

Election reforms

India is changing rapidly; the days of staid decisions are over now. e-Governance has changed the concept; everything is available in the form of an app or at the click of a computer mouse. One segment that has remained untouched for almost three decades now has been the electoral reforms. All the modern concepts of the voter ID card, declaration of assets, no posters on walls, capping election expenditure, and so many other election-related things were introduced by CEC T.N. Sheshan. Further introduction of the EVM was added, but in this digital age when everything is getting done by apps, why can't the voting exercise be done by some mobile app with biometric checks and balances? We already have a PAN and Aadhaar-linked KYC system in place that can verify the authenticity of the person concerned; why can't it be used to cast a vote? In every election, there is a poor voting percentage for the majority of constituency seats. The main reason is that the voters are either not present in the constituency on voting day. The reasons for absence can be different, like the voter working at a distance or some other compulsion or not being in the mood to go to the polling booth, but the ultimate casualty is democracy. If we parse the election data and gender at the election results, victory margins are as low as single-digit vote differences. It is, in a sense, a criminal offence not to cast one's vote.

India is factually a software guru in the world; as such, why can't we develop a system of Vote From Home (VFH)? Developing and adopting such a system is not as difficult as it seems to be. The Commission has developed a mobile application called "Saksham" for people who are physically unable to come to the polling stations. As an experiment in the coming state elections, this application will be used by the concerned persons to exercise their voting rights. The other important decision by the ECI is an arrangement by the EC of respective states to allow 80-year-old persons who are not able to come to polling booths due to the age factor to cast their votes from home. For this purpose, Form 12-D will be filled out, a vote will be cast, and the whole process will be videotaped as well. Proper secrecy will be maintained, and all political parties will be informed wherever this exercise is conducted. Another historic decision to be implemented by ECI is the KYC (Know Your Customer) campaign. All political parties have to share the information of their candidates on social media and explain the reason for selecting that particular candidate to the public if their candidate has a criminal record.

These are not ordinary, minor decisions, but all of these are historic reforms. These voting experiments, when adopted in totality to cast the VFH, will ultimately be a game changer, as 30 to 40 per cent additional vote casting will change the election scenario in the future, as the vote share difference is as low as 1 per cent in many elections, like in Himachal Pradesh recently. Once implemented, they will be game changers, as with a turnout of 95 percent or more in each election, the outcome will be different. India has achieved 90 percent vaccination to fight off the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that the Indian public is mature enough to understand the actual gravity of the situation rationally. All parties must unite to push these reforms now. All these reforms will be happily accepted and much appreciated by the public.

SDH Akhnoor - inaugurated but non-operational

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the major shortcomings of our health infrastructure completely. The administration is ensuring that major loopholes are plugged well in time to provide better healthcare facilities to the public. But it seems that at the Directorate level, the message is not clear yet. A Sub District Hospital has been built at a cost of Rs. 32 crores to cater to the two lakhs plus population of Akhnoor, Jourian, Chowki Choura, Pargwal, Khour and Pallanwalla areas. Sanctioned and started in 2010 with a mandate of two years to complete, the hospital is still non-operational, though the inauguration had been done by the then Additional Chief Secretary, administrative head of the Health and Medical Education Department, a year ago. J&K Housing Board took a decade to complete the building with no specific reason for the delay. After completion, again it is the same old story of two Government Departments unable to sort out things amicably. On one hand, Housing Board is claiming the building has been handed over and on the other hand, Health Department is denying the handover. There is a dispute about an unpaid electricity bill of around fifteen lakhs, which can be adjusted into seven crores plus money saved during construction after proper administrative approval. While the two departments are busy shadowboxing, the public is denied proper hospital care despite everything that is available. The present SDH in the congested city is more as less working as referral hospital only. Critical patients lose precious time in reaching GMC Jammu. The matter is serious as it shows what is happening on the ground. Inaugurated SDH must have been included in the projects completed, but actually, it is not. The matter should get sorted out as early as possible. Denying healthcare facilities to the public on flimsy excuses is not acceptable, as it is a question of life and death for many in public.

Squadron Leader Anil Sehgal

Memories don't die. They may fade with the passage of time, though. So, let me take you to my beloved Jammu of the good old days...

Our paternal grandmother was a devout lady who followed certain religious rituals, which included silent prayers, counting the beads of her rosary, singing bhajans, and chanting holy mantras each day.

