

KISHTWAR SHOCKER

The case of a tribal girl from Chattroo who was sexually assaulted by a teacher and died (read murdered) when quacks were trying to terminate her pregnancy, is shocking. It raises the issue of the safety of girls inside a government school and conduct of teachers. The guru-shishya relationship in the most valued relations in the Indian social setup. When the teacher turns into a monster and assault minor, there is something majorly wrong with society. Though the police have arrested all the culprit – the main offender, his associated and the hospital’s staff who, in connivance with the culprit tried to terminate the girl’s pregnancy, the locals continue to protest to vent their feeling of shock and disbelief. In the hills, communities treat girls witgh love and care. Hill people are hard working and aspire to educate their girls. Such incidents tend to dampen their enthusiasm. The government must seek a speedy trial of the accused persons to instill confidence in the people of the area and also for justice.

NEPAL TRAGEDY

Nepal is a tiny Himalayan kingdom and very vary of foreign help in the name of flood relief. India is keeping Kathmandu’s sensitivity in mind while offering help and humanitarian assistance for the flood affected border areas. India has sent three tranches of humanitarian help and on Nepal’s request is likely to send NDRF teams to assist the local authorities in rescue operations of the people trapped in the mounds of debris brought by flash floods that swept away all habitations. India was among the first to drop humanitarian help and never tried to bully the smaller nation with its help. Nepal’s location is close to China and that makes it very tempting for the western nations to park themselves under the guise of support and aid to keep an eye on China.

The link between falling fruits and failing hearts

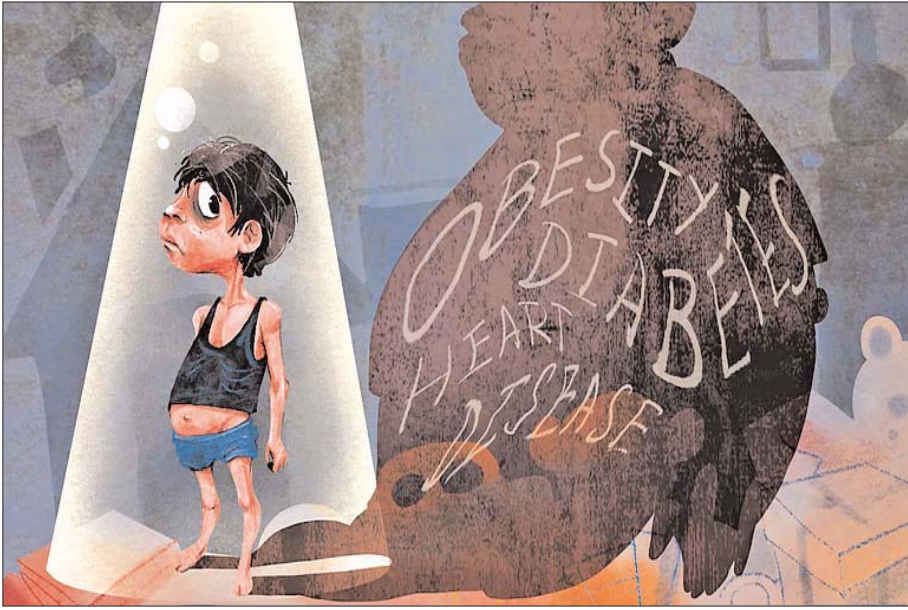
K Srinath Reddy

In a recent online post, Vidya Yeravdekar, chancellor of Symbiosis University, noted that the jamun fruit (Indian blackberry) started falling from trees earlier this year. She recalled her grandmother’s comment from years ago that an early fall of the jamun portends a period of diminished rainfall and possibly a drought. This is not mere folklore. It is indeed a recorded scientific observation. The phenomenon is called ‘drought escape’ or ‘stress fruiting’. In conditions of water shortage, plants like jamun yield smaller fruits with higher sugar content.

