

The Times of India, Mumbai, 09 May 2008

Child, Interrupted

Our record in health care for children is shameful

Health minister Anbumani Ramadoss is very concerned about what he calls the negative impact of movie scenes where heroes drink alcohol on young, impressionable minds. Perhaps he would like to turn his ministry's attention to the abysmal state of public health in our country. Report after report damns the state of health-care facilities in India. The latest data on child health care paint a shameful picture. About 53 per cent of children aged below five — that's a huge 67 million of them — make do without basic medical facilities. That includes access to prenatal care, skilled childbirth, immunisation and treatment for diarrhoea and pneumonia.

The report brought out by a reputable global NGO — Save the Children — compared 55 countries. And India, a country that has superpower aspirations and is proud of its robust growth, ties with Ghana and Eritrea for the 27th rank. According to the study, 66 per cent of the poorest children in India receive negligible or no health care. The figure stands at 31 per cent for those who are well off. The statistics only get more shocking: over a million children die annually before they turn a month old. That's mostly because they have no access to primary health centres. Even when they do, what greets them is often a woefully ill-equipped shed. Poor maternal health — caused largely, but not exclusively, by malnourishment — only compounds the problem.

One disturbing fact the report throws up is the gender survival gap, which is widening. Between the ages of one and five, for every five boys who die, eight girls die. The report cites less money spent on girls' health compared with boys as one of the major reasons for the survival gap. For instance, in Punjab the expenditure on medical care in the first two years after birth for boys is 2.3 times higher than that for girls. This is a telling comment on the deep-rooted gender bias in our society, which cuts across economic classes and does not spare even those who are well educated.

Many Indians might be adopting modern lifestyles but mindsets remain largely medieval. It is clear that education alone is not going to help us bridge the divide. Our education system is part of a prejudiced sociocultural matrix and often reflects it. Gender bias is further reinforced by skewed representations of women in popular culture, as seen in our movies, television soaps and advertisements. If we are to close the gap, the realm of popular culture might be a good place to start effecting change, not in drinking habits but in social attitudes.