She would get up early, much before the sunrise, and, after morning ablutions, she would take her bath with fresh tap water, irrespective of the temperature of the day. A daily bath with fresh tap water was an integral part of her religious regime.

My father, uncles and other elders in the family would repeatedly request her not to bathe with cold water in the winters. All their pleadings to make her bathe with warm water produced no results, and she continued with her ritual unabated, to the last day of her life on mother earth.

Before eating anything in the morning, she will go to the temple to offer prayers, carrying fresh flowers and a copper pot filled with water. First morsel of food shall go down her throat only after her return from the temple.

Like her, many of the elderly in the old city, men and women, would go to the temples, everyday, carrying a small metal pot of water and some flowers or a garland, to offer prayers before taking their first morsel of food for the day.

Can you imagine what sights did these freshly bathed temple goers, dressed in fresh attire, face as they stepped out of their homes on their way to the temples?

Well, more often than not, they were presented with the shameful sight of the sweepers carrying night soil in the open bamboo baskets perched on their heads.

Many a time you could see the human excreta dripping down their heads. The open drains of the narrow lanes also carried shit giving out a foul smell. This foul smell was mixed with the fragrance of agarbattis, camphor and sandalwood, laced with the chanting of the holy mantras.

I was always ashamed of our society that permitted this shameful practice where some of us, the sweepers, were expected to carry the drip-

Suman K Sharma

Apparently, there was nothing out of the ordinary about it. He had died after a lingering illness in Pune. His body was laid on the funeral pyre. Under the pundit's direction the bereaved son lit the pyre. A shriek rent the deathly calm shrouding the mourners: "Papa, I love you!" It was the bereaved daughter. She recalls that a gust of wind, ever so effervescent, touched her as if the departing spirit of her father had responded consolingly to her anguished cry.

A day later the ashes were ritually collected and put in an earthen pitcher. The pitcher was covered with a red cotton cloth. The family decided to immerse the ashes in the Narmada at Nasik that day itself. The sun had set by the time they reached there. So, they did not consider it proper to perform the rite then. Instead, they moved on to Trimbakeshwar, one of the most sacred spots in Maharashtra dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is a half-an-hour's drive from Nasik. They planned to pay obeisance at the temple, stay overnight at a hotel and return to the immersion spot the following morning. Two rooms were booked. In one room stayed the deceased's son-in-law and an elderly male relative, while the other was occupied by the rest of the family. The asthi-kalash was kept in the room taken by the two men. It was placed there on a low table beside a dressing table.

It must have been around 8 at night. As the family's son-in-law went about seeing the arrangements, it suddenly struck the other man to take a snapshot of the asthi-kalash with his phone. Then he took another photo from a different angle, this time facing the mirror of the dressing table. The day's exertions had taken a heavy toll of everyone's mental and physical reserves and the grieving family dozed off rather early. In the morning they got up, drove back to Nasik, immersed the ashes in the Narmada and reached Pune in the late afternoon. It too had been a busy

Dr C L Gupta

Oh, what a reputed and respectable man he used to be.

All the best things craved and needed by a man on this earth were bestowed upon him by the Almighty.

He was rich, prosperous, very influential and carrying one of the highest status in the society. He had plenty of land and plots as immovable property more than a man needs, reminding about a famous story written by an eminent Russian author Tolstoy under the heading of "how much land does a man need".

Legal acumen and high political status duly recognized by all were also in his possession in plenty. His uttered words and commands were listened to with very rapt attention and carried out according to the best of his satisfaction, by those who were supposed to be working for him. Doubtless he commanded respect from all and sundry.

He had in his family all well educated and settled sons and daughters in their own respective professions. As I vividly remember to be one amongst many of his appreciators, I could not help than to feel envious of his this exalted and respectful status in the society. Being a student I was not well versed with the worldly affairs but with the passage of time, I could form my own impressions about his personality and working style after a brief contact with him.

Still my impressions regarding this great personality started dominating in my mind and they started clashing with what others were thinking about him but the respect for him never lessened in my mind and psyche. Two things which I found in him were a bit disturbing for me. One was plenty of satire in his talking to the extent which could hurt any body in conversation him and two, that he was selectively philanthropist and helpful to those who needed any major or minor help from him thereby hardly reflecting any selflessness or sincerity in his actions.

Naturally, a negativity crept in my mind about him. As time did not show relentness in its own speed I also got my medical degrees and settled in the medical profession as a specialist enabling me to gain more knowledge about the worldly affairs and knowing who was who in the city of Jammu and the other areas of the state.

