

# The End of a Myth

After a year of misgovernance, Vajpayee's image has taken a knock, and it is unlikely to recover from the effects of the knock. Pratul Bidwai writes

WHEN the Atal Behari Vajpayee Government was sworn in a year ago, large numbers of Bharatiya Janata Party supporters, especially those among the urban middle classes, nurtured the hope that it would distinguish itself in at least four respects, despite the limitations of coalition politics. First, Vajpayee would give a sense of purpose and direction to governance; at minimum, his BJP component would function with cohesion and unity. Second, it would control or mitigate lawlessness and disorder; to the extent the BJP is a "disciplined" party, it would be well-placed to do this. Third, it would demonstrate its ability to rule without the network of patronage, coeries and institutionalised corruption associated with the Congress(I). And fourth, it would impart dynamism to the economy after it barely escaped contracting the Asian flu.

That hope lies in tatters today. What we have is an unsteady regime without moral purpose or legitimacy, run by a bunch of insecure, petty and fractious politicians, which stumbled from one crisis to the next — each month, in some months each week. "Rollback regime" describes the kind of one-man rule that the Government's proclivity to undo what it itself set out to do in one-step-forward-two-steps-back manoeuvres. A more realistic view is that it is a regime suffused with cynicism and skulduggery, which has totally failed to do anything meaningful as far as the popular interest goes. It has not only allowed self-serving politicians to feather their nests, but injected new kinds of venality into Indian politics. The Union Cab-

inet is so deeply divided even on basic issues of national security and economic policy that it dare not discuss them — as happened with the nuclear tests, telecommunications, and culture. The "party with a difference" is so disgracefully driven by personal considerations that one of its high-profile Ministers, Uma Bharati, boycotted her own office because she hates her senior Minister's guts and declares that Vajpayee is not my Prime Minister. The Government is held to ransom not just by the BJP's allies — as Jajalalitha has repeatedly done — but by its cohorts in the Sangh Parivar.

Vajpayee may make all the conciliatory noises he wants on Indo-Pakistan relations and the religious minorities. But his own bosses and colleagues in the Parivar ensure that they do not amount to much. Within weeks of the Lahore bus trip, L.K. Advani had made his in-glorious "Akhand Bharat" speech at the Wagah border. And the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's Pratinidhi Sabha in Lucknow decided to "revive the Hindu agenda" aggressively, threatening even to "forbid" Hindus from attending institutions run by the minorities. The Sangh's Number Three, KS Sudarshan, on March 13 went as far as to allege that Sonia Gandhi's "sudden entry" into active politics a year ago was guided by "certain foreign powers" which did not want India to emerge as a strong nation. The paranoia, and the message of defiance of any "soft" line, could not be clearer.

This Government has deviously manipulated and undermined India's democratic institutions. It stooped to the lowest possible level in rigging and

arbitrarily transferring litigation pertaining to Jajalalitha away from the special judges. It has handled Doordarshan and All India Radio especially crudely. It has also hacked away at what little integrity there was left in some of India's topmost social science institutions. It packed the Indian Council of Historical Research and the Indian Council of Social Science Research with Hindutva supporters of dubious academic competence.

On law and order, BJP-led governments at the Centre and in the States have performed abysmally. As Mumbai goes under mafia rule, Uttar Pradesh sinks deeper into the quagmire, with crime rates that outpace even Bihar's. The less said about Gujarat — where Christians have been systematically brutalised in over a hundred incidents, and where Hindutva mobs have fused into gangsters — the better. What happened to the serious charges levelled by Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat and by Mohan Guruswamy, what ever the latter's motives and his own business links, the stakes — whether in permitting global depositary receipts, writing off bad bank debts (Rs 2,800 crores last year alone), allowing talcum fee defaults, or forcing public sector oil firms into joint ventures with private groups who milk them — are so high that even a fraction of one per cent translates into scores of crores. And we may be talking about 10 per cent-plus.

The Government has made a horrible mess of the economy, returning it to its pitiable state in 1991 — by its Finance Minister's own admission. Besides mishandling — for example, of onion and urea prices — it stands accused of profligacy and an anti-poor orientation. The Centre's revenue deficit has reached a record high of 3.4 per cent. So utterly parasitical is the Government that it has to borrow Rs 314 crores a day just to stay alive. All macro-economic indicators have gone haywire. The Central Plan outlay fell short of the target by 16 per cent. There is little productive public investment happening in the economy.

