By Sidharth Mishra



Given the narrative which is dominating the media currently, the headline of this article may sound like sacrilege. Given the shoot and scoot journalism, which runs for ratings than the truth; and seldom for solutions; an effort to understand the catastrophe which made its annual visit to Baba Raghav Das Medical College Hospital (BRDMCH) would be asking for too much. Another problem with the Gorakhpur tragedy story is the personality of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. His saffron robes, the thick ear-ring of monkhood which he wears, and the plain speak on the agenda of minority appeasement which he does, make him a figure which the Left of the Centre media just loves to hate. In their hatred for the personality, they have overlooked the fact that it's Yogi who kept rising in Parliament to raise the issue of the infant deaths due to the killer encephalitis. Adityanath was the youngest member of the 12th LokSabha at 26. He has been elected to the Parliament from Gorakhpur for five consecutive terms (in 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections).

As LokSabha member he recorded 77%. LokSabha records scrutinised by The Indian Express (according to a report published by it) show that Yogi Adityanath, in his capacity as local MP, raised the issue of children dying in Gorakhpur at least 20 times between the years 2003 and 2014. The first step to solve any problem is to recognize it – Yogi Adityanth's past records tells us that he knows the problem first hand and he is probably the only person who can work to solve it. According to Express report, these issues raised by Yogi ranged from limitations of infrastructure at the BRD Medical College and Hospital to the need of an AIIMS in Gorakhpur; the importance of timely vaccination and the lack of any concerted action by the state or the Centre in tackling the encephalitis epidemic.While he asked questions on the issue at least eight times, Yogi Adityanath made a special mention of the issue leading to a debate in the Parliament on not less than 12 occasions.

India won the war over Small Pox and Polio and there is no reason why the country can't win this war over "JapaniBukhaar", as those covering the Parliament proceedings have heard Yogi several times saying with reference to Japanese encephalitis. What's of greater concern is the new strain – Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES). BRDMC, where 60 children are reported to have died, is the only medical facility that has a dedicated encephalitis ward in this region where more than 50,000 people have died of the dreaded disease since 1978, when the first case of encephalitis was reported from Gorakhpur.

The medical college hospital serves encephalitis patients from 19 districts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Assam and many times patients from the bordering areas of Nepal too. It's ironic that the

hospital is in controversy, when its main benefactor, Yogi Adityanath, is at the helm of affairs in the state. As the local Member of Parliament, Adityanath has pushed for a “holistic approach” to the scourge. While strengthening medical facilities has been on agenda, he has also focused on prevention.

A point he did not miss to make last week while addressing a meeting in Allahabad. “There are vector-borne diseases, such as encephalitis, you must be hearing media reports of BRD medical college these days...it is a tragedy that lives of young children have been snuffed out at such young age because we do not lead a clean and hygienic life” he said while reminding the crowd that the disease has been the bane of eastern Uttar Pradesh since 1978.

Most of the victims, who are aged between six months and 12 years, come from hinterland, where primary health centres are in shambles. Almost all the cases of reported death in the past few days were referral patients. By the time they were received at BRDMC, it’s too late. The survival rate is next to nil, as the records show, oxygen or no oxygen. Patients come with an inflammation of the brain and other vital organs such as heart, liver and kidney. It leads to organ failure.

Kafeel Khan, the doctor who has courted controversy in the tragic episode, in a newspaper interview soon after the tragedy had agreed that lack of oxygen could just be one of the causes for death. “It is not that we cannot save AES patients. After all, we have saved nearly 800 AES children this year out if the 1,100 who came to us. The key is to come to us early. Invariably when a child comes to us, she/he is gasping. You need time on your side to save the child. The tragic part is that out of 280-odd children casualties due to AES this year, 180 died the day they were admitted,” Khan was quoted in a newspaper interview.

If doctors like Khan provide solution, they are also the problem. Evidences have come to fore than Khan ran a private hospital to treat encephalitis patients. Khan is not alone; there must be many Mishras, Yadavs, Pandeys, Singhs and Srivastavas, who would not be holding onto their post in a primary health centre or a community health centre but doing private practice in some urban settlement. This problem is not exclusive to Gorakhpur or Uttar Pradesh. The government health services in most of the northern Indian states are in the doldrums because the rural health centres go unattended.

The medical mafia is something which any Government has to take on to counter the endemic encephalitis. Yogi has the temperament and the moral wherewithal to take on the corrupt. With Gorakhpur being his pocket borough, he must turn this crisis into an opportunity to end the rule of the medical mafia.

(Sidharth Mishra is Editor, Capital Khabar)