

Who is mad?

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This piece is related to two milestones. Let me quickly dispose of the first, personal and more pleasant one. It is almost exactly a year since this column came into existence. This is a happy milestone, as writing this column has brought me into contact with so many people and shown me another side of life. My first piece, published on August 20th, 2011, was a questionnaire which is at least as pertinent today as it was then.

The second ‘milestone’, on the other hand, marks one of those countless disgraceful incidents that need the boundary conditions and abject insensitivity of ‘Incredible India’ to happen. Almost exactly a decade ago, on 6th August, 2001, twenty-six people burned to death at Moideen Badususha Mental Home, Erwadi, Tamilnadu because they could not escape the fire, on account of having been kept chained up when the fire broke out. (Please also see the article in ToI, August 16th by Hussain Kodinhi, and accompanying details of ‘manacles of mental health’.)

And just to show the world that we were still keeping our hand in, barely about a month ago, on 11th July 2012, the body of a young woman was found buried within Dulal Smriti Samsad, a home for mentally disabled at Gurap, Hooghly, West Bengal. In fact, once investigation into this this last manifestation of depravity started, more such bodies were also unearthed.

Which nation can stand tall and lay claim to all the following mind-blowing characteristics:

- Cities like Delhi and Chennai vie with one another for the maximum number of weekly casualties due to road accidents.
- The (lack of) road etiquette of our drivers is trying to surpass itself by exterminating the elderly by simply bumping them off in road accidents; an elderly (wo)man going for a walk on a sidewalk is easy prey for the sufficiently committed.
- A week doesn’t go by without some drunk driver running over that poor ‘vagrant’ who had the misfortune of having chosen that spot for sleeping on the pavement!

- Rather than taking them to school, our schoolbuses run over children on a practically daily basis.
- Publicised statistics show that more than half our women have been subjected to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their own relatives.
- Young men routinely lace drinks of an unsuspecting female acquaintance with some drug, then gang-rape her, capture this bestiality on their cell-phone cameras, and later try to blackmail the poor girl with threats of publicising her indignity.
- Gangs of hooligans of the same ilk often turn to ‘moral policing’ to maintain the ‘decency and purity of our culture’ by harassing and pawing young women, be it in Guwahati or in Mangalore.
- One dreads to imagine what a ‘mentally ill’ woman, kept under lock and key, will be subjected to by her ‘attendants’. After all, doesn’t one often read of policemen getting their jollies with women under ‘lock-up’?

Not surprisingly, people striving to improve the cause of mentally ill people in our country, ask *how long will WE, who are not residing in asylums or such Homes, claim that we ourselves are Sane?* and say that **on this 6th of August, we are joining hands with other groups to think about those human beings who are shackled and take a pledge to demand the right to positive mental health of all.**

Let me conclude this sorry litany of manifestations of our national collective mental sickness on a positive note by thanking Vaishnavi Jayakumar for suggesting that I use this column for publicising the passage of a decade after Erwadi and let me salute her for her decades of exemplary service in the cause of the mentally ill in particular, and people with disabilities in general.