

PRESIDENT’S ADVICE

President Droupadi Murmu is a woman of wisdom and simplicity. In a way she is the daughter of the soil of her tribal community in Odisha. She deviates from jargonised speeches on formal occasions and speaks from her experience. Recently she spoke about her childhood memory of her family treating wood to be burnt for cooking with reverence. President was addressing a function on environment. She explained the environmental friendly practices of indigenous communities through her own experience. She said while her father fetched dry wood for fuel from a jungle she saw him bow before it was put in the hearth for cooking. The reason was that the community regarded trees as sacred and useful. Her father explained to her that the tree first gave oxygen to sustain life and even after it’s dead the wood is useful as fuel. Indeed, the tribal communities value the bounties of nature and can teach the world searching for magical answers to global warming how to live in harmony with nature.

FIVE-DAY SCHEDULE

The J&K education department is mulling over a proposal to have a five-day weekly school schedule to give the much needed break to the students as well as teachers for work-life balance. Weekends off for schools and even offices is universal phenomenon but somehow it was frowned upon and seen as a major disruption in work or studies in this part of the world. The schedule of students is as such packed with homework and tuitions that they barely get time to relax and pursue other interests, which are important for proper growth of their mind and personality. Kudos to Hasnain Masoodi, MLA from Pam-pose who argued that students face growing academic pressure and spend long hours dealing with school and study-related work. The routine leaves students tired and leaves them pressurized. Such things are detrimental to their growth and social skills.

Delhi’s unsafe buildings: Disaster is round the corner

Satendra Singh

A building has collapsed in Satya Niketan, there have been casualties, and rescue operations are on in full swing. But soon enough, as always happens in such situations, debris will be cleared and media attention will shift to something else. However, what needs to be asked is: “Does the risk apply only to the collapsing building, or does it also involve all the other buildings which still stand strong?”

In case another building were to collapse, or in case another fire or earthquake were to occur in this area, would Delhi’s emergency services machinery be able to respond in time to save those caught inside? This is precisely what went through my mind when I visited Satya Niketan after the last incident. What I saw was very disturbing indeed: densely populated buildings, narrow pathways which appear to be obstructed, and no open ground where fire engines, ambulances or any other emergency vehicle can rush to the spot. The tragedy, thus, may not just be one of a collapsed building but much more than that.

Building collapses, fires and other disasters of the kind have been happening too frequently in our national capital. From our analysis of several such disasters in

Satya Niketan: More than a building collapse

Debasish Bhattacharyya | Valson Thampu

The story so far: The tragic collapse of an illegal, multi-storeyed PG accommodation in New Delhi, which has claimed the lives of seven young people, has understandably triggered widespread public outrage.

The arrests of the owners of the killer structure are necessary and welcome, but insufficient as a remedial response, especially if such tragedies are not to recur. “Greedy for rental income, owners built extra floors,” reads one headline. Perhaps the larger point we are missing is this: it is not the greed of the PG owners alone that caused the tragedy; it is the product of a greedy system operating under the colluding eyes of those whose duty it was to prevent tragedies of this kind. Bigger point: If the discussion centres on illegal construction, negligence, arrests and compensation alone, we will miss the forest for the trees. The collapse of the building is only the visible manifestation of a much deeper crisis: the criminal neglect of education, not just in NCR but countrywide, and the failure to provide safe, adequate and affordable accommodation for students. And this, not because we lacked the required resources, but because we value money above life.

Thanks to the scandalous failure of our education enterprise nationally, Delhi has become an educational refuge for young people from across India. About 50 per cent of the 700,000 students enrolled in DU colleges are from other states. Each one of them, numbering some 350,000, needs accommodation. The infrastructure available to accommodate them is woefully inadequate. Such a state of affairs serves as a goldmine for PG accommodation sharks. This is a national shame. This problem is not unique to Delhi. Indianews updates

A national tragedy

Here’s the question that stares us in the face from this tragedy: Why do so many young Indians have to flock to Delhi, leav-

ing their home states in search of better educational opportunities? Surely, such educational migrations are not natural. Many of these students cannot afford to live and study in Delhi. Parents strain their economic resources to the utmost, just because educating their children is their topmost priority. It devastates them to have their children return home dead. And this brings us to an uncomfortable question: Why is education so grossly neglected? It cannot be because India’s ruling class does not understand its value. When it comes to their own children, our ruling elite are keen to provide the best quality education in the most expensive and prestigious universities in the West. Our education system is what it is, not because we lack the political will to educate our children and youths, but because there is a will to patronise the vested interests thriving through this scandalous state of affairs.