Tacit knowledge of communities stored as experiential wisdom reflects past observations. It is of value even if it is not an accurate meteorological forecasting based on modern scientific methods. The anecdote is a timely reminder that nature retains a long memory and uses its recall to fashion a species survival response in the plant. When its roots are alerted by unfavourable environmental signals related to soil moisture, the plant prioritises flowers and fruit over new branches and leaves. Anthropogenic climate change is now stretching the limits of nature’s ingenuity.

A similar phenomenon is also observed in human beings. When a growing foetus or young infant suffers early childhood malnutrition, there is early sexual maturation. This is especially evident among females. Early menarche (onset of menstruation) can be accompanied by increased fertility if there is improved nutrition as the child grows. If social customs force an early marriage, a spate of teenage pregnancies can result.

Even more alarming is the widespread impact of sequential early childhood malnutrition followed by an adiposity rebound in later childhood and adolescence. Physiological programming, of the epigenetic levers of gene expression, results in a ‘metabolic mismatch’ of the nu-



tritional parsimony experienced in the early years of life and relative caloric largesse in later life.

British epidemiologist David Barker drew attention to the ‘foetal origins of adult heart disease’ by initially pointing out that the high rates of premature adult deaths from coronary heart disease in England and Wales correlated with high infant mortality rates of earlier decades (reflecting adverse early childhood influences). He later showed the association of low birth weight and small birth size with early onset of coronary heart disease in adult life. Many studies across the world corroborated this association.

In India too, studies in Delhi, Mysuru, Vellore and Pune have affirmed the link between early childhood malnutrition and adult cardio-metabolic diseases—diabetes, hypertension and coronary heart disease.

A team of University of Auckland scientists led by Peter Gluckman showed that these effects are not due to structural alterations in genes but are mediated by functional changes in gene expression. Such ‘epigenetic’ modifications

up-regulate or down-regulate gene functions. These can extend across several generations but are also potentially modifiable within an individual’s lifetime under the influence of behavioural and socio-environmental factors.

The heightened risk of cardio-metabolic diseases in adulthood results from mechanisms that nature crafted to ensure the survival of the undernourished foetus, infant and young child. Muscle mass is kept lean and the muscle membrane becomes resistant to the action of insulin. This is because glucose should be prioritised for use by the brain and nervous system and not be burnt up by the muscle. Being more essential for survival, the brain wins nature’s vote against the muscles. Most of the other organs assume a modest size to let the brain become the maestro.

Among the blood cholesterol sub-fractions, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) levels are reduced and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) levels are increased. This ensures that cholesterol is deposited in the brain and blood vessels rather than being drawn away from them. Under-

utilised blood sugar also gets converted to triglycerides. Abdominal fat deposits increase, to store energy for hard times.

Sugar which is kept out of the muscle cells gets converted to triglycerides. Inflammatory responses to perceived or potential threats are heightened. Platelet activation and coagulation pathways too are easily triggered to prevent life threatening bleeding. Malnourished babies have higher levels of fibrinogen and coagulation factor VII.

When these imprinted changes of gene expression in the ‘thrifty phenotype’ operate during the rest of the life course, diabetes and cardiovascular disease become more likely. Abdominal obesity becomes a prominent feature. Inflammation strikes blood vessels and many other body tissues. The protective armour of the foetus and infant becomes a strait-jacket for the adult.

These epigenetic mechanisms need not be permanently switched on in the same mode. Physical activity reduces insulin resistance. As insulin-sensitive muscle membranes permit more sugar to enter exercising muscles to be ‘burnt up’, risk of diabetes is decreased. A diet which is rich in fibre from fruit and vegetables enables the growth of a healthy gut ‘microbiome’. Such a collection of friendly bacteria produces short-chain fatty acids which are anti-inflammatory.

Ricardo Uauy, a paediatrician in Chile, first showed that supplemental nutrition to low birthweight children runs the risk of making them stunted and obese due to the programming mismatch. The answer lies in ensuring balanced fibre- and protein-rich diets with low levels of refined carbohydrates, coupled with high levels of physical activity to overcome insulin resistance. We must ensure that low birthweight children can grow to their physical and intellectual potential, without becoming victims of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. This is the lesson for India, as we are now confronted with both undernutrition and obesity in childhood.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN GREAT BRITAIN

Shyam Bhatia

Britain has a strange crime problem. According to the statistics, much of it is getting better. According to the public, almost everything is getting worse.