As for dependence on cabals, coeries and patronage networks, this Government has reached new lows. Most of its senior Ministers have their own close coeries, starting with Vajpayee's Pramod Mahajan-Jaswant Singh group, ably backed by his foster-daughter's husband, assorted bureaucrats, and media spin-doctors such as Sudheendra Kulkarni. The Advani faction has its own operators, from KN Govindacharya and S Gurumurti to Mohan Guruswamy all the way down to senior and middle-level journalists. The Government has not taken a single major economic decision without the involvement of some business group or the other.

As for corruption, the Government is hard put to answer the serious charges levelled by Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat and by Mohan Guruswamy, what ever the latter's motives and his own business links, the stakes — whether in permitting global depositary receipts, writing off bad bank debts (Rs 2,800 crores last year alone), allowing talcum fee defaults, or forcing public sector oil firms into joint ventures with private groups who milk them — are so high that even a fraction of one per cent translates into scores of crores. And we may be talking about 10 per cent-plus.

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The Government has botched up social sector schemes, including the Jawahar Rozgar Yojna, and reduced real allocations to health. The poor will also have to bear the burden of additional indirect taxation, inflation and low growth, coupled with rising unemployment. Other recent measures, such as 30 to 40 per cent increases in issue prices under the public distribution system, and hiking of postal rates and rail fares, will adversely affect the vast majority, further widening income disparities. The current boom in the share markets, which reflects business' short-term gains, is unlikely to last.

The Government's balance-sheet, then, is largely negative. The person singularly responsible for this is none other than Atal Behari Vajpayee. It is because of him that there is no cohesion in the Cabinet. It is he who out of his paranoia decided not to take into confidence the Home and Defence Ministers over Pokhran-II. It is he who

has played ducks and drakes with economic decision-making. It is he who called for a "debate" on conversions at the height of harassment of Christians, thus encouraging the forces that burned alive Graham Stewart Staines and his two sons.

It will simply not do for Vajpayee's apologists to take any of the following three lines of defence, denial or diversion — namely, that he is helpless in the face of the Sangh Parivar; that some of the bad decisions of his Cabinet are due to individual Ministers' failings; and his Government has had to reverse some of its decisions because the Opposition is not cooperative enough — as, most embarrassingly, on Bihar. Vajpayee is a part of the Sangh Parivar. Whether it lets him function freely is a matter internal to it; it does not concern the larger public. After all, the public did not vote for the RSS. Vajpayee cannot both declare that "the Sangh is my soul", and then whine about the Sangh's high-handedness. If he cannot dispense with the Sangh's control at election-time, it is only natural that the pracharaks will demand their pound of flesh. Vajpayee's duplicitous approach of riding the Sangh piggy-back, and of farcically protesting against the Sangh's intolerance, will not work.

Vajpayee should know that the failings of individual Ministers, for example, Uma Bharati or Jagmohan, are secondary to the overarching principle of collective responsibility of the Cabinet under the

Westminster system. In the final analysis, the Cabinet, especially the Prime Minister, is responsible for what his/her government does. It is childish to blame any particular Minister for the Bihar fiasco or the mess over telecom rates. It is equally futile to blame the Opposition for doing what it is meant to do — namely, oppose the Government. It is its legitimate function to do so, albeit responsibly, seriously. The BJP must have been out of its mind to put all its eggs in the Congress(I) basket and count on its biggest political rival to oblige it on Bihar. This speaks of political immaturity, even stupidity. Vajpayee is wrong to think that he would be forgiven for his ineptitude, and what Dattopant Thengdi called his "mediocrity", and his cynicism, because of his "liberal" middle class image.

The middle class "honey-moon" with the Vajpayee image may be over. The "liberal" masks on Vajpayee's face uncomfortably after the display of terrible cynicism through Pokhran-II and the BJP's communalisation of the polity. Vajpayee, do not forget, has never wavered about his primary loyalty to Hindutva and the Sangh. His anger or remorse over the demolition of the Babri Masjid only lasted a few weeks. After that, he, like the public-school educated Jaswant Singh, was back in line with the Sangh. When it comes to the crunch, the tendency to recite Urdu couplets quickly fades away. Saffron takes over. Those who counterpose Vajpayee to the Parivar are gravely mistaken. They are six of one and half-a-dozen of the other. Two aspects of the same phenomenon. Their popularity rat-

ings differ. Vajpayee's may be a little higher than the BJP's. But these cannot shore up the BJP's vote, which peaked at 25 per cent and has been rapidly falling ever since. There is no easy way the BJP can reverse this decline. It is no longer in a position where its opponents' mistakes rebound to its advantage. On the contrary, its negative vote piles up day after day. The party's base is fast shrinking down to the upper caste core. Other Backward Classes, Dalits and Adivasis are likely to vote against the party in UP, Maharashtra, Gujarat. Even the gains it made in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are eroding, according to recent surveys.

