

Pictures for reflection: India

Malnutrition, Uttar Pradesh



This is Alina Sahin, an 18-month old baby suffering from acute malnutrition in Uttar Pradesh, India. Her father is a handloom weaver who does not earn enough to find food for his family.

Anyone seeing this picture would immediately question how this could happen in modern India. India not only boasts of excess food and grain supplies, but it also has a multitude of schemes and laws obligating the state bureaucracy to assist persons facing serious food insufficiencies. Alina's plight indicates that there are some systemic

problems that allow such incidents to happen.

Not only are the state system and institutions flawed, but also civil society interventions. Why did no individual notice this problem in time? Is it because such malnutrition is a common occurrence? If that is indeed the case, then the problem runs deeper than the plight of a single child not getting enough food.

A little concern and effort by a few persons; some phone calls and letters to relevant agencies could help a great deal towards feeding children like Alina. When people do not care to take such action, their distrust of state institutions and bureaucracy must be very high; demoralization within society must be high.

What are the ethical and moral issues involved here? Have the various religious codes of behaviour failed in addressing state and civil society inaction? How can a nation that boasts of so many intellectuals and popular media allow this to happen?

Child kidnapping, Bihar



This picture shows a group of young children calling for an end to kidnappings. "Kidnapper Uncle, Please stop," says one poster. This picture is from Bihar, India but it could have been from any other place in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan or Nepal.

Sometimes kidnappers demand large sums of money as ransom, while sometimes the sums are smaller. In either case, the consequence to the child is the same. He is taken away from the protection of his parents and teachers, kept in a hostile environment amidst kidnappers who will threaten him with dire consequences if they fail to get what they want. The children are

traumatized and some end up killed. Families and relatives are also affected, sometimes going into such a state of shock and paralysis that they are unable to help the surviving children.

While the state makes gestures of law enforcement, it is the very failure of law enforcement that leads to such kidnappings. State failure and inaction ultimately lies in the endemic corruption within the state bureaucracy. Paralyzed state machinery contributes to paralyzing the will of the people to protect their own.

Civil society is also unsure of how best to deal with such problems and therefore prefers to discuss grand ideas unrelated to the actual life experiences of ordinary people. The result is a deep division within society, where people no longer trust each other or depend on each other for empathy and support. This eventually leads to various forms of violence.

One prevalent - and terrible - feature of child kidnapping is that persons known to the family participate in the crime. This is a stark demonstration of societal collapse and the resultant dehumanization.

Under these circumstances, how can society come together and competently respond to the primary concern of child protection?

Mob justice, Bihar



The motorcycle rider in this photograph is a police subinspector. The man tied to the motorbike is alleged to have snatched a woman's neck chain. He was immediately captured and severely assaulted by a mob of people on 27 August 2007. Thereafter, the police officer took charge of the lynching; the man was tied and dragged behind the motorbike.

A policeman represents the state and is supposed to enforce the law. He is not supposed to take the law into his own hands and mete out punishment as he sees fit. And yet, it has become common in many parts of Asia where law enforcement has collapsed, for mobs to engage in lynching, with or without police cooperation. The police themselves are known to engage in atrocious acts. Killing of alleged criminals after arrest is a common phenomenon in several countries. They are alternately termed as encounter killings, killings in self defense or shooting persons trying to escape arrest.

When society accepts such brutality on the part of the mob as well as the police, how can ethics and morality be taught effectively to the young? They will learn their lessons from watching their society collapsing into such inhuman conditions. Those who make it their profession to preach and teach ethics should pay more attention to the eroding of an environment in which basic morality is respected.