



The argument that 'it is the government's job' cannot be conveniently used to deny our own individual responsibility.



During the 2014 Football World Cup in Brazil, though Japan lost, Japanese spectators made news when they voluntarily cleaned up the stadium after the matches - collecting tissues, bottles, plastic cups and confetti in bins. People from around the world watched in awe as the Japanese cleared away the litter.

Japan is known for recycling 77% of its waste. It has been written that the country has few waste bins on the roads; only signs telling people not to litter. After due segregation of waste at their homes, the Japanese dispose it of, for recycling and processing. They don't treat the world outside as their dumping yard.

My column is not about Japan or about waste management. I thought the example of Japan is apt as there is an admirable balance in the way responsibilities are shared by both the government and citizens. Though Japan's government provides facilities, its people have a certain regard for public space and pride for their country.

I think this distinction is important as we live in a time when there is a re-evaluation of accepted behaviour and ways of doing things. In a society like ours, traditionally, there is a tendency to look to the government for almost everything. Be it garbage disposal, prevention of traffic accidents, ensuring women's safety or regulating pollution, we expect the government to fix everything in our lives, take care of minor to major irritants that we face everyday.

Ever since our economy opened up in the early 1990s, there has been a rethinking on what the government should and should not be doing. Increased private sector participation, the efforts to involve civil society and the corporate sector in developmental work are all signs of change. Some of them have worked, some haven't.

One cannot wish away the role of the government. It has to enforce the rule of law, uphold the sanctity of the constitution, be a vigilant and fair regulator of economic affairs, safeguard public welfare in the critical areas of education, health and sanitation. However, the argument that 'it is the government's job' cannot be conveniently used to deny our own individual responsibility. As responsible citizens, how can we actively help the government to implement many of its schemes that can have a positive impact?

Take the case of garbage that is piling up in our towns. While its disposal is certainly that of the municipality, as citizens do we minimise the waste that we generate, especially the plastic and electronic waste that pose serious environment hazards? Garbage collection and disposal would be a lot easier and cleaner if we as citizens do our bit to avoid littering, reduce our per capita waste and segregate it for recycling before disposal.

At one of our IITs, some innovative students threw 100 rupee notes on the ground. As soon as students saw these valuable "pieces of paper" they immediately picked them up - only to realise it was April Fool's Day. The incident showed that if it is money, we bother to bend and pick it up, but if it is litter, we are quite happy leaving it untouched. Swachh Bharat is a national campaign. We can choose to be cynical, saying it is just another slogan like 'Garibi Hatao' or 'India Shining'. Or, we can genuinely start doing our bit, to make it a success, making our roads and lives cleaner and better.

Consider the traffic on our roads and the horrific accidents we see almost every day. There are far too many vehicles, our law enforcement is lax, and we lack efficient public transport systems. Yet, don't we also add to the chaos on our

roads? We jump traffic lights, happily ride on the wrong side of the road, or give our helmets to the pillion riders for safekeeping – you name it and we practise every form of traffic violation. No wonder Pune has one of the highest incidents of two-wheeler accidents in the world.

As employees of an energy-environment company, can all of us adopt safe and sustainable practices, at home and on the road? Operating two sets of practices – one at home and the other at the office, is not what is expected. Our lives should reflect these relevant concerns.

Perhaps the worst manifestation of our lack of concern and apathy is in the way women feel unsafe in our country. As the media has pointed out, the system has always been slow to act even after the nation-wide public protests over the rape and death of the young woman in Delhi in 2012. Equally shocking is the public apathy when women are harassed or children molested in full glare of the public. I find it most shocking when groups of people watch an outrage happening, without reacting and offering immediate help.

Like many others, I too was troubled by the recent BBC documentary that was banned. The documentary and the reactions to it showed us the warped mindset of some men in responsible positions. If many of our teachers, parents and so-called educated people think regressively about the way women should dress and behave, won't they propagate them to the next generation? Won't children grow up thinking that women should not dress in a particular way, should not be seen after dark with a man, other than her father or brother; or else men have every right to molest or rape them? That would be highly unfortunate.

It is heartening to see some initiatives happening in our own Pune. For

example, SEMAA (Stop Exploitation Molestation Abuse and Assault) is an initiative in response to the anxieties about safety of women and the new law against sexual harassment at the work place. Led by Pradeep Bhargava, Anu Aga and Vandana Chavan, the initiative is working on various fronts to make workplaces safer for women – making both men and women aware of what sexual harassment entails, strengthening our women and helping them become assertive, forming the mandatory internal complaints committee, training them to deal with complaints and so on.

Another excellent initiative adopted by our own Municipal Commissioner in Pune is the Pune Action Task Force – he has invited corporates, NGOs and civil society to partner with the PMC to improve the quality of education in our municipal schools, bring in digital literacy both at schools and within our city, as well as to create Swachh schools and ultimately, Swachh Pune. With participation of people, this could turn out to be an excellent initiative, bringing together citizens and the local government.

Let me present a story that illustrates well our powers as citizens to make things happen. A disciple went to his Guru and asked him whether the bird in his hand is alive or dead. The master told him, "It depends on you. If I say it is alive, you can tighten your fist and kill it, or if I say it is dead, you can open your hand and let it fly away."

Effective governance starts with a responsible society; gains momentum and achieves results when a purposeful government works together with a sensitive and demanding public. Being responsible for oneself and others could be the first step from each of us to make that happen.

Warm regards,

Meher Pudumjee

EXPRESSIONS

I find it most shocking when groups of people watch an outrage happening, without reacting and offering immediate help.