Many strange experiences encountered which were full of pleasures and pains during the active professional life.

Few of them made indelible impressions upon

The curse of Jammu

ping night soil of others, on their heads, to earn their livelihood.

Jammu, like scores of other old cities in the country, suffered from the curse of dry sanitation for hundreds of years. As I look back on the city of the sixties onwards, this is the malady I was most ashamed of. But, thank heavens, the

septic tanks and soaking pits and the paraphernalia.

It is sad that even today, we have a number of colonies and areas in Jammu where there is no underground sewerage system installed.

To my mind, laying of proper and working world class sanitation and sewerage systems along with a web of well covered drains should be the first priority of a modern progressive society.

Today, Jammu boasts of, inter alia, fibre optics with 5G speeds, the AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) and the IITs (Indian Institute of Technology), but, alas, a proper sewerage system seems a distant dream.

Jammu is one of the cities of our country that has been included in the list of cities to be given the facilities of a smart city. I wonder if proper sanitation, hygiene and sewerage system is a part of this smart city bouquet.

Poor sanitation practices lead to polluted river waters. I fail to appreciate how we could pollute the waters of our rivers? We who live in a society that

worships rivers like a mother?

A campaign to hold regular Aarti for river Tawi is under way in Jammu under the stewardship of Chandher Mohan Sharma, a socio-political activist. He wants to glorify the riverfront on the lines of the famous aarti of the Ganges in Varanasi.

I attended the event twice. I was dismayed to find that even the ghat, the riverbank, the place where Aarti is held, was full of excreta and garbage.

Untreated human excreta, wastewater and unsegregated garbage are freely allowed to flow into river Tawi since times immemorial.

How can we call ourselves civilised, modern



Line drawing by Siddharth B Arya

JAMMU JOTTINGS

covered with the underground sewerage lines. I say most, because, a few parts of the city still suffer from the old malady, so I learn.

I learn that many households, not adequately covered with underground sewerage system, get rid of the human excreta and let it out in the drains, open or otherwise. But, thankfully no excreta is carried on the heads in the bamboo baskets.

Modern colonies of Jammu, like Gandhi Nagar, Trikuta Nagar, and Chhanni Himmat you don't have proper sewerage systems installed. Even otherwise well laid Sainik Colony, Greater Kailash, Apna Vihar suffer the same malady. But, thankfully, these colonies offer better systems than the age old dry sanitation. They use

It was there; it wasn't

day for them.

After an onrush of activity, a death in the family leaves behind vacuum. It was during one of those empty moments that the old man remembered the snapshots he had taken of the asthi-kalash. Apart from the detail of the dressing table mirror showing his own image taking the photograph, there was this peculiar difference in the two photos of the cremation urn. The first one showed just the urn placed on the low table, while

The explanation did not appear altogether facile. The Garuda Purana, read in most of the mourning Sanatan Dharma families, does assert that the soul of anyone who passes away remains with his/her dear ones for thirteen days after the death. In 'Autobiography of a Yogi', Parmahansa Yogananda has described more than once the materialisation of his deceased guru, Shri Yukteswar. Quoting his Master, Yogananda-jis says: "...God encased the human soul successively

in three bodies - the idea, or casual, body, the subtle body, seat of man's mental and emotional nature; and the gross physical body....The recently physically disembodied being arrives in an astral family through invitation, drawn by similar mental and spiritual tendencies....The astral body is not subject to cold or heat or other natural conditions....Astral beings

are able to effect changes in their forms by life force and by holy mantric vibrations." (407-410). [The term 'lifetron/lifetronic' is Yogananda-jis translation of the Sanskrit term 'pran/pranic'].

U.R. Ananthamurthy, the author of the much acclaimed Kannada novel 'Samskara', borrowing from the Manu Dharma Shastra, takes a more earthly view of what happens after death. "First, there is a mantra which says that the body which came from the panchabhoothas (the five elements, viz., the earth, fire, water, air and ether) goes back to the panchabhoothas. It is a



the other showed a spot of light by its side. Surprisingly, the image of the urn in the mirror did not have that spot.

What had caused that spot of light to appear in the second photo? If it was due to the change in the angle, then why the urn's image in the mirror did not carry it? Recalling the daughter's dramatic experience in the cremation ground, everyone in the family agreed that the speck in the second photo was a manifestation of the sookshma shaer - subtle body - of the deceased. The man was present with his family at Trimbakeshwar, but in another dimension.