The Vajpayee Government continues to totter in power because of a stalemate. The BJP's allies are unwilling to desert the floundering coalition only because they are not sure the Congress(I) will include them in an alternative alliance. The Congress(I), for its part, is unsure of winning an early mid-term election. It remains extremely weak in UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. So it does not seem to be in a hurry to pull down the Vajpayee coalition.

But this uneasy and transient situation cannot last. Each day it is prolonged, the BJP is liable to get increasingly discredited as venal, unprincipled and power-hungry a party as any other, and twice as communal. As a BJP admirer said, Vajpayee and Advani could not have dreamt some years ago that they would be in power one day. True, but the dream may be coming to an end, never to appear again. By arrangement with the Frontline magazine of India

## Missing in Action?

Investigations are under way at a site at Chemmani in Jaffna, where 400 Tamil civilians are alleged to have been killed and buried by Sri Lankan security forces. V S Sambandan, recently in Jaffna, writes

IN the many years of enervating fighting between the Sri Lankan security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, there have been several allegations of human rights violations by the security forces. However, an allegation made in July 1998 — that the security forces had done to death 400 Tamil civilians and buried them in a mass grave at Chemmani in the Jaffna peninsula — was particularly stunning. The allegation was made in an open court by Lance Corporal Somratne Rajapakse of the Sri Lankan Army after he and five others were sentenced to death for the kidnap, rape and murder of a Jaffna schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy, and the abduction and murder of her friends and relatives.

Rajapakse said that close to a checkpoint in Jaffna where he had served, and where Krishanthi was killed, was a mass grave where at least 400 other civilians were buried. These, he said, were victims like Krishanthi, who, according to him, were done to death by the security forces after the Sri Lankan Government regained control of the northern peninsula from the LTTE.

Ever since the allegation was made, there were scores of media reports reflecting the anxiety and fear among the families of those who were reported "missing" in the northern peninsula. These prompted demands to dig up the site in order to verify the truth behind the accusation.

Opinion was divided on the veracity of Rajapakse's allegation: there were people who saw

it as a "revelation" made by a convicted soldier to escape punishment or to try and mitigate the gravity of his crime; others felt that it should be taken as a full-fledged "confession" by a person who had committed the crimes.

The fact that the alleged incidents were reported to have been committed during the tenure of the People's Alliance (P.A.), which came to power in Colombo on the promise of resolving the ethnic conflict and respecting human rights, was particularly shocking. One of the reasons for the electoral defeat of the United National Party (UNP) after 17 years in power was the perception that there were late second human rights violations under its rule.

The Government responded by entrusting to the Human Rights Commission the investigation of the allegation. Subsequently, the judicial process took over. Since September 1998, however, there was a change in the situation in Jaffna following a series of violent incidents, such as the assassination of Jaffna Mayor P. Sivapalan and the shooting down of a civilian aircraft. Courts in Jaffna stopped functioning, citing "death threats from the LTTE".

Meanwhile, there was increasing pressure to dig up the alleged site of the mass grave. Yuktithya, a Sinhala weekly,

had challenged the Government even as early as July 1998 to dig up the site. Recalling a similar situation in the South following allegations that Sinhala youths were killed as part of a crackdown on the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and that their bodies were buried in a mass grave at Sooriya Kanda, the weekly said: "People's Alliance leaders, who were enthusiastically involved in digging up graves in Sooriya Kanda when they were in the Opposition must now take up this challenge or forfeit whatever image they have been able to build for themselves as protectors of human rights."

Tamil parliamentarians demanded that international norms be adhered to in the exhumation process; they wanted the exhumation to be carried out scientifically. However, the process was delayed by the late withdrawal of the monsoon and the subsequent closure of courts.

Early this year, the judicial process resumed but got bogged down. Jaffna Magistrate Ekanathan pronounced that the case would be taken up for hearing on March 5; a Foreign Minister's statement, however, stated that the exhumation process would start on that date. The Magistrate protested and said that he had been misinterpreted. Shortly thereafter he expressed his inability to per-

form his judicial duties owing to "death threats". The Government was caught on a sticky wicket. But in a series of moves in early March, it made clear its intention to carry forward with the judicial process.

