



SHAH ALAM KHAN

Walking with the dead

Developing protocols for transporting dead bodies with dignity is state's duty

JOHN DEFRAIN, AN American writer and professor of Family Science had once written that the death of a baby is like a stone cast into the stillness of a quiet pool; the concentric ripples of despair sweep out in all directions, affecting many, many people. Gorakhpur was witness to such ripples recently. As the dust settles on the tragedy, details emerge and one such detail which clearly missed the eye of the national media was the fact that the dead bodies of most of the children were carried back home without any government assistance. Bahadur Nishad carried the body of his four-year-old son Deepak on his motorcycle. The painter tells us that Deepak loved motorbikes.

Ever since Dana Manjhi, the man from Kalahandi district of Odisha, carried the body of his wife on his shoulders from the hospital, there has been a surge of similar incidents reported from across the country. In 2017 alone, more than a dozen such incidents have been reported so far. Besides being visually repugnant, the process also carries a risk of transmission of diseases and physical damage to the body.

In the West, transporting the dead from hospitals follows laid down standard operational protocols (SOPs). An extensive enquiry into the Indian healthcare reveals the

complete absence of such protocols. It can be easily seen that illiteracy, poor health administration and social norms are barriers. But this shouldn't deter the government from at least developing and promoting SOPs for those who die within the confines of a government set up. Most importantly, such SOPs should not be confused with the legal protocols for transporting the dead, which do exist in the country and, like many other laws, are devoid of the necessary sense of compassion and care.

It is interesting to note that most people who took this walk of shame were from the most marginalised sections of society, both in terms of economic status and social strata. This should raise a red flag with the state in general and the health authorities in particular. It appears that the lack of hearse protocols hurts the underprivileged sections the most. Poverty, coloured by caste and creed, makes a dangerous concoction in such cases. No wonder a large number of these cases have been reported from the most backward areas of the country.

Besides the absence of SOPs for the transportation of the dead, there appears to be an acute shortage of hearse vehicles which could be used for the easy transport of dead bodies

from hospitals. It is common knowledge that most dead bodies in India are transported using private vehicles like vans and ambulances. We are probably the only nation in the world which transport our dead in ambulances. Ambulances are not meant for the dead, they are for the dying.

On June 12, 2016, this newspaper reported that officials from the Chandigarh's three main hospitals, Government Multi Specialty Hospital, Sector 16, Government Medical College and Hospital and PGI, confirmed that none of them has a hearse van which is equipped with a freezer to prevent decomposition. If the situation is so dire in a big (and rich) city like Chandigarh, we can imagine the situation in the rural hinterlands of the country. There is no national data available on the demand and number of hearse vehicles in the country even when schemes like the Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) allow the purchase of hearse vehicles for district hospitals.

Death, unlike life, does not distinguish between the rich and the poor. Another aspect of transportation of dead bodies is the practice of long distance transport which needs the body to be embalmed for the journey. Such transportation is essential in a big country like ours

where higher referral medical centres are few and scattered. A case report in the *Indian Journal of Clinical Anatomy and Physiology* in December 2016 highlighted the fact that there are no provisions which deal with funeral embalming in the many (contemporary) Anatomy Acts enacted in the country. This shows that there is an urgent need to formulate guidelines for transportation of embalmed bodies by air, rail and road.

Thus, the need of a national hearse policy with a minimum corpus for transportation and cremation of dead bodies cannot be overemphasised. Developing protocols for the transportation of dead bodies from government and private hospitals with dignity is the duty of the state.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy enquires, where do birds go to die? We really don't know where the birds go to die, but they are surely more civilised than us. They don't display their dead to the public in a way some of our fellow citizens are forced to. Death is the necessity of life, it is high time the government should wake up to the reality of a dignified death to its citizens.

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