fact that between 2009-10 and 2011-12, prices of food products have increased by 17 percent. After getting cornered on the issue, Planning Minister said that these figures are not final and are merely estimates of an expert group.

It is more than clear now that in India Governments don't need any hard work to reduce poverty; this could be achieved by magic of interpretation of statistics. Demonstration of reduction in poverty by changing poverty line itself is no new thing. This was done by the Government in 1993-94 also, when Government suddenly came out with a big downfall in poverty by merely adopting new definition, which led to constitution by Tendulkar's Panel to redefine poverty line.

As far as Government's contention is concerned, that incidence of poverty has come down due to MGNREGA, perhaps is not correct. Sometimes back Government claimed that employment guarantee in rural areas under MGNREGA, lifted 4.8 crore people out of poverty. This relationship between MGNREGA and poverty reduction is not seen at ground level, and more importantly number of man days has actually declined and MGNREGA accounts for only 0.65 percent of rural employment. Neither economic growth is bringing any reduction in poverty. For instance, Bihar experienced economic growth at 10 percent per annum between 2004-05 and 2009-10, but without much impact on poverty. However Government then had put this blame on dismal performance of MGNREGA in Bihar; and now the planning commission has suddenly dropped poverty figures from 53.5 percent in 2011-12 to just 33.7 percent!

Though Government and the Planning Commission are adamant on official poverty figures; they do not seem to be con-

fidant of these figures. After conceding that these figures are not final, Government has constituted yet another committee under the chairmanship of Dr Rangarajan to redefine and appropriately estimate poverty. It is notable that figures published now by the Government, are supposedly based on methodology suggested by Late Suresh Tendulkar, for the year 2004-05. Prof. Tendulkar had improved upon earlier methodology for estimating poverty by taking into account the expenditure on health and education.

Whatever explanation Government may offer, none is ready of accept cut-off of rupees 27 and rupees 33 for poverty line in rural and urban areas respectively. Universally accepted definition of poverty line is two dollars a day. If we apply this definition of poverty line, the cut-off expenditure would be rupees 120 a day. Even if we take 1.25 dollars, as a cut-off point of acute poverty, cut-off expenditure would be rupees 75 a day. Therefore, one can conclude that from any standard, declared definition of poverty by planning commission is nothing but a cruel joke on poor and poverty in India.

But one aspect, which is being ignored by all, is the phenomenon of rising inequalities in the country. According to Central Statistical Organisation, according to which in 2011-12 per capita income in India reached rupees 61564 per annum (on current prices). Even the benefits of MGNREGA are also reaching the poor and unemployed, though partially, after adjusting for corruption. However, the benefits of growth are actually not fully reaching the poor, due to increasing inequalities. Even according to official data, Gini Coefficient, a measure of inequalities, value of which increased from 31.11 to 33.9 between 2005 and 2010. Therefore, income of the poor is not rising proportionately despite growth. This increase in inequalities is more or less found in all states. If we really want to get rid of poverty, benefits of growth must be more or less equally distributed.

# To have or not have separate State?

**I**n the unbridled war of words unleashed by the announcement of Telengana becoming 29th State of the Indian union, among the several tweets appearing like a July-August monsoon shower was the one posted by our own fellow columnist Shobhaa De, known as much for her style as her satire, who wrote, this could also rake up the demand for a separate Mumbai State outside Maharashtra. Incidentally, the tweet did not attract as much attention as Raj Thackeray's rejoinder that getting a State was not as easy as getting a divorce, thus obliquely referring to Shobhaa's much "divorced" status or, in other words, over three divorced personal status. Coincidentally, the other Twitter savvy person to make a similar comment apprehending many more Statehood demands from other regions including Jammu was the Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister whose "divorced" or "undivorced" status can hardly match that of Shobhaa's.

Be that as it may, the subject deserves a far more serious introspection rather than such

unsavoury trivialisation intruding into the private lives of individuals. To put the record straight, without prejudice against any Statehood demand from anywhere, the truth is that unlike most other demands emanating from elsewhere in the country, the demand for a separate Telengana State had been pending

Potti Sriramulu died on December 15, 1952 following a 56 day fast. Simultaneously almost, the demand for a separate Telengana state also began to appear in newspapers.