On March 2, N. Arulsagan, a District Judge in Colombo, was transferred as the Additional Magistrate of Jaffna and he served at the checkpoint when the alleged atrocities were committed — was not present at the site to identify the location of the mass grave.

No explanation was offered other than that Rajapakse had stated that he would be present only after exhumation was ordered; this, however, raised the question of whether the exhumation process could be undertaken without identifying the site with certainty. Asked if a court order could not be obtained mandating the presence of the accused, it was clarified on behalf of the Government that such a course of action would be resorted to when the need arose.

The most evident outcome of the visit organised to Jaffna and the conduct of soil sample tests at the Chemmani site was that the Government made clear its sincerity about its attempts to unravel the truth. The exercise would have gained greater credibility if Rajapakse had been present to identify the site.

Chemmani apart, Jaffna town presents a picture of tor-

ment. Clear indications of a once-idyllic setting abound in the marketplace and the streets of Jaffna. Bullet-scarred walls and skeletal remains of buildings tell the tale of the town's painful trudge to normalcy.

"Life goes on," says a restaurant worker, who sought anonymity. Prices of commodities depend on the arrival of the cargo ship Lanka from Colombo. Since the town now has no road to the rest of the island, sustenance is largely dependent on the arrival of the vessel. "Today the prices are better because the ship has arrived, but we do not know how much it will rise after stocks run out," the restaurant worker said. Another person recalls the days when the LTTE had control over the peninsula: "There were no crimes at that time. Now there is a definite increase in crimes."

A third person displays his watch — the time shown is half an hour behind the time in the rest of the island. As a daylight-saving measure, clocks were reset half an hour ahead in the rest of Sri Lanka; however, in the areas that were originally under LTTE control, people continued to follow the earlier time, which coincides with the Indian Standard Time. "I follow only this time," the man said. In every other way, for him and for a couple of teenagers working in his shop, life goes on as usual. However, with the military conflict between the Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE dragging on, the time for peace in Jaffna has clearly not yet come.

By Arrangement with the Frontline magazine of India

## A Shift in Battlere

Lankan military changes its war strategy, reports Sugeeswara Senadhira from Colombo

THE Sri Lankan government may have to pull back its troops from some of the newly-captured areas in the north even as the opposition linked the offensive to the coming provincial elections. Former Air Force Commander Harry Gunatillake said the troops would have to withdraw from most of the 860 square kilometres of area they captured from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in two surprise attacks last month due to shortage of manpower.

More than five battalions will have to be permanently deployed to secure the entire area and it is not a feasible or practical proposition," he said. "Furthermore the troops will be vulnerable to rebel attacks when stretched in a large barren land area."

Last week seven soldiers died in the captured area when their tanks hit a landmine. The Tigers had laid mines all over the place, but retreated without much resistance when they were taken by surprise by "Operation Battlere", launched by the troops on March 6. In a swift operation, the troops captured a 535 square kilometre area, while another 325 square kilometres was captured in the second phase of the operation

late last month. Jayalath Jayawardene, a lawmaker of the main opposition United National Party (UNP), alleged that political rather than military considerations were behind the latest anti-LTTE offensive, a charge denied by the government.

"The ruling party wants to show the people that they are gaining grounds in the north before the forthcoming provincial elections," Jayawardene said. Elections to five provincial councils are scheduled for April 6 and the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the UNP are locked in a bitter contest. Observers said the elections are crucial as they would have a bearing on the presidential and parliamentary elections due next year.

Meanwhile, military spokesman Sunil Tennakoon said the troops were consolidating their positions in the newly-captured areas, including Madhu church, the biggest Christian place of worship in the Wanni area. More than 5,000 soldiers were deployed to the new offensives which were swiftly concluded. When the first operation was launched, the LTTE retreated without offering resistance. — India Abroad News Service

## Walking on a Tight Rope

Peace and war is a too delicate matter to be treated with a cavalier attitude,

writes M. Ziauddin

ON March 23 this year Pakistan brought out for public display the best in its defence arsenal. And at the investiture ceremony, that followed immediately at the presidency, Pakistani scientists, who made all this possible, swept almost all the annual civilian awards in almost all the categories.