The big deception

ing and compelling me all the time to share with the society there by imparting satisfaction to my own mind. Coming back to the man in focus I must admit that in spite of analysis of his wholesome personality, he commanded respect from me. His better half whom I happened to meet few times was a noble lady and commanded lot of respect from her relatives and all other needy people whom she used to be empathetic with and helpful. Having observed all about, it looked to be a happy prosperous and perfect family, leading a peaceful life. But sorrowfully the noble lady suddenly felt sick thereby causing sudden emotional turbulence in the family. She had a serious medical disease. In spite of all the best of treatment rendered by best doctors of the town, she did not survive and left for her heavenly abode peacefully. Everyone concerned felt aggrieved by this irreparable loss but what was destined could not be averted. People including relatives and all those acquainted with her husband having a wide social circle started heading towards the residence of the deceased to express the sorrow and sympathy with the family.

Due to the heavy rush and the dearth of space inside the house, her dead body was kept in the lawn of the house for people to pay the last respects to her. Herein, a strange thing was watched in that the dead body was decorated and dressed like a new bride. All the parts her body were loaded with glittering yellow metal. In spite of the presence of prevailing gloom all around, everybody commented and expressed his/her appreciation as to how much the husband must be loving his better half but so much gold ornaments sacrificed for her beloved wife were a source of concern for few who commented by quoting famous lines from a song sung by Late Lata Mangeskar in a hindi film Laila-Majnu in early fifties. These lines were:

Aik muryad ko saja kar naam dulhan rakh diya. Having heard such comments, I realised that the world can be so wicked as to pass such like comments in that prevailing circumstances. But there was no alternative than to listen and accept such things without any reaction on my part.

However, the last rites of the noble lady were performed under the cover of crying, wailing and grief by the family members.

After all the rituals were completed according to hindu customs, the pandit (called charji in our local terms) was called at the residence and all the ornaments as were exhibited on the deadbody and collected before setting the pyre on fire were handed over to him as a donation.

The pandit took all this and kept safely at his place. His spirits and happiness was soaring so high that he kept awakening throughout the night, lest someone should steal this costly gift. His elated feeling was natural because he had three daughters in the marriageable age. He must have felt assured in his mind that

This gift would stand in good stead at the time of need. So the next morning he took the gift and went to a man he trusted almost like god father. His utmost faith in this man was out of having been associated with him as driver of his vehicle for nearly two decades.

But at the same time, this noble soul popularly addressed as Lala ji by the local residents of the area was also their custodian, solving their problems impartially for many decades thereby earning their trust.

Incidentally this so called charji/pandit was inducted into this profession by Lalaji, after the death of his father.

To fill up the void created in form of non availability of a charji for performing the last rites of deceased in that area. It was after a lot of persuasion by this noble man that the so called charji/panditji agreed to take up this profession.

Aftermath of the above story should have come to an end but for the startling revelation of the part two of the episode as had been narrated to me by the elderly noble man himself and that too, a few years has had lived after this all happened and before his death.

Here in I must highlight by admitting that Lalaji had dictated me not to reveal this story to any body, but I am violating this oath to satisfy myself by exposing the ways of life as practised by the high and mighty persons. My prayers to almighty God to forgive me for this

After the confession of this violation I am quoting as per narration in his own words.

"It so happened that the pandit(charji) came to me and after paying due respects, expressed his happiness and joy, which I had never seen on his face before. He handed over the bag to me. After inquiring from him, he revealed that this bag is

or progressive if we cannot ensure that only the treated waste is allowed to enter our rivers? Don't we understand the repercussions? The devastation such unholly practice brings to our community health is known to us well.

We have plans to beautify the river front of Tawi, creating an artificial lake and the walking path along the waters of the river. But, sadly, we have no plans to install more wastewater treatment plants by the riverside so that only safe waste is permitted to enter the revered river we worship.

Every year, Hindus celebrate Makar Sankranti in the month of January, mostly on 14 January. This festival is dedicated to the Hindu religious Sun god called Surya. The significance of Surya is traceable to the Vedic texts. River Tawi is considered to be Suryaputri, daughter of the Sun god. She, therefore, is venerable to the Hindus.

This year, on 15 January, to mark the Makar Sankranti, a grand ceremony was held by the riverside, and an Aarti, a prayer set to music and rendered as a devotional song, for river Tawi was released eulogising the sacred river and thanking her. In an Aarti, worshippers offer light, agni, to the gods and sing praise to them.

