



Sagarika's daughter Aishwarya, then one, is carried by her grandmother along with then Minister of State for External Affairs Preneet Kaur (pink) on her arrival in Delhi. The Norwegian court gave the custody of Aishwarya and Abhigyan, then three, to their paternal family. In 2013, Sagarika was handed their custody as per the order of the Child Welfare Committee in Burdwan after the CWC seconded her allegations that her in laws had been reluctant to let her visit the children, and they weren't being looked after.

PICS/GETTY IMAGES



RUBY HARROLD-CLAESSON

When fair is foul

Not just immigrant families, Norwegian parents and activists are also looking forward to an upcoming Bollywood release to blow the lid on an insidious system that separates children from families not for welfare but profits

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

MY son was taken from us when he was a little over three. He is now 13 and in foster care. For the first six years, I was allowed to see him twice a year for a total of four hours. Now it is up to three times in a year till he turns 18. He has developed learning and concentration difficulties and other psychological problems, and has little chance of higher education. By the time he is 18, [I fear] he will not have any social relations," Ove Dag Knarvik tells mid-day over a video call from Ålesund in Norway. The

retired Norwegian naval architect and marine engineer lost two of his children to Barnevernet or the Norwegian Child Welfare Services, a public agency responsible for child protection in Norway. Barnevernet is the same agency that had back in 2011 taken NRI couple Sagarika and Anurup Bhattacharya's children away for "improper parenting". What followed was an arduous battle for custody, accompanied by diplomatic exchanges between the two countries and widespread media attention. The story is also the basis for the upcoming Rani Mukerji-starrer Mrs Chatterjee Vs

Norway.

What many hope the film will shed light on is the fact that these are not stray cases. Critics term it part of a larger systematic injustice that has been underway in the country for years. "Since 2018, Norway has been convicted 15 times for human rights violations connected with cases of childcare in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which is more than the rest of all of Europe put together," Marius Reikerås says. The human rights lawyer, who has debated Norway's human rights violations in more than 50 countries, has in the last 13 years been involved with child protective service cases and is expected to arrive in India to lend his support to Bhattacharya and others like her when the film releases. He hopes to participate in public dis-

cussions around the subject while here. It took a while, he admits, due to Norway's reputation for being a small developed country in the north with no glaring social issues or human rights encroachments. "But in 2013, thanks to a lot of international pressure, we managed to get some attention and European institutions like the ECHR and the European Parliament realised that there was something severely wrong going on in Norway."

Reikerås draws attention to the fact that a majority of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services' actions are directed against immigrant families. "We have seen over and over again that Norway is basing these decisions on cultural differences. It is not permitted in Norway to stick out from the ordinary Norwegian system," he explains, highlighting that once children are taken away from immigrant families, it is almost

impossible to get them back.

"Sagarika was lucky," he insists. "In most cases they have to wait until they [the children] are 18 to get in touch with them." Moreover, it turns out that it is not the cases themselves that dictate the possibility of the child's return. "There are no actual differences between the ones [parents] who get their children back and those who don't. It's a lottery," he says, pointing out that while the government wins most of these cases, they cannot withhold all the children being taken into public care. "A small number have been able to get them back but who gets them back and who doesn't is accidental." He suggests that the wisest thing for most families who are in trouble with the service is to flee to another country. He says several families have chosen to flee to Poland, which has been critical of this system.

The main reason, Reikerås

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MARIUS REIKERÅS



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the founding members of the Forum for Autism, and is the parent of an adult living with autism. "Since we are a support group, parents and family members have approached us asking if we know of any trust offering loans for stem cell therapy. Some of them have had to sell their gold and mortgage their homes to pay for their child's so-called 'treatment'. Sometimes these doctors convince them to go in for a second round of SCT. Parents will do anything for their children. But this is nothing but preying on the vulnerabilities by offering false hope as autism is a life-long condition with no cure. This money could have been used for the right kind of therapies that would assist the family lead a wholesome life," she says.

Back in 2016, when Gopika Kapoor worked as a therapist in the autism intervention team at the

Ummeed Child Development Centre, a non-profit helping children with developmental disabilities, she recalls the mother of a 16-year-old boy with autism, tell her that she had decided to go in for SCT for her son. "She told me that she sold her mangalsutra, and her husband, a mechanic, had cashed out his pension for the cost of the therapy. I had to request the doctor at Ummeed to urgently sit the parents down and explain why this therapy was not the solution. While the mum was partly relieved that she wouldn't have to spend that money, she was crestfallen," says Gopika, a parent advocate and neurodiversity consultant, who suggests that parents of children with autism should first go to a developmental paediatrician for an accurate diagnosis, and with the expert's help, explore therapies.

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Approx. number of stem cell therapy for autism clinics currently operating across the country

"Parents also need mental health counselling. If they can accept that their child and the accompanying challenges of raising them, they won't be in a rush to 'fix' their child. They need to reach a state of acceptance," adds Gopika.

