

## Letter from Chennai

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### THE NOT SO GENTLE BOVINE

As a teenager making my way to school and college on a bicycle or a motorcycle, I was always wary of stray dogs. The Corporation and its dog catchers were more efficient in those days, and the encounters I experienced were far fewer than those reported nowadays. However, a greater danger was from cattle. There was no restriction on keeping cattle in the city in those early years after India's independence, and most of the city's milk supply came from milkmen who had herds of cows or buffalos which they let free to graze on the open grounds that were much more common than they are today. Often a large band would cross the road, and occasionally an individual would have got separated from her friends and would be making her solitary way home. Unlike feral dogs, these cattle generally had no hostile intent. However, they followed their intended route and were not bothered by any obstacles, whether men or machines, and pushed them aside. It was impossible to stay seated on a two-wheeler when a cow chose to cross your path. A relation of mine fractured his leg when he was pushed off his scooter by a cow which appropriated the right of way.

Dogs have multiplied and are a greater menace nowadays, as I discussed in a recent *Letter*. Cattle are fewer than they were in the 1950s. They may be kept in the city now, but the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) has 'strict' regulations on how they should be housed. Cattle sheds should be inspected and approved by the GCC. Cows are not permitted on city streets. However, when was any true Indian deterred by laws or regulations? It is common Chennai practice to let cows loose, and let them find their sustenance from the garbage bins on the street corners, particularly those in the vicinity of eateries. Riders of two-wheelers should beware of them.

A month ago, an 11-year-old walking home from school on a Chennai street, accompanied by her mother, was attacked and gored by a cow, which had to be driven away by other pedestrians. She was badly injured and needed hospitalization, but is reported to be doing well now. A few evenings ago, a group of cows attacked a few pedestrians on one of the city streets. The owner was traced and a case has been filed against him. I had always considered the cow to be a placid, non-violent animal. Clearly I am no authority on animal behaviour.

The Corporation Commissioner made a statement that a fine of ₹2000 was levied on the owner of any stray cow found on the roads. The cow would be impounded and a further ₹200 was levied for every day the animal stayed in the pound till the owner reclaimed it. From 1 January 2023 to mid-September 2023, 3241 cows had been impounded and ₹62.9 lakh (6.2 million) had been collected. He wanted to increase the fines and would submit a proposal to the Corporation Council at its next meeting.

Meanwhile, the newspapers of 22 September 2023 inform us that the Supreme Court is to take up a case to examine the Animal Birth Control Rules of 2023, and is expected to go into all the existing rules and their implementation to find a 'lasting and humane solution' to the stray dog menace. This was to be heard on 23 October 2023. When that is sorted out, maybe the danger from stray cows can be discussed. If dog lovers are creating so many problems, you can imagine what cow vigilantes would do.

### A TALE OF TWO INSPECTIONS

The Collector of one of the districts of Tamil Nadu walked into a primary health centre (PHC) one day and found no doctors or nurses on duty. He did not play by the rules. He should have given notice at least a week in advance, and every one of the staff would have been there hard at work. Even a person on leave would have been recalled. This Collector was even more improper. He ordered the tahsildar to keep an eye on the PHC and let him know if the doctors stayed away again. This created an uproar, and members of the medical service objected that they could not have administrators of lower status inspecting their work. I do not know whether their objections were acted upon.

A few days later the Health Minister made a similar unannounced visit to a PHC, and found no one at work. He instituted disciplinary action and the doctor was asked to explain his absence. Many doctors turned to social media to raise an objection that there were 2000 posts of medical officer vacant. The Tamil Nadu Medical Officers Association stated that of five posts of medical officer in that particular PHC (which had been upgraded and therefore had more than the usual number), only two were filled and one of the two doctors was on maternity leave. The remaining doctor was deputed to do school health screening on that day. As far as this particular incident was concerned, I do not see a problem. The doctor had a clear and legitimate reason for not being at the PHC, since he was posted to the school on that day. If anyone is at fault, it is the administration, which ultimately points to the Health Minister himself. I do not see anything wrong in the minister making a surprise visit. Ultimately, it shows him that there is a serious deficiency in the service that he runs and might stimulate him to do something about it.