A new study from the Policy Institute at King’s College London has found that Britons dramatically overestimate the scale of crime and routinely get its direction of travel wrong. The median estimate of the proportion of people experiencing crime in England and Wales in 2024-25 was 27 percent. The actual figure was 9.7 percent.

The mistakes continue down the list. Eighty-three percent thought mobile phone theft had increased since 2010, when it has actually fallen by about 70 percent. Majorities believed domestic burglary and vehicle theft had risen, although both have fallen by roughly half. Only shoplifting among the five offences tested had substantially increased over that period—by about 70 percent—and that was the one the public got right.

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the King’s Policy Institute, puts it bluntly: “The public are very wrong about crime.” But that is not quite the end of the story.

The latest official figures are more complicated than the headline ‘Crime is falling’

suggests. The Office for National Statistics stresses that the Crime Survey for England and Wales and police-recorded crime measure different things and have different strengths. The survey is particularly useful for long-term trends, while police data are preferred for offences such as homicide, robbery and weapons offences.

Nor is every category falling. Shoplifting has risen sharply over the longer term, even though the latest figures show a fall. Fraud and computer misuse remain enormous problems. Anti-social behaviour continues to shape how people experience their neighbourhoods.

There is also a more prosaic version of the unease. Stories abound of apparently respectable men and women walking into shops, filling bags with expensive bottles of wine and other goods, and simply walking out without paying. Staff may know what is happening but hesitate to intervene, fearing confrontation or violence.

The British Retail Consortium recorded about 1,600 incidents of violence and abuse against shop-workers every day in 2024-25, although that was itself a 20 percent fall.

And there is another question that the King’s study does not answer: has the nature of British crime changed even as conventional crime has declined?

The old British gangland had recognis-

able geography and recognisable characters. It lived in pubs, clubs, betting shops and East End streets. Today’s organised crime can be harder to see. The National Crime Agency says the overall threat from serious and organised crime increased last year, with technology transforming the scale and reach of criminal activity and criminal markets increasingly converging. The gangland has not necessarily disappeared. It may have changed its clothes.

Drugs, fraud, people-smuggling, cyber-crime and illicit finance cross borders with an ease the Kray brothers, Britain’s notorious gangsters, could scarcely have imagined. The NCA says global criminal groups are increasingly diversifying and collaborating, while technological change is reducing barriers to offending.

This is where London becomes important. Talk to people in parts of east London and you will hear claims that the old local gangland has been replaced by Albanian, Russian and other international networks.

Those claims need testing rather than simply repeating. But the broader phenomenon is real: organised crime is increasingly international, networked and technologically enabled. And it is not confined to deprived neighbourhoods. London’s enormous legitimate economy, property market and financial system can provide opportunities for criminal money

to mingle with respectable wealth. The modern gangland may be less visible precisely because it can operate behind legitimate businesses, property and international financial transactions.

Then there is the question of trust. The King’s study found that 35 percent of the public have no confidence at all in the government’s ability to deal with crime. Among people who wrongly believe murder has increased, the figure rises to 48 percent. Sixty-five percent expect crime to rise nationally over the next three years, although only 40 percent expect it to rise in their own area.

That distinction is revealing. People may feel that Britain is becoming more dangerous even when their own street does not feel that way.

Duffy believes psychology and information interact. “We have a deep negativity bias that tunes us to threat, and a rosy view of the past that makes us assume things were safer in the past than they were.” He adds that when people give inflated estimates of crime, “they’re sending a message about what worries them”.

This is where Britain’s increasingly bitter arguments about immigration, race, policing and ‘two-tier justice’ enter the picture. King’s found that 52 percent believe ethnic or religious minorities are sentenced differently for crimes from others.