The spirit of education

To understand the above, the story of St Stephen’s College is worth recalling. Founded in 1881 by five Cambridge missionaries, the college was established at a time when educational opportunities in Delhi were extremely limited, particularly for the poor. The founders had very modest resources. Yet they believed that there was no better way to love a people than to provide educational opportunities to them. To them, education was an outworking of love. If we love, we will respect the worth of the people we love. This activates vigilance in caring for them. To care is not only to preserve the current worth, but also to enhance it, as every parent knows. Education is the best means of enhancing the worth of individuals and nations. The founders of St Stephen’s College were animated by a spirit of selfless love - the belief that those who are less privileged deserve not less, but greater care, attention and opportunity. That idea seems to have been lost somewhere along the way.

The St Stephen’s story further reveals the extraordinary demand for quality education. The college has only around 400 undergraduate seats, while tens of thou-

sands of students applied. The tragedy was that many of those rejected were among the brightest young people in the country — not because they lacked merit, but simply because there was no room for them. Permission was sought to expand the intake in Economics and to introduce Political Science (Hon) Adequate library and infrastructure facilities were available. Only a limited number of additional teaching posts had to be sanctioned. Yet, despite repeated efforts, the necessary permissions never came.

The prospect of some hundred more young men and women benefiting from quality higher education did not appeal to the ‘competent’ authorities concerned. It is far easier to run an illicit PG facility that could kill many an inmate, provided the relevant authorities see scope for ‘additional mobilisation of personal resources’ in it. Such an experience is not limited to St. Stephen’s. The larger truth it exposes is that India has failed to expand educational opportunity — not because the resources were lacking, but because our patriotism falls short of loving the people. We profess, but do not practise, love. At its deepest level, education must not be deemed an industry, a degree-producing mechanism or a speculative investment. It is a domain of public service — a sacred enterprise in human development. To care for the learner is first to recognise their worth and then to do everything possible to enhance it. Indianews updates

Where this concern is absent, education risks becoming an industry rather than an investment in human development. This is why the Delhi incident should force us to ask not merely who violated building regulations, but what kind of society allows young people to live in dangerous conditions simply because they have nowhere else to go or cannot afford safer roofs over their heads. The answer cannot be found only in courts, commissions or administrative inquiries. Those institutions provide temporary justice and relief, but the deeper transformation must come from society itself.

Another dimension to the crisis

lapsed, and the resulting drug economy fuels insurgency. To our north, we have a neighbouring country that refuses to recognise Arunachal Pradesh as Indian and has established 628 border villages near the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the majority of which are located opposite Arunachal. And this country plans to construct a dam on a river upon which 70 million Indian people depend.

Three borders, three distinct problems. Our difficulty is not a lack of military strength. Our primary problem is ‘latency’ — that is, the time gap between an event occurring on the ground and the right person becoming aware of it. This is where aerospace or space technology becomes necessary.

What would remain if space-based communications, navigation and imaging technologies were disrupted for 72 hours in the Eastern Theatre? If the adversary is using state-of-the-art satellite systems and we revert to older methods in an eventuality, the enemy won’t even need to defeat us; rather, we ourselves would be handing them the initiative.

Satellite-derived information today is neither intelligence nor evidence for a police officer. In the sense an operational officer understands it, it is not intelligence, because intelligence must arrive in a timely manner and have someone accountable for it. What is received at the district level is, in most cases,

THE NE BORDERS NEED EYES IN THE SKY

Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta

In a riverine char (sandbar) of the Dhubri sector, perhaps 400 families might live in one season, but by the next season, it could be completely obliterated. The Brahmaputra creates and destroys land at its own will. When the char disappears, the families move away, and with them, the border too changes. This is the actual functional reality of approximately 61 kilometres of Assam’s border with Bangladesh, where electronic surveillance has to be adopted instead of fencing, because there is no hard soil there to erect a fence. You cannot put a fence in water. You can only monitor it.

I was reminded of this while chairing a recent discussion organised by SIA-India in Guwahati on ‘Space Technology for National Security and Border Protection’. This panel included a former Army Commander of the Eastern Theatre, a senior telecom administrator and scientist, a national security expert, and representatives of two new Indian satellite-manufacturing enterprises — institutions that did not exist a decade ago. Indianews updates Assam has approximately 263 kilometres of border with Bangladesh, a large portion of which is riverine. To our east, we have a 1,643-kilometre border with Myanmar, where governmental authority has largely col-

merely briefing material. It is not verifiably guaranteed information — the failures of which we discuss the least. Before a Foreigners Tribunal or a Magistrate, the question is never how striking the image is; the question is its provenance and whether the chain of custody holds up during cross-examination. We built extraordinary capabilities, but we forgot to make them admissible in court.

What can change this is not more hardware or more sensitive sensors. For this, four unglamorous but indispensable requirements must be met:

Standing Authority: A Superintendent of Police (SP) in Dhubri or Karimganj should have standing authority to monitor a specific riverine area.

Analysis Cells: An interpretation cell at the range level, because it is unfair to hand a satellite image to a district-level officer and expect accurate analysis from them.

Legal Procedures: Procedures for evidence preservation and custody, granting formal legal status to specialised satellite imagery.