Some years ago in Karnataka, there were many PHCs with no doctor and the administration solved the problem by putting up the list of these PHCs and appointing doctors to the PHC of their choice. It is clear that no government medical scheme can work well if there are not enough personnel to carry out the work, and so filling the vacancies is a vital first step.

I do not find any objection to a tahsildar or a clerk or any member of the public noting that a doctor is not present at his place of work and reporting that to the Collector. If the doctor has joined the service and has accepted the posting, he is duty bound to be at his PHC or any other place of work unless he has applied for and been granted leave at the time. Equally, the authorities are duty bound to see that he is paid the appropriate salary on the day it is due. Every one of our ministers is a millionaire, at least; most of them are *crorepatis*. They do not actually need a salary. Unfortunately, no doctor in TN service could equal them in that respect. Most doctors at the start of their careers cannot buy the necessities of life without their salary. A grand hospital has been erected by the government in memory of our former Chief Minister, the father of the present Chief Minister, who in turn is probably the father of our future Chief Minister. The cost of the hospital has run into several crores. Among all those crores, the government could not find the few lakhs needed to pay the salaries of the medical officers working in that hospital for the past few months. They are waiting for the paperwork to crawl from desk to desk.

### RETIREMENT FROM SERVICE

The recent retirement of a colleague in the hospital turned my thoughts to work and retirement from work. Why work at all? The obvious answer is that, except for the fortunate few whose forefathers have left them enough to live comfortably, we must work to earn the wherewithal to live. Most of us make provision for our retirement, either in the form of a pension from our employer if available, or by other savings and retirement plans. Which brings me to the next thought. Why retire at all? One reason is that the individual may not wish to work any more. He may have other plans to be fulfilled in retirement.

The concept of retirement, I believe, originated in government service. Ever since the British took over the administration of this country, government was the major employer in a formal service. The armed forces, administration and the railways are the main examples. These services provided the major avenues of employment for the people of the country. Since the jobs available were, and still are, limited in number, it is necessary that seniors should retire so that vacancies can be created and younger people could find work to do and thereby a source of income.

When we attained independence, the expectation of life of an Indian at birth was a meagre 27 years. It made sense to set the age of retirement at 55 years. In fact, attaining the age of 60 years was distinctly unusual, and many people celebrated a *shashtiabdapoorthi*, a ritual to thank God for having brought us to this age. Advances in medicine, and the improved efficiency in the delivery of medical care in India, have led to increased length of life. In 2022, the expectation of life at birth was 70.19 years. The World Data Atlas, accessed on the internet, says 9.6% of the population of India was over the age of 60 years in 2020 and there were 13 284 octogenarians. In keeping with the increasing age of Indians, the age of retirement has been raised

to between 58 and 62 years in different branches of government service.

I began my career in the government medical service as assistant to Dr K. Ramachandra. He continued in the service till his retirement, and continued to practise medicine till his end. I resigned after 13 years in the service and pursued my career elsewhere. I met him several years later, and asked him how he was. With sound common sense, he replied, 'How are you? I have passed my sixties with no major problems, and am likely to live trouble-free for some decades. You are not yet 60, and are still vulnerable.' His words were prophetic. A little later, I fell into the hands of cardiologists, and have not been free from them since. I am not ungrateful. They have brought me well into my eighties in pretty good condition. Since I worked in a private hospital with no definite age of retirement, I could keep working till I felt I had worked enough, and could enjoy a relaxed old age.

I brought up that vignette to illustrate that today there is no point in enforcing an age of retirement, except to create a vacancy in service, to give an opportunity for a younger person to rise to the top, and to be able to recruit still younger people at the start of their careers. Architects, engineers, planners and, of course, doctors, can often contribute much even at a great age. It does not make sense to send a person out of service when he is at the peak of his ability and experience. In the USA and Australia (I do not know about other countries), government cannot force a person to retire unless he is physically or intellectually incapable of carrying out his duties. Perhaps India cannot afford that principle of service. People in salaried posts must retire to create vacancies for our army of educated unemployed.

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