While the display of Ghauri and Shaheen missiles was beamed along with the Pakistan Day Parade by the PTV for the whole world to see, the honouing of its scientists by a grateful nation was personally witnessed by diplomats from all over the world at the investiture ceremony. It was an exhilarating experience for those Pakistanis who witnessed the two events on this memorable day. And perhaps for the enemies of Pakistan it must have come as a rude shock. Perhaps as rude a shock as the one Pakistan had dealt when it had detonated six nuclear devices in May 1998 in retaliation to India's five.

But there is also a flip side to this soul-lifting experience. The flexing of our nuclear muscles did not go all that well among the diplomatic circles in Islamabad. Not that these diplomats wanted Pakistan to abdicate its right to defend itself against external threats in whatever manner it thought fit. But their objections seemed to be more against what they described as "wanton" display of Pakistan's capability which by now the whole world has come to accept and live with. There is this worldwide abhorrence against weapons of mass destruction. In many developed and developing countries these days the voters promise to do their utmost to free the world from the fear of a nuclear holocaust.

Pakistan at the moment needs all the help it can get

from the world and more to rehabilitate its economy. But this help would not be coming with all the speed and in the right quantum if the voters in donor countries were to form in their minds a negative image of Pakistan which is irresponsible enough to spend its borrowed resources on developing weapons of mass destruction.

Today the world does not blame Pakistan for conducting the nuclear tests in May 1998. It holds India responsible for goading Pakistan into doing so. But tomorrow if by some miscalculation on our part we were to create the impression that we are more interested in arms race than in economic well-being of our people, the world is going to come down on us very harshly. It was, indeed, a miscalculation on the part of India that started the current nuclear crisis in the region. India perhaps mistaking Pakistan's peace initiative, which it had launched soon after the February 1997 election, as a show of weakness reflecting Islamabad's immediate economic woes, thought of calling Pakistan's nuclear bluff and conducted five nuclear tests. India perhaps had persuaded itself to think that Pakistan actually did not possess enough capability to retaliate. And even if it had, the Indians thought, Islamabad would not, at this juncture, take the risk of annoying its non-proliferationist donors by testing its own devices.

The Indian government has paid heavily for its miscalculation. The new government in Pakistan, which came into power in 1997, has also paid for its own untimely and rather crude peace initiatives. It were these seemingly thoughtless initiatives on the part of Pakistan that had actually embold-

ened India to take the nuclear path. India had acquired the capability sometime in early 1980s but it did not dare test it because Pakistan with its so-called "basement bomb" had successfully created the illusion of having acquired the capability to retaliate. Even during the 1990s, despite continued political upheavals in this country and with the economy falling from one crisis into another, the successive governments had never allowed India to miscalculate Pakistan's capabilities or its determination to preserve its ideological and geographical integrity. Therefore, the Indian reluctance to call what New Delhi suspected all along to be, Pakistan's nuclear bluff until 1998 when Pakistan itself provided India the reasons to doubt its capabilities or its determination to use them.

Peace and war is too delicate a matter to be treated with a cavalier attitude. Indeed, it is like tight rope walking. In order to win peace from India, Pakistan needs to be flexible but firm. We should never let India misunderstand our desire for peace or our determination to protect and preserve our independence. On the other hand in order to avert war or a war-like situation in the region, Pakistan needs to bend backwards all the way to establish without even the slightest hint of ambiguity that it is well aware of its duties and responsibilities as a nuclear state.

Talpeace: Here is a very interesting notification issued by the government of Pakistan (cabinet division) department of stations and forms, Block No. 53 & 54, Pak Sect, Karachi (dated Feb 4, 1999): Subject: Disposal of wastepaper in respect of all federal government offices located in the provinces of Punjab (including Islam-

abad/ Murree) and NWFP (Zone-A) during 1998-99 (up to 30.6.1999). Dear sir, Attention is invited to this department's circular No. S&T-12(1)/97 dated 21.11.1997, the validity of this circular expired on 30.06.1998.

The competent authority has appointed Ms Malik Meraj Din & Sons, Lahore, as authorized contractor of the federal government for lifting of wastepaper that may be available in the federal government ministries/divisions, attached departments/subordinate offices etc. during the financial year 1998-99. It is, therefore, requested that all waste paper lying in the offices/departments of federal government located within the provinces of Punjab (including Islamabad/ Murree) and NWFP may kindly be handed over to the authorized contractor or his representative(s) whenever his representative contacts the respective offices/departments. It may kindly be noted that no federal government office or ministry is authorised to dispose of their wastepaper to any other firm/ dealer/ contractor etc., except appointed by the controller of stationary & forms otherwise the office concerned will be held responsible for the consequences and the loss to be sustained by the contractor appointed by the controller.