Down the line, the States of Maharashtra and Gujarat also got carved out of a larger Bombay State, more for reasons of linguistic criteria. Similarly

## TALES OF TRAVESTY DR. JITENDRA SINGH

ever since the dawn of independence in 1947 and the matter of fact is that even the "Nehru-Sardar Patel-Pittabhi-Sitaramayya" (JVP) Committee constituted in 1948 had in its report stated that though the time was not ripe for creating more States, a case could be made for a separate State for Telugu speaking people. This fanned a movement among Telugu speaking people who were then a part of the undivided State of Madras and one of the spearheads of the movement

lesser Punjabi speaking areas or more Hindi speaking areas of Punjab separated out to give birth to Haryana.

The point often missed is that most of the demands for a separate State from different parts of the country are not inspired so much by linguistic or ethnic identity but more so on account of a desperate feeling among people of certain regions that they have been, for political reasons, victims of discrimination, disparity and raw deal in matters of employment,

education and development. Often, the deep underlying reason in such cases is that the powers-that-be have never considered these neglected regions as an important or viable vote bank for themselves. The case of Jammu can also, to a great extent, be perceived in the same perspective. And, the historic Amarnath agitation of 2008 went on to prove the point by going beyond being a mere land row agitation but evolving into a movement against six decades of cumulative grievance nursed by Jammu against discrimination suffered in the hands of Kashmir-centric rulers.

The answer is not too simple to be summed up in this brief column. The crux of matter is that the common man wants a fair deal. If it is possible without separating out...Fine! But, if the only option is to separate out, Umaphathy drops Sahir's poetic cue "Taaruf Bhoy Ban Jaye To Usko Bhoolna Behtar, Taaluk Rog Ho Jaye To Usko Torhna Behtar....."

# Taking an astronomical leap

**A**t the end of a marathon session in Hawaii (on Mauna Kea), India signed up the 'Thirty Meter Telescope' along with USA, Canada, Japan and China on 25 July. TMT, the next-generation astronomical observatory, will be on stream in 2022 on, Hawaii. A unique and vibrant collaboration among universities in the USA and Canada, China, India and Japan, it will aim at an unprecedented scientific endeavour with global reach. The signatories were Donald E. Brooks, chair of the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy Institutional Council; Jean-Lou Chameau, president of the California Institute of Technology; Masahiko Hayashi, director general of the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan; P Sreekumar, director of the Indian Institute of Astrophysics; Jun Yan, director general of the National Astronomical Observatories of China; and, Mark Yüdf, president of the University of California.

The signing of this Master Agreement marks a major milestone in the official commitment to and formalisation of this global collaboration, ensuring that the TMT project is on schedule and progressing smoothly. We have been working towards this moment for a long time and this is

a special day for astronomy's next-generation observatory,' said Henry Yang, Chair of the TMT Collaborative Board. The deal is a sequel to the collaboration among the California Institute of Technology, University of California, the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy, the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan, a consortium of Chinese institutions led by the National Astronomical Observatories of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and institutions in India supported by the Department of Science and Technology of India. Estimated at several billion US dollars, the major funding is from the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation.

TMT-India is extremely happy to participate in the joint signing of the TMT Master Agreement. It is an important milestone in our global endeavour to raise astronomical observations to a new level with the promise of exciting science. With a large number of young students and researchers in our growing academic program, the Indian astronomical community sees the complete realisation of the TMT project as an important stimulus to astrophysics research programs in India. We look forward to jointly addressing the next milestone in this program,' quipped Sreekumar. ACURA executive director, said, 'TMT will be a vital

resource for research in Canadian universities. It will deepen our knowledge of many of the major issues in astronomy & astrophysics in ways that would not be possible without such a new generation telescope,' while NAOC DG observed, 'China is excited to be an active partner of such a world-leading facility, which represents a quantum leap for our community. With yet another major step taken, we look forward to many decades of solving the mysteries of the cosmos from Mauna Kea.'