West Bengal resident Siddhartha Sankar Mukhopadhyay, who lives in Nadia district, says he only wanted to give his daughter a second shot to life. "Eighty per cent of her cerebrum part of the brain had been damaged. I was made to believe that injecting stem cells would repair it." She was 10, when he brought her to Mumbai to be treated at the NeuroGen centre. This was in 2015. Mukhopadhyay and his wife spent nearly ₹7 lakh for the treatment. "We did it twice over two years, and were assured that she'd have a recovery of nearly 80 per cent. Nothing improved. Her

condition is the same. Those who mislead parents like this should be nabbed," says Mukhopadhyay, who is a civil service officer, working in the land department.

When contacted, Dr Vrajesh Udani, paediatric neurologist at PD Hinduja Hospital, says autism is best dealt with the help of developmental paediatricians and neurologists. "The doctors currently offering SCT come from all disciplines and there is no rationale to 'treatment.'" Genetic factors are known to contribute to ASD risk. "Injecting a patient's stem cells back into the body doesn't make sense, because the genes are the same." His thoughts are echoed by Dr Anaita Hegde, consultant Paediatric Neurologist at SRCC Children's Hospital, Wadia Hospital for Children, and Jaslok Hospital. "Till date, we don't even know what causes autism. When you don't know the cause, how can you have a cure? In the case of children with genetic

conditions, you are taking out their own stem cell, with the genetic mutation, and injecting it back into the child within minutes to hours. Where is the science in that?"

Udani says that the need of the hour is a government crackdown.

When the NMC report was released in December, NMMC medical health officer Dr Pramod Patil was among those who decided to act immediately. "We had been receiving complaints about the NeuroGen centre from paediatricians at our municipal hospitals in Navi Mumbai." On December 29, 2022, Patil says that he and his team carried out a surprise raid at the centre. "We retrieved several brochures and promotional material, which claimed the centre offered stem cell therapy 'treatment' for

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West Bengal resident Siddhartha Sankar Mukhopadhyay says he and his wife spent nearly ₹7 lakh, on the treatment of their daughter who was then 10 years old. There was no improvement, he shares

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believes, why Sagarika, who is now settled in Kolkata after she separated from her husband, got her children back was because of the political pressure from India. "The then Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre who is now the Prime Minister of Norway had specific instructions for Gunnar Toresen, Head of Child Welfare Services in Stavanger, where the family lived," he says, asserting that Toresen has been known to have particularly extreme methods of taking children into public care. "It is interesting to see that his name is coming up again now with relation to this movie."

Most distressing of all and repeatedly evident in testimonies is the profit motive at the heart of Norway's CPS system. "Norway is a rich country with only five million people, which generates more than \$3 billion every year into its CPS system, more than any other country in Europe," says Reikerås. As a result, he explains, a lot of citizens have a vested interest in maintaining the system as is. "The more children you take, the more money is generated."

Ruby Harrold-Claesson, lawyer and co-founder-Pres-



The maternal grandparents of children who were taken away from their parents by Norway's Child Protection Services (CPS), after the agency deemed that the toddlers were not receiving proper care, during a demonstration outside the Norwegian embassy in New Delhi in 2012. The parents Anurup and Sagarika Bhattacharya were in Norway at the time fighting the battle to return to India with their children. Their story has inspired the upcoming film Mrs Chatterjee Vs Norway. PIC/GETTY IMAGES



Everyone who deals with you after they have taken your kid away [lawyers, psychologists, social workers, judges]—is part of the system and they are financially dependent on this removal, because the children are often traumatised and need follow ups as they begin to struggle in school and daily life

Ove Dag Knarvik, parent who lost two of his children to the Norwegian Child Welfare Services

ident of the Nordic Committee for Human Rights, For the Protection of Family Rights in the Nordic Countries (NKMR/NCHR), speaks of the harmful nature of these mercenary practices. Social workers in affluent countries like Denmark, Finland, England, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Holland and the USA have built child protection systems which claim that children from poorer families will be "better off" in wealthier families, she says, with developing countries also given incentives to follow the "leaders" in the so-called "first world countries". "They claim that it is 'in the best interests of the child' but the economic incentives and the industries that have been built up for 'child protection' is damaging, to not only for the children and their families, but for the countries involved."

"Everyone who deals with you after they have taken your kid away [lawyers, psychologists, social workers, judges]—is part of the system and they are financially dependent on this removal,

because the children are often traumatised and need follow ups as they begin to struggle in school and daily life," Knarvik agrees. The kindergarten, school and health authorities are obliged to file reports to Barnevernet and they do it, he says, without following the law. Knarvik highlights other corrupt practices from children being allocated to well-paid foster parents who are known and related to CPS workers, to the force that is used by the police on older children who protest and confiscation of their phones and laptops if they try to escape from the institutions they are relocated to. There is also the potentially devastating emotional and psychological toll that early separation from parents takes on the children. Several of them develop learning, social and psychological difficulties, dropping out of school, running away and using drugs. There are also high rates of arson, institutionalisation and suicide associated with these cases, with Reikerås informing that statistically these children are 10-15 times likelier to end up in devastating situations than those that remain with families. "I am not saying that no kids should be removed from their parents," clarifies Knarvik. "There are some parents who are bad enough, but even in those cases Barnevernet is not doing the right thing—these kids should not be placed with strangers but with grandparents or relatives whom they know and trust."

