

Background note for a nation-wide AIDWA- AIPSN campaign

Science, not superstition, will help us tackle Covid-19.

On 23rd July 2020, All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) is commemorating the eighth death anniversary of Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, the revolutionary freedom fighter and tireless campaigner for progressive ideals, democratic rights, gender justice, and an upholder of the scientific outlook throughout her life. She was one of the founding members of AIDWA in 1981, and played a crucial role in taking the organization into the Hindi heartland. As a doctor based in Kanpur, UP, her clinic was a nodal centre for the organization, attracting women seeking medical help and unable to afford it; as well as a site for interaction and meetings of activists. Fortunate were the thousands of babies delivered there, as the parents did not have to worry about becoming impoverished in the process!

The All India Peoples Science Network (AIPSN) comprising 37 Organizations all over India, joins AIDWA in remembering and celebrating the enormous contributions of Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal. Significantly, she played a leading role in the founding of the Network in 1987 and was a champion of the battle against obscurantism, and for promotion of scientific temper.

The life and work of Dr. Lakshmi Sahgal assumes even greater relevance during the on-going Covid-19 epidemic during which obscurantist forces are playing on the fears of the people, particularly women, to spread superstitions and pseudo-scientific beliefs. . Many traditionalist practices which have no proven impact on Covid-19 are being advocated as cures or as having

preventive properties. Under cover of the epidemic, attempts are being made by the Sangh Parivar to bolster socially conservative values, communal prejudices and patriarchal notions. This must be resisted unitedly by progressive and democratic forces.

The message of science

The Covid-19 pandemic hit India in January 2020, and presented a challenge in the early days even to public health experts, doctors and scientists who were still learning about the novel Corona Virus. The Central Government and most State Governments, with the notable exception of Kerala as recognized worldwide, were quite late in putting together a coherent, rational understanding and communicating it effectively to the people. A knee-jerk and badly implemented lock down, dramatic gestures like lighting diyas, clapping, hands, etc, initiated by none other than the PM himself, did not help matters.

Not surprisingly, as people desperately sought relief and protection from Covid-19, all kinds of myths and beliefs proliferated to fill the gaps. These included a number of home remedies like drinking warm water, standing in the sun, growing certain plants at home and so on. Such untested beliefs gained considerable popularity until, under pressure from scientists and people's organizations and movements, public messaging became more coherent and science-based. AIPSN and other organizations of scientists, doctors and public health experts have been at the forefront of informing the public about the correct do's-and-don'ts related to Covid-19 derived from WHO and ICMR guidelines and expert opinion. A number of popular practices and home remedies gain acceptance as remedies because in 80% of cases the disease is self-limiting and the patient recovers without much intervention. .

The challenge meanwhile is to stop obscurantist forces and vested interests from using the uncertainty which still prevails, to spread their ideology, and to

make their profits. The promotion of do-it-yourself home remedies or traditionalist treatments combine with misleading messages that “no treatment is available for COVID 19” and to distract from the governments failures to provide affordable quality medical care through rapid expansion of public health services. Although there is as yet no curative allopathic medicine, the scientific and medical communities have learned much about the virus and its effects, and are applying this knowledge in testing and treatment of Covid-19, especially in hospital settings with or without oxygen or ventilator support. Further, the search for definitive treatments and vaccines for prevention continues with emphasis on scientific validation especially through clinical trials so as to ensure safety and efficacy. This is the scientific approach. Unfortunately, some treatments are pushed even within modern medicine, cutting short scientific procedures, by corporate interests and their supporters in positions of power or influence, motivated by greed for profits or misplaced national pride. The undue haste in pressurizing hospitals to unrealistically accelerate clinical trials of a vaccine candidate, perhaps just to enable a triumphant announcement from the red fort on Independence Day, is a case in point, thwarted only by concerted opposition by the scientific and medical communities and informed public opinion.

Countering pseudo remedies and false propaganda

Some false remedies and fake claims take the form of peddling Covid “cures” or “treatments” in the name of Ayurvedic, homeopathic or other traditional formulations. None of these have any foundation even within these traditions, nor have they been subject to any scientific trials. Yet many such claims have been allowed to propagate. Even some Ministers at the Centre and in several States have made such claims. When the Union Health Minister or leading Government spokespersons were challenged on such claims, they have shied away from outright debunking them, instead saying they may be the “personal beliefs” of those Ministers or leaders.

The atrocious and brazen claim of a supposed Ayurvedic “cure” from Baba Ramdev’s Patanjali conglomerate emerged from this trend. The formulation from the Sangh Parivar-linked, politically well-connected Baba was all set for commercial launch based on spurious “clinical trials,” when a public outcry by scientists, doctors and informed citizens forced the Health and AYUSH Ministries to debunk this claim and even declare readiness to invoke the law against “magical cures and remedies.” Nevertheless, many so-called immune-boosters and other concoctions to supposedly help people fight-off Covid-19 continue to be propagated, cleverly taking care only not to use the word “cure!”

