

LETTER FROM AMERICA

A Sampling of American Sense of Humour

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

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"I have good and bad news," says a man. "My mother-in-law drove over a cliff today, in my brand new car!" Mother-in-law jokes are a major staple of western male humour, something Bangladeshis - who are taught to respect the mother-in-law - cannot relate to. Western mother-in-law jokes actually are a not-so-subtle male attempt to make fun of his wife's family.

Unlike British humour, which can be quite laboriously crafted, American humour is direct. British audiences allow their comedians, such as Morecambe and Wise or the Two Ronnies, to build up a joke before delivering the punch line. Americans have no such patience. They want humour in every line. That is why American television comedies are full of one liners.

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A unique part of American politics is that the politicians all visit the talk shows. The 1996 Republican Presidential candidate, Senator Bob Dole announced his candidacy on the David Letterman show declaring, "I believe every nation ought to have a President!" When Bob Dole volunteered to loan former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich \$300,000 dollars fine the House assessed

him for ethics violations. President Clinton quipped to reporters: "You know, Chelsea is going to College (Stanford). I have to talk to Senator Dole about her tuition!" During the 1992 Presidential campaign, Bill Clinton appeared on MTV to win over young voters, and to endear himself to the African-Americans, played the saxophone on the *Arsene Hall* show, prompting President George Bush to comment sarcastically: "When he (Clinton) blows into his taxophone, Americans will be singing the blues!"

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"What did he do?" Sometimes Reagan went too far. At the height of the cold war, as he finished recording his Saturday morning radio speech to the nation in 1984, Reagan joked (without realizing that the microphone had not been turned off): "Ladies and gentleman, we begin bombing Russia in five minutes!" Presidents who did not have a sense of humour, such as Richard Nixon, are the ones who got themselves and the nation into all sorts of trouble.

Such self-deprecating humour is common among Americans. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield's act is built around getting no respect. "I tell you, I get no respect. After watching me going at it with my wife in my bedroom for a while, the peeing tom kids started boo-

ing me!" Nothing is taboo when it comes to comedy, not even death. An agent is overheard commenting on a pop star's untimely death: "That was a good career move!"

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Many countries could not restructure their health systems and failed to mobilise the resources required. Selective primary healthcare pushed by donor funds compartmentalised many health systems. Now the dominance of market economy and weakening of the state-run public sector make it imperative to revise the primary healthcare strategy.

Questions to Debate

A debate is on in most countries on what the role of the government should be. This debate is revolving around some of the following questions:

1. Can governments provide primary healthcare to the entire population effectively and efficiently in the context of present economic situation? From where the enormous resources will come?

2. Should governments leave primary care to the private providers and support instead tertiary and secondary care which people especially the poor cannot afford to buy? What are the expected consequences of such a shift?

If the state withdraws from primary care, the immediate impact might be on the poor who will be pushed out of the market. Some would argue that the poor are already paying for the care they need sometimes at a high cost that they meet by selling their assets.

3. How to make the private health market truly competitive, provide care of acceptable quality and affordable to the highest number?

4. What is the viability of voluntary community based health financing through some form of health insurance? Sur-

veys in the past have shown that in most developing countries, the cash expense by households to buy private care far exceeds the expenditure by the government on health services. Apparently there is some logic behind the argument that the present market-inefficient and "laissez faire" private care market needs to be disciplined by appropriate rules, regulations, and policies in order to improve its effective access and quality. Of course, even then very poor households will need some form of subsidy as a social safety net.

5. How can the State facilitate the growth of the private health market yet make it behave in a socially responsible manner and in partnership with the public health sector?

6. What is the new role of multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Regional Banks who influence economic policies, and often provide loans for the health sector? Taking into account experience in the past, international partners need to redesign their policies and strategies in health assistance to countries going through economic transition.

Addressing the Issues

Post-Alma Ata experience and the current global ascendancy of free market throw ample doubt about the states' capacity to provide primary health care to all. A review of the role of the government in health is overdue. Such a review will likely result in new policy directions that may not be very attractive politically.