Somak Raychaudhuri, head of the department of physics at the Presidency University and an astrophysicist of international chair, who attended the meeting as an observer, expressed his feel in an elated manner, 'Today, I was privileged to be present at a historic moment- the signing of the Master Agreement of the Thirty Meter Telescope project. This document establishes a formal agreement amongst the international parties defining the project goals, establishing a governance structure and defining member party rights, obligations and benefits. India is committed to contribute Rs 800 crores (US \$ 130 million), to be incurred over ten years. Most of this will be spent within India in building hardware and software for this project, thus funding hi-tech industrial and academic research and development. It was a photo finish in the

end- the permission for us to sign arrived yesterday, after approvals from various Government departments, including the DST and the ministry of External Affairs,' Raychaudhuri, who devised the camera for the Hubble Telescope, added. After a brilliant academic performance in B.Sc. and M.Sc. at the erstwhile Presidency College, Calcutta, he got the prestigious Isaac Newton fellowship (Homi J Bhabha, too, had it) at the University of Cambridge. Emotionally surcharged Raychaudhuri wrote on the Facebook, 'When I was a little kid, I had been awestruck by the unmanned Voyager missions setting out to explore the Solar system. Today, the Board meeting was chaired by a personal hero of mine - Ed Stone, the Project Scientist of the Voyager missions, later Director of NASA Jet Propulsion laboratory when the Mars Pathfinder mission was launched, now a professor at Caltech.'

Needless to say, TMT will help astrophysics, astronomers and scientists belonging to collaborative disciplines of study objects in the own solar system and stars throughout our Milky Way and its neighbouring galaxies, and forming galaxies at the very edge of the observable Universe, near the beginning of time. TMT in size will be nine times bigger than the presently biggest Keck telescope Mauna Kea. (IPA)

# And the nominee for Best Hasty Pudding is....

M.J. Akbar

**E**very industry must be permitted the luxury of self-congratulation, particularly if no one else is too eager to do the honours. The foundations of this modern excess were laid in the little town of Hollywood, created in the late 19th century by an eccentric millionaire determined to nurture the ideals of abstinence. Look where good intentions got us.

When Hollywood grew up and rewarded itself with stars, sex and alcohol, it realised the need for some symbol of recognition for its art form. Ergo, the Oscars. Statues breed statuettes. There are more categories of awards now than cinema knew existed when it was born.

It is surprising that journalism, which is no less creative than Hollywood, has not yet invented an award for the best news factories, the assembly line of politicians who become famous by issuing an endless stream of statements. The number of contenders would be within limits. The major parties have about a dozen each; the smaller ones two or three. Most of them are official nominees, but there are an irrepressible few who float in some greater realm, their legitimacy assured by proximity to higher powers or celebrity status inherited from an earlier career. To paraphrase the charming P.G. Wodehouse, master of the English language, the former are grunted, the latter largely disgruntled.

We could begin with just one Spokesbite of the Year award. Later, we could diversify: Best Example of Law of Unintended Consequences; Finest Double Entendre by Ageing Celebrity in Search of Rajya Sabha Seat; Best Misunderstanding of Hindi Slang Lost in Translation into English, to name a few. The possibilities are fertile: Best Mismatch of English Grammar and Indian Meaning; Worst Distortion of Intent by Twitter Limitations; Most Acrobatic Fall on Flattery Oil; Finest Self-Goal in Competition for Minority Vote Bank; or even Most Creative Abuse of Existing Foe who Might be Tomorrow's Friend. There should be no shortage of sponsors either, since this part of the ceremony is bound to be infinitely entertaining.

Septics are bound to wonder whether any politicians will actually come to pick up their awards. Audiences, inside or outside a theatre, would be bewildered if the recipient was unable to thank a Supreme Leader, wife, husband, parents, ghost writer, constituents and that wise-cracking pal who dreamt up the gag in the first place. Septics are vastly mistaken. Politicians are far smarter than them. They know that 90% of a television audience only remembers that you got an award, not why you got it.

The only reasonable condition that politicians would impose was that the award be handed over by a celebrity who is still celebrated, like a film star who remains in play when high-profile roles are being discussed by the big bosses of popular movies. If Amitabh Bachchan is unavailable and Katrina Kaif is busy, there are others. But there is nothing to be gained by receiving an award from anyone reduced to the art cinema circuit. Even worse would be Raj Babbar smiling at Shatrughan Sinha and, for the next award, Sinha returning the favour to Babbar. Nor would anyone care too much for a mutual back-scratch between Digvijay Singh and Shakeel Ahmad.