Would the competent authority be kind enough to answer the following questions: 1. Why no tenders were issued for awarding the contract? 2. Why a Lahore party has been given the monopoly in both the provinces of Punjab and NWFP? And 3. Would it not have been more profitable and more equitable if the contract had been awarded to different parties in each city of the two provinces?

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

## Attraction in the Desert

India's camel population on the decline. Gajraj Singh, writes from Rajasthan

LACK of veterinary care, shrinking grasslands and increasing use of modern modes of transport in the country's desert areas are causing a decline in the population of the Indian camel.

The camel population in the country, which was over a million in 1987, has declined by 15 per cent, according to the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Research, Karnal, in Haryana state.

The basic reason for the shrinking camel population could be that the "Raikas", traditional camel rearers, are giving up the profession and turning to more profitable jobs, experts say. Veterinary scientists, who attended a recent seminar on camels in Bikaner in the

central Indian state of Rajasthan, felt genetic deterioration could also be a reason for the decline in population.

This decline has happened despite the fact that camels are increasingly replacing bullocks and buffaloes in the semi-urban areas of Rajasthan and neighbouring Gujarat, both of which are desert states. Camels are less expensive to maintain than bullocks and also take on more work load.

Also, veteran camel rearers still take a keen interest in camel fairs at the Pushkar, Nagaur and Merta areas of Rajasthan. "Some exceptionally good breed of camels fetch as much as Rs. 10,000 (\$238)," says camel rearer Bhima Ram Jat.

The single-humped Rajasthan camels are known for different qualities. Camels from the states of Bikaner and Nagaur districts are good for transportation and farming. The Jaisalmer breed (which derives its name from the Rajasthan city of Jaisalmer) is considered swift and fast because of its extraordinarily long legs and necks.

The Jaisalmer camels are used by the Border Security Force (BSF) patrolling the India-Pakistan border. "They can run and climb steep dunes and walk for long stretches without any difficulty. Even the Pakistani Rangers use it for patrolling," said a BSF official.

A positive sign is that the camel is becoming a tourist at-

traction. Packaged camel rides and camel festivals in Rajasthan have been a roaring success. "The camel is not just an animal for Rajasthanis but an asset. Tourists come to the desert for camel safaris. This has helped boost the desert economy," said Beena Kak, Rajasthan's Tourism Minister.

Scientists at the Camel Research Centre here have been looking at ways of increasing the camel population. Nearly two decades back Saudi Arabia had expressed interest in importing Indian camels, but the Indian government did not pursue the matter as it may have involved the slaughtering of camels for meat. — India Abroad News Service

## Assertion within the Family

India has its own definition of feminism, writes Rupa Chatterjee

institution, said Karat, whose AIDWA has 7.5 million members across the country. It was crucial to note that as the country was bracing to enter the 21st century, its women were "seen not as victims, but as symbols of courage," she added.

The most significant challenge before the women's movement in this country now is "changing a mindset that makes people still celebrate the birth of a son and greet the arrival of a girl with tears," Azmi felt. Karat pointed out that Amartya Sen, last year's Nobel economics laureate, estimated there were some 30 million "missing women" in India, the

reference being to victims of female infanticide and foeticide which are still practised in underdeveloped parts of the country.

Asked about the Women's Reservation Bill that seeks to set aside a third of seats in Parliament and state legislatures for women, Azmi, who is also a member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament), said all political parties pay lip service to it, but when push comes to shove there is an in-built resistance "to legislate on the landmark bill."

Emphasising that placing the bill in Parliament was in itself a significant achievement

for women's groups, she claimed there was a move by certain quarters to either water down the 33 per cent seats sought to be reserved or scuttle the proposed legislation completely.

The bill has a tempestuous history. Former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was shouted down by a member of his own Janata Dal party over it. Current Law Minister M. Thambudurai had the bill papers snatched from him; and two members came to blows over its presentation in the Lok Sabha, Lower House of Parliament. The bill was, however, tabled last year and is therefore now on the agenda of the House. Karat conceded that some parties were trying to ensure that the bill was not legislated by insisting that a quota be set aside — from within the third of seats sought to be reserved — for women from underprivileged castes and religious minorities. — India Abroad News Service