Mediating lingo in the age of AI slop

Geetha Ravichandran

Artificial intelligence giant Anthropic is in the news for buying, scanning and shredding millions of physical books—including rare, out-of-print editions—after feeding the data to its chatbot as part of its Project Panama. This was done to overcome an earlier violation of piracy laws for which it was fined \$1.5 billion.

The destruction of physical volumes is a cause for heartburn among book lovers. Printed titles are prized for their tactile tangibility and deeper reading experience. Books have long been a part of a circularity, being bought, lent, sold, gifted, handed down—changing hands without any decline in value. Therefore, treating it as an exclusive one-time resource has raised concerns among several groups. While a judge in the US has ruled that this is fair use and there is no violation of American law, it is difficult to normalise destruction of books that symbolise the collective legacy of human knowledge.

Language is not merely a mode of communication, but serves as a tool

for inclusion or exclusion and is often leveraged to exert authority. Until a few hundred years ago, the main influences on language wafted from across borders or were introduced by migratory populations, including traders, evangelists and conquerors. The rise of the internet has brought in an increased elasticity to spoken and written languages.

While some people may lament the dilution of grammatical norms, the nature of language has always been dynamic. At present, social media has proved to be the biggest game changer, with the emergence of new usages at predictable regularity. The proliferation of various sub-cultures on social media has given rise to in-group slangs which trigger common associations and strengthen bonds within groups. The growth in group size is promoted by algorithms, which target audiences based on specific metrics. This helps adoption and dissemination of words in a broader user base. One instance of this transformation is the word ‘cool’ which has gained mainstream acceptability. Many slang words thus have a placeholder status—till their time arrives.

Purportedly, social media algo-



rithms police the use of language and content on their platforms to meet community standards. This has perpetrated a class of users who proactively analyse the algorithms and find hacks to defy its detection. The result is ‘algospeak’, where a spelling may be tweaked or a new word substituted for a censored one.

An example is the emergence of the word ‘unalive’ to describe a situation of a person ending their life. Social media algorithms classify the topic of suicide as sensitive and restrict related posts.

So, coded messaging is used by users to get around algorithms. There have been other versions of coded messages in public space, like the dog-whistle used by political leaders to address ideological groups. A controversial message is couched in ordinary language, but the underlying intent is conveyed to the targeted audience.

Over an average lifetime of, say, 60 years, most of us have been witnessing altered emphasis and a shift in the use of words. To keep pace with the

vector of change is an interesting challenge. The best way to do so is to engage with the younger generation, who bring in creativity, humour and irreverence to the use of language. The rise of memes has contributed colourful words and phrases to the lingo of Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

A few months ago, what started as a meme playing on the word ‘cockroach’ burgeoned into a movement. It is interesting to see how the response to an alleged dismissive or even an insulting usage to refer to jobless youth was transformed into a rallying point. Those at the receiving end did not lob an insult back, but bounced, tossed around and repurposed the offensive word to further their cause. It demonstrated the potential of a single word to pivot and bring together groups of people who identify with a common cause.

It is undisputed that AI algorithms on social media contributed to the meme going viral. But the stripping of the original context and grafting it on to angst of students was the strategy of those who lead the movement. Algorithms catalysed the process, but what transpired was the use of human ideas to bring to the forefront real prob-

lems. To quote from Adam Aleksic’s Algospeak: How Social Media Is Transforming the Future of Language, “Humans are social creatures who adopt words if they have a social purpose”.

The ability to think, discriminate and weigh consequences is as valuable now as it has ever been. And the access to a vast cultural capital of words in numerous languages can facilitate this. Languages grow and evolve with contributions from a wide spectrum of sources. Niche communities, discussion boards, geek-speak, lyrics of songs in various genres, the multi-lingual capabilities of Indians in particular, keep the repository updated.

The destruction of books in the past has never deterred authors or poets in their quest for expression. Of course, AI will also write books now, as it has ingested a humungous number of words. But AI slop is no match for the narrative of youth whose innovations begin with words that may sparkle or sizzle to inscribe their identity. Therefore, even as social media and AI algorithms shape and determine the use of language, the stroke of genius that gives rise to words is still essentially human.