The Prize of Prizes should be reserved for a Best Hasty Pudding Prize, offered for verbal concoctions cooked up within the blink of a sleepy eyelid. This would be a test of intrinsic individual capability, rather than a paragraph patiently constructed over a languorous afternoon. Judges would measure worth by the taste of the pudding; it would be of no concern to them whether it was healthy or not, since only political parties suffer ill-effects from the instant wit and wisdom of their preferred chefs. Media's gratitude emanates from the fact that journalism is the best restaurant where such pudding can be served. Nothing sells news more efficiently than politicians bleeding to death from self-inflicted wounds. The laughter of the audience is both free and contagious, two virtues that media values above all else.

These great chefs of mass consumption slip from their high standards only because the temptation to produce fast food has become almost irresistible in an age when social media is as popular as a hamburger. Social media is a term that reveals all with the stark simplicity of nudity. Any comment longer than 140 characters, or a slapdash pastry thrown on the face of a screen page, is ipso facto anti-social.

Discourse, therefore, is about accusation, not comprehension. This is perfect for the latest version of television dialogue, which bridges brevity with hysteria. Anyone who seeks any more is dumped into the dustbin of boredom. Do not blame journalists alone. This is what the viewer wants; this is what the viewer gets.

Obviously there should be a lifetime achievement award as well, for shortest sentence with maximum impact. It would be inappropriate to hand out a statue for this. A tweezer could be a good substitute.

# Where are the friends?

Col. R.D. Singh (Retd)

**H**ere comes the Friendship Day. But where are the friends? Suddenly they seem to have disappeared, giving way to cheats and frauds. You do not know whom to believe and whom not to. I badly miss my village days when we did not lock our house, did not have to worry even if 20 guests arrived all of a sudden, and never thought that our sisters were unsafe outside. Let me give you a glimpse of the days when we grew in the midst of friends and well wishes.

It was a small village (Pilimandori) in Hissar district in 1960s, with no electricity or water supply. But life was still very happy and healthy. There was so much of inter personal relationship, full of warmth, and selflessness. If there was no milk at home, we would just go across to our neighbour with a pot and get milk. It was always give and take. There was no question of any payment. If my mother fell sick while father was away from home, the neighbours will take her to the hospital. And if our guests arrived when none of us was at home, then the entire neighbourhood will come and sit with them to give company. They would feed the guests, give them a 'hookah' to smoke, and make them feel wanted.

## TODAY IS FRIENDSHIP DAY

It was a community living, a life of sharing and caring. A marriage in the village, was an occasion for every one to celebrate, and chip in to help the girl's family. The village will never allow the bride's father to feel the burden alone. Each house would offer a 'charpoy' and a bedding for the 'baratis' (marriage party). The ladies would go to the wedding house and sing marriage songs. These were so melodious and festive. The marriage would last for three to four days, and the whole village would unite to make it a success. During this period, there would be camel races, wrestling bouts, and even kabaddi matches to entertain the guests. We, the young children, would surround the groom, and be at his beck and call. After all, every girl in the village was our sister, irrespective of which family she belonged to. There was no hooliganism or misbehaviour. Our tradition of 'Athithi devo bhavah' (the guest is God) was at its best. And we took pride in it.

Once, I remember, a locust had entered our village fields. Unless checked, it would eat away our crops. So, the entire village youth got together with the digging tools. They dug up a deep long drain in which the advancing waves of the locust kept falling, and were then buried. Such collective efforts to meet emergencies in the village were a common code of conduct rather than an exception. Helping others came naturally.

Yes, times have since changed. Modernisation has taken place. People have become rich with lots of material wealth. But why have we become so poor in human relations? Why have we become so self centered and greedy?

Urbanisation and modernisation does not mean we become like mechanical robots. No amount of wealth can give us happiness that another human being can give by way of love and gratitude. We may be staying in a mansion, but life will be very dry and lonely without good friends and neighbours. So, can we please take a minute off from our rat race for money and power. Can we just think where we are heading, and for what. Lets lead a simple and healthy life. Lets be a friend to some one, a nice and kind person. That will not reduce our earnest income. But definitely make our life more happy, and worth living.