Pseudo-scientific claims have got validated because the party in power and supporting social forces have gone along with such notions. The Prime Minister’s calls for people to come to balconies or doorsteps and clang vessels, and later to shine torches or light lamps, to express support for doctors and health workers, were followed by twitter storms and social media posts claiming that India’s anti-Covid lamps were seen from space by NASA, or that “powerful radiations” or “vibrations” from these public displays would destroy the Corona Virus! No efforts were made by any Government or Sangh Parivar leader to contradict any of these fantastic claims. (Suffice it to say that the virus continues to spread alarmingly!) These kind of claims are being used not just to magnify the PM’s “superpowers,” but also to undermine the influence of science, rationality and critical thinking in society.

The Sangh Parivar and linked forces have also used the Covid19 pandemic to spread communal poison. One highly regrettable mass religious gathering in Nizamuddin, which acted as a superspreader, was used systematically over several months to demonize a particular religious minority as the major cause behind the pandemic. This was carried forward to stigmatize the entire community by spreading false rumours that positive cases from this gathering were deliberately spitting on others to spread the virus, or that buying vegetables from vendors belonging to this community was dangerous etc. The simple fact is, as science teaches us, that it is not the religion that matters but

that there was a large gathering, with no physical distancing or other precautions being taken. Indeed, a recent occurrence at arguably the most popular temple in the country where large numbers of priests and devotees have been infected, sharply underlines this fact.

The Sangh parivar and linked forces have been utilizing social media to propagate superstitions, communal, traditionalist and obscurantist beliefs in a big way, which have to be countered, through powerful media campaigns of our own based on science.

Unmasking the use of religion to reinforce patriarchy.

The other dangerous development is the invocation of supposed religious beliefs to reinforce obscurantist views and customs, especially by giving it a gender twist, with the virus being personized as an angry goddess. Observations made by AIDWA activists from different states provide some disturbing instances of this growing trend.

In Rajasthan, some well-known temples were surreptitiously opened despite the government's ban on opening places of worship, by spreading rumours that the doors of the temple had opened "by themselves" and people, especially women, should offer prayers there to "placate the Corona virus." Women have been told to dip their hands in kumkum water, or in cow dung in UP, and put their imprints on the walls of their homes to pacify "Corona Mai (Devi)." In parts of Bihar, women are being prompted to go to nearby rivers, dress up and carry sindoor, bindi, sweets etc and take a dip just as they would during Chhat Puja, to appease an angry "Corona mai." In some places, women get "possessed" and exhort "Corona mai" to go away. Unfortunately, it is observed that women from Dalit and OBC families are especially influenced to act in this manner. The idea of an angry "Corona goddess" is also being propagated in Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

Such notions of an angry or dangerous Goddess who must be appeased have been witnessed earlier too in India. Small pox was associated with female Goddesses, for example Mariamma in Tamil Nadu, and the pox itself was known as “Mata/ Amma/Ammmai etc,” as chicken pox, measles etc are often termed even today. Part of this derives from ancient quasi-religious beliefs but also stem from deep-rooted patriarchal culture and ideologies ascribing evil, dangerous and power-hungry characteristics to women as witches, daayin etc.

In Telangana, pro-Sangh Parivar forces, often led by women, are leading “prabhat pheris” or dawn marches, propagating the idea that the Covid epidemic has struck because women have stopped performing pujas and other sanskari or traditional practices, and calling on them to restart them so as to drive away the Corona Virus. The intention is clearly to reinforce traditional patriarchal culture with a subservient role chalked out for women within the *lakshman rekha* drawn around the home.

In Odisha, pro-Sangh Parivar outfits have been campaigning that temples should not have been closed, and that the Supreme Court did not permit the Rath Yatra because it is pro-Muslim and pro-Christian! In fact, places of worship of almost all religious denominations have been kept closed by the respective religious institutions themselves and by government guidelines. Where this has not happened, or has happened without observance of physical distancing and hand-hygiene, it has resulted in Covid positive cases spreading from such gatherings. Any rational and unbiased person would understand that the problem is not with the particular religion, but with the practices adopted. Here obscurantist forces are deliberately fanning and spreading communal prejudice, while at the same time devaluing science and rational thought and distracting everyone from governments’ responsibility to provide quality medical care.

In this context, AIDWA and AIPSN would launch joint campaigns starting from 23 July 2020 to combat propagation of superstitions and irrational beliefs by obscurantist forces. We will take inspiration from great fighters like Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, to arm people with science as against superstition, and to demand that the scientific temper enshrined in the Constitution be widely

promoted. The campaign would resist attempts by the government and obscurantist forces to take us backwards , and instead uphold the values of secularism, gender justice, critical thinking and scientific temper, all of which are essential for building a forward-looking, democratic society.

The Joint AIDWA-AIPSN Campaign would be conducted throughout the country from 23rd July 2020 at least till the National Scientific Temper Day on August 20, the black day on which anti-superstition campaigner Dr.Narendra Dabholkar was murdered by right wing obscurantist forces.