Dedicated Budgets: A dedicated financial head in the state budget for this purpose.

‘Self-reliance’ - Atmanirbharata in the space sector is often being talked about, dwelling on many geo-strategic ramifications. Presently, the focus of discussions on this is limited merely to manufacturing capabilities. We do not need to manufacture everything.

We must reach a stage where no one can block or veto us.

The path ahead for the Northeast

The encouraging truth is that the framework for this is largely ready. The anti-satellite (A-SAT) demonstration of March 2019 placed India in the group of 4 prominent nations of the world. That same year, the Defence Space Agency was established, and last September, the nation released its first Joint Military Space Doctrine, treating space as an independent operational domain. The Indian Space Policy of 2023 and IN-SPACe opened this sector to private-sector capabilities, and 52 satellite surveillance programmes are currently underway. A decade ago, none of this was clear. But for reaching the ‘last mile’, the robust management of institutional rules and procedures is essential. Two mishaps this year make this clear: Indianews updates

In January, due to a launch failure, a DRDO Earth observation system was lost.

Two months after entering orbit, a historic Indian private satellite (the world’s first to combine radar and optical sensors) was destroyed due to a geomagnetic storm.

Self-reliance is not just the ability to build a satellite once; it is the ability to rapidly replace new satellites, coupled with indigenous launch speed, domestic hardware and procurement processes completed in 90 days instead of 90 weeks.

tion in which the private gain from hazardous construction is achieved by a few individuals, while the threat itself is faced by residents, students, neighbours, firefighters and the whole community.

The problem is much more acute in crowded areas. A building may look sturdy under ordinary circumstances, but could become highly susceptible under the effect of fire, rain, an earthquake or any such sudden impact. Narrow alleys or crowded roads could exacerbate the situation. An emergency vehicle such as a fire engine, an ambulance or heavy machinery would not be able to access the building in time. If there are no available exits, or stairways are insufficient or crowded, then even a minor incident could cause a catastrophe. The crucial minutes at the beginning are those that could be lost because of a lack of proper planning and preparation.

This is precisely why Delhi needs to shift gears from the reactive mode to the preventive mode. Emergency operations are required but should not be the primary means to address the problem of unsafe buildings. It is impossible to fix an unsafe building by conducting a better rescue operation once people get stuck inside. What needs to be done is to pinpoint the potential risk areas prior to any accident. High-risk buildings and clusters of high-risk populations need to be identified and tested for

structural soundness and fire safety standards. Defective buildings will need to be either fixed, strengthened, modified or even demolished. These assessments should not degenerate into just another paperwork exercise. There has to be accountability and timeliness attached to them. These processes can become more streamlined with the use of technology. Plans and permissions granted for construction must be digitised and easily verifiable. Any construction that violates the approved plan must attract an immediate inspection. Where negligence can be proven, liability must extend beyond the owner of the property to include the approving agencies, among others. Enforcement cannot be selective or based on the level of media interest after an accident.

But there is one more aspect that cannot be neglected - the community. In every disaster situation, local residents become the first responders. Before the arrival of fire services, policemen, ambulances or any rescue team, local residents may be involved in rescuing people, giving first aid, informing the services about the situation and finding out who could still be trapped. Their reaction in the initial minutes of a disaster can determine whether people will survive. But the preparations of communities to respond to disaster situations in most vulnerable localities remain

mostly informal and disorganised. ShopEmergency Supplies

Thus, Delhi needs to build the capacities of community-based organisations, local residents, volunteers, market associations and other local networks in disaster-prone areas. They do not need much equipment in the beginning. What they require is some basic training in evacuation, first aid, dealing with fires, emergency communications, identification of vulnerable people and coordination with services such as policemen, firemen and health professionals. They should practise emergency drills in schools, markets, residential colonies and other crowded places. Volunteers should be aware of the emergency numbers, access roads and safe assembly points in their area. This is a relatively inexpensive but effective measure.

The government should not only focus on individual buildings but also consider neighbourhood risks. In cases where new high-density developments and activities need to take place, the local authorities should consider some very basic questions: Can emergency vehicles reach the building? Are there any safe means of evacuation? Can firefighters go up the floors in case of an emergency? Are the buildings strong enough to withstand the stress? What will happen if more than one building is affected in the event of an earthquake or fire?

Satya Niketan is not merely an example of yet another collapse; it is also a reminder of the type of urban growth we are seeing in Delhi. The city cannot afford to accept hazardous buildings as a part and parcel of urban growth. Economic growth and safety are two entirely different concerns; in truth, there can never be any economic development without structural and fire safety measures.

Disaster readiness is not about how quickly we manage to rescue people from a collapsed building; it is about preventing a disaster before the collapse. Satya Niketan should not end up being another entry on Delhi’s list of tragic stories. It should be a lesson that results in change. The next building should not collapse before we find out its dangerous condition.

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