It's our Dharma to Serve

Recently a shocking incident in India made the whole world turn around. Twenty three school children from Bihar faced tragic deaths due to lunch poisoning. The source of this food poisoning traces back to the vegetable oil that was used to cook the mid-day meal for the children. Traces of monocrotophos, a lethal pesticide banned in many countries, was found in the vegetable oil. Meena Kumari, the principal, had bought the vegetable oil from her husband's store. Investigators believe that the principal could have stored the oil in a container that was previously used to store pesticides. Overall, a chain of events miserably led to the death of twenty three five to twelve year old children. This heartbreaking incident could have been easily avoided if the principal and the inspection staff had followed their proper duties. In other words, if the principal and the inspection staff had attended to their proper Sanatan Dharma, the grief of twenty three families could have been saved.

Sanatan Dharma means "eternal" and this set of duties and responsibilities holds everyone together as a whole. The path to Sanatan Dharma is by serving others and helping them without flaw. By doing this, one brings their consciousness closer to that of God. In addition, one is spiritually lifted and fulfills their duty as a human being. As a principal and decision maker of the school, it is Ms. Kumari's responsibility to serve the children and attend to their needs. Her failure to do this resulted in a tragedy that will follow her throughout life. Stories from Hindu epics such as *Manimegalai* and *Mahabharatha* could help Ms. Kumari understand that being a principal is not only her job, but also her service to her community.

Manimegalai is the Tamil literature that narrates the story of Manimegalai, the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi. According to the story, while trying to find the meaning of life, Manimegalia comes across the Dharma seat. Based on legend, those who worship the seat will

gain knowledge of their previous life. Unknowingly, Manimegalai beings worshiping the Dharma seat with complete devotion. Observing Manimegalai's dedication, the seat's guardian goddess, Deevai Tilaka appears and presents Manimegalai with Amrta Surabhi, the magic bowl that provides never-ending food. She tells Manimegalai that it is one's Dharma to serve those in need, especially the poor. Starting that day, Manimegalai, without fail, continued to properly serve food to rid hunger from her community. Similarly, Panchali, the wife of the Pancha Pandavas from *Mahabharatha*, owned a Amrta Surabhi. She was also widely known for her service to those in need. With the help of Krishna, Panchali helped the poor by serving them from her never-ending bowl of food.

Both Manimegalai and Panchali completed their duty of service by feeding those in need using the Amrta Surabhi bowl that was presented to them. Likewise, Ms. Kumari is funded by the government to suitably feed the children in her school. Greg S. Garrett, the director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition's (GAIN) Large Scale Food Fortification Initiative, noted that India's government funded mid-day meal program for school children is recognized as one of the most effective initiatives that motivate economically deprived children to attend school. Despite events such as the one that occurred in Bihar, this program has been running successfully since the 1960s. Although this is a federal program, every state government should make it their duty to set health and safety standards for the food preparation. Furthermore, the food is prepared locally, at the schools by various cooks. Therefore, the authorities of the school, including the principal, should take responsibility in creating quality standards for checking the food before preparation. In addition, the staff should be trained on how to properly purchase, store, and prepare food while following sanitary techniques. Protocols and checklists should be created to triple check the preparation before serving the children. If these initiatives and

recommendations are followed, there will definitely be a decrease in the number of schoolchildren being admitted for food poisoning.

Although the mid-day meal program starts at the federal level, local schools such as Ms. Kumari's school should take the responsibility to implement protocols to carefully check through procedures before the food is served. It is their Dharma, as leaders and role-models to serve their students with care. Even though this tragic event erupted throughout the world, there are many such incidents that are not as widely known. If proper duties are followed, such cases can be easily avoided. Children are our future and should be cared for with kindness and lots of love. School children look up to their elders as role-models, so elders should behave accordingly to exemplify proper Dharma to children.