



Know Your Heart – The Hidden Links Between Your Body and the Politics of the State. Dinesh C. Sharma. Harper Collins Publ. India, A-75, Sector 57, Noida. 2014. 256 pp. Price: Rs 250.

Working in Public Health, one is caught between two worlds. One which insists that Public Health should be ‘hard science’, i.e. based on verifiable, measurable, and testable, preferably experimental evidence; and other that considers it as an art, the ‘art of applying science in the context of politics’, according to one definition, so as to ensure equity in health and work towards an acceptable level of health for the whole population. What sets apart Public Health from clinical medicine, is, of course, the social science: seeing population health as an outcome of social processes, based on currently accepted values and norms.

The book under review takes the second perspective, of science as it applies in the context of politics. It is titled ‘Know Your Heart’; but, as Srinath Reddy says in the Foreword, don’t let that fool you. It is not another popular science book on heart disease. The subtitle says it all: ‘the hidden links between your body and the politics of the state’. The author attempts to document how the fight against one of the greatest health challenges of modern times in India – the rise of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancers, is handicapped by the politics of what we have come to call development. We know that to counter these diseases, people should eat right, exercise more, and cut down on tobacco; however, while the health ministry tries to promote these approaches, the imperatives of ‘development’ force other ministries to pursue policies which make healthy lifestyles impossible.

The book carries three separate chapters dealing with the three major risks precipi-

tating cardiovascular disease: rich food, inadequate physical exertion and tobacco. The chapters are titled, appropriately, ‘Of fattening burgers and sweetening colas’, ‘Barriers to physical activity’, and ‘The poison leaf’. In the chapter ‘Of fattening burgers and sweetening colas’, the author documents how aspirations to a more westernized lifestyle invariably result, in consumption of high calorie processed and packaged food, as well as fast food which is rich in trans fat. Even in villages where more wholesome food is produced by farmers, the compulsions of the market force them to sell their produce and earn money so that their families can aspire to a more urban eating pattern. With regard to physical activity, increasing urbanization and demand for urban space for construction has meant that playgrounds and parks have a low priority in the claims for urban space. Increasing competitiveness forces students to spend more and more time in class rooms and tuition homes, away from playgrounds. The kind of jobs they finally end up in, also force them to sit in front of computers for long hours. In this environment, knowledge about the value of exercise is hardly likely to be translated into practice. In the chapter ‘The poison leaf’, the author looks at the story of tobacco. Though India has some stringent tobacco legislation, this is eclipsed by the fact that in many Indian states growing tobacco is a major source of livelihood for many people. Thus politicians recognize the interests of tobacco growers as their own and promote the cultivation and marketing of tobacco. Despite international pressure, it has been very difficult to implement anti-tobacco legislation in India effectively, though there are many pressure groups working towards it.

Thus the message that the book conveys is that life style change, which is very necessary if we as a society are to stave off this ever-increasing threat of heart disease, is hardly an individual choice. This, however, does not mean that change is not possible. The individual option to a healthy life style should be supported by collective decisions, reflected in national and state policies, which reward such choices. In India our failure seems to be that our political processes have so far not risen to these expectations. The state apparatus has many ways of rewarding right decisions by communities, corporates and other collective entities – such as incentives, tax breaks and recognition. There are many examples around the world where such

approaches have shown results within a short time span. Even in India, we have examples to copy from in related sectors: the story of the concerted campaign against HIV-AIDS comes to mind readily.

This book has three things going for it. First, it has got the science right. The author has done extensive exploration of the literature to document the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and their risk factors in India in recent years. All the papers quoted are relevant and appropriate, and the context has been well described. More than this, he has got the social science right – he describes the politics of decision making between various ministries and the lobbying and influences that lead to these decisions. Most important of all, the story has been told boldly and directly, in elegant and simple language that reads like a thriller. At the same time, the author has taken care to see that the language does not slip into activism inspired harangue at any point. This is a well-produced book, the key points along the text emphasized by short sentences given within boxes. However, it is not very clear who the book is addressed to – the lay public, policy makers, the medical profession, or the community of health activists. All of them, perhaps, would benefit from reading this, though one personally wishes the message gets across to policy makers.

The dilemma of development in the health sector, especially in a country like India, is that those aspirations that become a priority as the nation becomes prosperous, such as greater variety and availability of food, personal vehicles, indolent lifestyles, and the increasing competitiveness that accompanies urbanization – all contribute to a rising incidence and prevalence of diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer. Physicians generally are well aware of the risk factors that contribute to this trend, such as smoking, lack of exercise, and calorie-dense food. However, their lack of sensitivity to the context of how lifestyles tend to change with developmental aspirations, may result in what D. Banerji has famously labelled ‘victim blaming’. This book should be a very good antidote against the disease of victim blaming.

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