

>

Title: Regarding safety of school children and their school transport.

DR. SHASHI THAROOR (THIRUVANANTHAPURAM): Madam Speaker, just a few weeks ago, I had the tragic experience of visiting the homes of a number of bereaved parents as a result of a school bus accident in my constituency.

A bus plunged into a canal and six children died. But, in this incident, I realized that there were several features which are common in many parts of our country and which cry for national attention and response. In this particular incident, the vehicle was really not meant for transporting children. There was an inexperienced driver who was a ten year old boy. He was driving rashly and at considerable speed in order to complete several rounds in time and there were simply too many children squeezed into too small a vehicle.

Children are, Madam Speaker, the most precious assets to any family. They represent the hopes of parents. Witnessing the grief of the parents and the devastation that was caused to them, let me ask the Government, through you, as to what can be done in terms of an effective response around our country.

I discover that in 1997, the Supreme Court had actually issued guidelines in a case called M.C. Mehta versus the Union Government of India and yet these guidelines have been widely ignored throughout the country. There has been no effective enforcement of these guidelines. The Court, for example, said that it requires all drivers of school transportation to have at least ten years of experience and that the vehicle must maintain certain standards or fulfil certain requirements. There are rules about the speed that these vehicles can go on.

Now, the safety of school transport is the responsibility of the district administration, of the school authorities, of the parents themselves, of the proprietors and drivers of the vehicles when the vehicles are not owned by the school. Clearly, therefore, we need a national campaign and national standards to be promulgated based on the Supreme Court guidelines. Instead of taking refuge behind the idea that this is a State subject and that education should be left to others to take care of, the need is for a national consciousness on the great danger in which our children are transported to school everyday throughout this country.

It is essential of course that, the State Governments be asked to enforce them but the fact is that the standards have been neglected. In fact, they are treated with impunity throughout the country which calls for both raising of our consciousness and our conscience on this matter and for executive action to ensure that the standards are promulgated.

What is striking me as I visited the bereaved parents is that everyone of them unanimously said that they wanted to ensure that the Government of the country should do something to ensure that other parents will not suffer and endure the pain that they suffer. I think, therefore, that there is a great need for us to be conscious of this and take such steps to ensure safety of children.

Probably, there are more than one Ministry involved like the Ministry of Human Resources Development, Ministry of Child and Family Welfare and Ministry of Road Transport. All of them will have to come together and coordinate for an effective response with a nation-wide public information campaign.

The Nobel Prize winning poet, Gabriela Mistral, while talking about children, said: "To him, we cannot say tomorrow, his name is today." This is an urgent problem, Madam Speaker, and I hope we can take action on this matter.