The event was held in the 25th because 13/14 January rains washed away the temporary facade erected for the grand event

Wow, we sing hymns to the sacred river as human excreta and wastewater keeps polluting her waters!

No amount of singing praises to Tawi will help her or the people she feeds. We have been singing praises of the river for centuries and not taking adequate care of her waters in any way. We need to change our mindsets and help the waters remain unpolluted and pure. This, in turn, only helps us remain clean and healthy.

What river Tawi needs today is a few effective and modern wastewater treatment plants in the city. The current measures are not adequate and urgent addition is the need of the hour. Merely singing an Aarti would offer no relief to the suffering river.

How I wish in place of an Aarti, a waste treatment plant was inaugurated on this Makar Sankranti, which would keep our river waters safe and clean! That should be the best tribute and thanksgiving to a pious river that Tawi is!

kriya (ritual) which does not call for love or emotion...But since we are human beings, we cannot give up the body objectively, so there is vyamoha (affection; attachment). And so there is a whole set of beliefs to cater to it: the dead person has become a pretha (spirit of a dead person)... ('Samskara - A Rite for a Dead Man', translated by A.K. Ramanujan, Oxford University Press, 1998).

An ordinary man, who has lost a near relative, would hardly be in a frame of mind to wade through such philosophical quicksand. The old man shared on WhatsApp the snapshots of the urn with a friend of his for an opinion. Before the end of the day, that man sent him back photos with the spot removed, of course. That was his way of telling his curious friend that there was nothing much to it. But how did the spot appear in the first place? The sceptic had no viable answer to that. The man then went with the question to another of his friends. The gentleman, a retired university professor of Physics, listened to him patiently and gave the photos a close look. It was all in accordance with the laws concerning light, concluded the former don. For a good measure, he voluntarily gave him a demonstration of the way light behaved before the mirror of his own dressing table. The old man was overawed by the scientific explanation. Yet his mind refused to accept what the learned professor was at pains to explain to him.

Was it the mulish denial of the old man to accept a scientific answer to the question that the circumstances had connived to pose to him? One could perhaps say that. But does everything perceived by us have to be 'normal' so as to be explained by science? One is reminded of the story of Procrustes, a rogue smith and bandit from Greece, who cut off the legs of his victims so as to fit them to the size of his iron bed.

Talking of a disembodied soul, one may say it was there; it wasn't.

containing ornaments which had been given to me in lieu of the services rendered by me after the death of the gentleman's beloved wife.

Further, he said that "the great man has freed me from worries which as a poor man I shall encounter at time of my daughters be married in due course of time. Furthermore, that the bag, I have brought be kept in your safe custody as there is no other person than you I can trust.

Old noble man, experienced and mature enough after life long experience took a note book and told the pandit to take the ornaments out of the bag so that a proper inventory could be made.

As soon as the ornaments were taken out of the bag and seen by Lalaji Ji, he suspected the authenticity of the ornaments to be made of gold.

He immediately did not react and told the pandit to immediately go and bring Lalaji's friend who was a gold smith living nearby and ensured that he should bring the pass a stone used by the gold smiths for testing the purity of the gold.

To the horror for both the pandit/chargie and Lalaji the goldsmith after testing the ornaments confirmed and declared the same were not made of gold and were artificial.

Pandit/charji who was exalted before almost fainted and started cursing the giver for doing all this fraud with him.

The other character, Lalaji also felt shocked. but at the same breath he thanked the God almighty for saving him from biggest sin and embarrassment, which he would have faced, if he could have kept them as gold ornaments as per the version of the Charji and deposited with him without getting the due precaution and procedure he had followed.

This infact was greatest anticlimax for both the panditji and Lalaji for no fault on their part.

This writup and its aftermath compels me to ask myself few questions but I am fully conscious of the fact that their answers I shall never get as all the three characters have left this mortal world.

Still the main question which I cannot resist to ask is: Whether the so called aggrieved husband loved his wife or was it a show of exhibitionism by adorning her dead body with artificial ornaments to get the applause from society for his this act.

Why did he deceive the pandit by donating the ornaments which in fact were shown as made of gold in such a bargain he could only get bad duwas/thecurse from the poor man the charji/pandit Bol malik yeh tamasha tuj se kyun dekha gahya;

(The author is surgeon and urologist)