With his own children, an adoptive daughter who was taken into public care and later got sick, and then his son, Knarvik experienced first-hand, instances of system-employed psychologists giving false testimonies in court and fabricating reports where he feels undue emphasis was placed on his age which they saw as reason for his inability to understand the needs of his son, along with other accusations of alcoholism and violent behaviour.

Rune Fardal who started Family Channel, a network on Facebook

comprising frequent interviews with parents and psychologists about childcare cases with the aim of urging the system to follow scientific and legal tenets rather than arbitrary ideas, says that there is a lot of subjective thinking behind the claims and decisions made by Barnevernet. "There are diffuse reasonings behind why the CPS gets involved in the first place," he says. "These could be anything from an angry ex-husband making a false claim against a mother who then has to defend herself to a school mobbing where the blame is directed at the child's home whereas in reality it points to a problem within the school environment. The school alerts Barnevernet and then the parents are investigated whereas it is the school that should be investigated."

Harrold-Claesson agrees: "There has been an array of accusations brought against parents by the CPS, ranging from: not intelligent enough, mentally ill, not mature enough, too poor, too demanding on the children, ill-treatment, home-schooling, not adjusted to the society—any accusation that the social worker can conjure."

But Barnevernet's controversial operations notwithstanding, there is palpable hope thanks to the upcoming film directed by Ashima Chibber, also starring Neena Gupta and Jim Sarbh. "The only way for the victims to draw some attention to what is going on in Norway is through this film," Reikerås believes. "The movie will have a bigger impact than people realise because it shows how Norway has gone under the radar for so long and why it is important to focus on the fact that this is not about child welfare but about profit." The film is scheduled to be screened in several Norwegian cities and those following the developments around the issue say that official worry is evident in the already visible efforts to discredit the production.

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autism. The NMC guidelines clearly indicated otherwise; this was illegal. We also noticed that there was an entire floor dedicated for physio and occupational therapy, and other such therapies. If you do any kind of aggressive therapy on an autistic patient, they are bound to show fleeting, momentary results," he says. In accordance with the Bombay Nursing Homes Registration Act, Patil says the centre was given a month to comply with the orders. "They even submitted a short compliance report, claiming they had made all the rectifications."

Two days later, when Dr Patil once again visited the premises, he said nothing had changed. The brochures endorsed the same material, except that now instead of stem cell therapy, they were calling it "cell therapy". Their licence was revoked soon after. This week, the NMMC filed a caveat in the Bombay

high court over a possible appeal filed by NeuroGen.

"This is not just a Navi Mumbai problem," Dr Patil clarifies. "It's happening all over the country. The NMMC can only deal with cases within its jurisdiction. Right now, we need medical and government associations to come out and strongly oppose the use of SCT."

Earlier last week, the New Delhi-based Association of Child Neurology also extended their support to the recommendations of the NMC.

The Yash Charitable Trust, on the other hand, released a short documentary on YouTube to caution parents about SCT. While the film was scheduled to be released on World Autism Awareness Day in April, Dr Sushama Nagarkar, founder and managing trustee, said they decided to release it soon after the licence of NeuroGen was revoked. "We felt that it was important for us to give families the right informa-



PARUL KUMTHA



DR SUSHAMA NAGARKAR



DR VRAJESH UDANI

tion based on the current science and research, so that they can make an informed choice," says Nagarkar, adding that there are a few parents, who have told them that they don't agree with the film. "And that's okay. It's our responsibility to put out what we know."

Those in favour of SCT for autism are behind a change.org campaign demanding continuation of "autologous bone marrow cell therapy for special needs children". It has already received 2,770 signatures.

Among the many parents propagating SCT are Abhishek Jain from Pune and Nerul resident Sachin

Shantaram Pawar. Jain says his nine-year-old son took the therapy in November 2022. "Almost immediately, we saw improvements in his hand-eye coordination... he started playing badminton as well. It's a game both of us enjoy," he says, adding, "He can now remember names of objects and sleeps for longer hours. He also started reading Hindi, which we were trying to get him to do for the last two years." Speaking to mid-day, Pawar says it was in 2019, that he was told that his daughter, then 2.5 years old, was on the autism spectrum. "She wouldn't speak a word, and always seemed

withdrawn." Pawar had tried a host of therapies, but didn't see any clear results. On the recommendation of a heart surgeon, Pawar visited NeuroGen. "She underwent stem cell therapy in June 2022. Within a few months, we started noticing some changes; her condition had started improving," claims Pawar, who has now written to Maharashtra Health Minister Dr Tanaji Sawant to intervene in the matter. "She cannot yet string a full sentence together, but her vocabulary has increased. She can now talk and comprehend. She is also a little more social and tries to make contact at school. Her attention span has increased as well," he says, of his daughter who is now in the junior KG. If the centre's licence hadn't been revoked, Pawar would've arrived for the second round of SCT this month. "It was a ray of hope, which has now been taken away."

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Actor Rani Mukherji seen here in a still from the movie Chatterjee vs Norway, which releases March 17