Questions are being raised if primary care is best left to the market, if governments should concentrate their resources and energy to perform such public health functions which are so essential that non-performance will endanger health of the greatest number of people. These functions and services do not attract the private sector which has no incentive to perform these. Rather, many cases governments will need to frame and enforce rules and penalties to secure compliance

with safety and standards by the private sector. Environment, food hygiene and safety are prime areas. Essential public health functions will include in particular promotion and protection of maternal and child health, population health watch and early control of epidemic outbreaks.

Between the international partners and with the national governments and the civil societies to evaluate and redefine partnerships in national and international health development. Few will disagree with the need to improve upon the present level of coordination and convergence between and among all international partners in health.

A Set of Assumptions

The private healthcare market needs support not subsidies; regulations including voluntary self-regulations and not a free rein where unscrupulous practices flourish in the guise of free market.

Health is not the product of medical care alone. Health is the outcome of many determinants extending beyond the conventional limits of the health sector itself.

While public health is the responsibility of a representative government, the individual must exercise the right and responsibility to perform health functions and participate.

The private sector has to behave in a socially responsible manner. Industry and trade must be accountable for compliance with public health safety regulations wherever these apply.

Relationship between the public and private health actors need to be inclusive and based on partnership.

Present global health and medical research efforts need to pay attention to the priorities of poor countries also even without adequate market incentives.

The global economic and financial institutions need to incorporate health concerns in their policies and in the restructuring and lending programmes that they sponsor. Without being too idealistic in a reigning market with globalisation, one can counsel in favour of more enlightened national health policies and international cooperation in partnership for closing the health gaps within and between countries.

Healthcare Market

What Role for Government?

by Dr M Zakir Husain

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Guardians of the Pure Pour Oil on Troubled Water

Film-maker Deepa Mehta was furious when Hindu extremists attacked and set fire to the set of her current production, and the local political chief ordered a halt to filming. But the attack is no isolated

Kuldeep Kumar writes from New Delhi

basis of a powerful leader nominated by his predecessor. In its 75 years' existence, it has had only four chiefs, including the current incumbent, Rajendra Singh. The first two died in harness and the third abdicated because of poor health.

The second supremo, MS Golwalkar, laid down the RSS ideological credo in a 1938 booklet *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*: "German race pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races — the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested

here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan (the land of Hindus) to learn and profit by."

That followers of such an organisation are trying to impose their will on creative artists by intimidating them through acts of vandalism should come as no surprise. They are trying to create paranoia among Hindus that their religion, culture and social values are in danger.

Romila Thapar, history professor at Jawaharlal Nehru

Adolf Hitler is well known. The organisation functions on the University in New Delhi, points out that the symbolism of women is an important factor in the cultural attacks: "It shows that these groups do not want a change in the traditional image of the woman and are against her empowerment." She says that the attackers do not want to confront aspects of Indian society in need of reform.

More insidiously, the RSS and BJP have been busy forcing down the throats of gullible school children their own version of Indian history, attempting to glorify the Hindu past while painting the period after the arrival of the Muslims as a "dark age".

The RSS opposes Urdu, the language with which most Muslims identify, and promotes an artificial form of Hindi that is packed with ancient (therefore pure) Sanskrit words. It also runs a network of schools with the motto, "Catch them young!"

The RSS wants women to be restricted to traditional, supplementary roles in society. Like the German Nazis, it extols the virtues of motherhood. A woman finds fulfilment through holding the family together. So it is not surprising that its supporters feel rattled whenever a depiction of a woman deviates from the traditional RSS image.

But that does not give them the right to impose their will, unleash violence on those who disagree and coerce writers, film-makers and artists into submission.

The author is a freelance journalist who writes on politics and culture.

Water was an insult to the widows of Varanasi. As 90 per cent of the widows of Varanasi are Bengalis, the state should feel insulted and should have led in the condemnation of the film.

THE West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has threatened to take to the streets if Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Me