

A Gutter-Level Poll Campaign Plebiscite on Prejudice?

Pratul Bidwai writes from New Delhi

We must take a stand against false patriotism, manufactured nationalism and Kargilised identities. We must reject "security" obsessions and macho symbols of "strength" divorced from flesh-and-blood people. The NDA-BJP campaign is an assault on our sensibilities.

ITALIAN opera singer, "cane crooner", "kaalmukhi" (someone who brings ill-luck), "upri" (outsider), "matric-pass", "Monica Lewinsky"... The vilest of abuse, the choicest of epithets... It is hard to believe that all this calumny and political slander can be made to seem like "normal" election campaigning, or that someone as decent and infectious as Dr. Manmohan Singh can be challenged to remove his turban to prove he is a true Sikh! This is doubtless our dirtiest, most personalised, vilest, election campaign. Even the Prime Minister, supposedly the BJP's gentle, decent, "civilised" face, has stooped to agitating the "foreign origins" issue after having solemnly promised that he wouldn't. He has been a passive spectator to extraordinarily foul personal attacks on Ms. Sonia Gandhi. His belated call for "restraint" has done little to redeem the damage.

Vajpayee groupies like Mr. Pramod Mahajan took their cue from the PM. Mr. Mahajan's outrageous comparison of Ms. Gandhi with Ms. Monica Lewinsky is an assault on decency. It was quickly followed by Mr. Fernandes' vituperative remarks reducing Ms. Gandhi's entire "contribution" to India to giving birth to two children. These remarks have rightly excited strong condemnation from scholars, political leaders and feminists. It is insulting to any civilised mind that Ms. Gandhi, a full-fledged Indian citizen, should be put in the same category as Ms. Lewinsky. It is even worse that she should be reviled in this gutter-

level campaign because she happens to be a woman, and a White woman at that. Women like Ms. Rabri Devi, Ms. Jayalalitha and Ms. Gandhi are being singled out for sexist barbs, the last two even by Mr. M. Karunanidhi. Abuses like "crooner" and "kaalmukhi" are not used against men. Mr. Fernandes chose to diminish Ms. Gandhi to a mere bearer of children — a passive reproductive machine. He did not do this even to Rajiv Gandhi, no favourite of his.

The special "White" angle in maligning Ms. Gandhi derives from the widely prevalent middle class prejudice that White women are either saints (e.g. Mother Teresa, Annie Besant or Meera Behn) or (mostly) sinners (Monica Lewinsky). The latter have "loose morals". Even the chief minister of progressive Kerala once poured scorn over the outrage caused by the rape of two White women. What's all the fuss, he asked. For Whites, rape is normal, like having a cup of tea... The Gandhi-Lewinsky comparison captures a stereotype, the opposite of the Bharatiya Naari, the artificially constructed Hindu woman of pure character. The White, foreign, *meekha* woman is seen as sullied, immoral, a mere sex object. We should feel offended at this not only because the president of India's oldest party is being equated with a former White House intern, nor even because this insults Indian "motherhood", but because it reviles Ms. Lewinsky (rather than the older, more powerful, Mr. Clinton) for having had an affair. This amounts to revictimising the victim.

This mindset regards a rape victim as guilty — an "impure" woman who "must have done something". It is typical of the *sangh parivar*. Indeed, a former president of the BJP's Mahila Morcha, Mridula Sinha, says that wife-beating has "two sides". The same attitude characterises the *parivar's* adherence to Manuism, some of its leaders' defence of caste and the VHP's demand that women must not perform sacred rituals.

Even Mr. Fernandes now uses the *parivar's* favourite language — e.g. terming all Congress members as hijras (eunuchs). Hijras are here contrasted to real, virile, strong, males. All other sexual identities are inferior, low or unauthentic. The fact that the Mahajans and Fernandes use such language in the presence of Mr. Vajpayee speaks of our political degeneration and cynicism. It is hard to believe that Mr. Fernandes really thinks that Ms. Gandhi's claim to Indianness is primarily based upon her wearing a sari. The attack comes from political calculation. At the heart of all this is an attempt to tug at national "loyalty".

This is grossly unfair. But clearly, the NDA thinks all means are justified by the end: defeat their secular opponents. On this logic, anything can be rationalised. Indeed, why stop at verbal attacks? Even character assassination is permissible. As is politicising Kargil, communalising the army. Scoring points like the small-town criminal lawyer can become a higher priority than grappling with substantive policies.

Today's campaign confronts us with a stark choice, imposed by the decision of the BJP-NDA to concentrate on identity, and play with symbols. We are not being asked to choose between policies or candidates for what they do, but for who or what they are or claim to be: Indian or foreign, Hindu or otherwise. Their trade-marks are promoted through clever marketing.

However, we must take a stand against false patriotism, manufactured nationalism and Kargilised identities. We must reject "security" obsessions and macho symbols of "strength" divorced from flesh-and-blood people. The NDA-BJP campaign is an assault on our sensibilities; we are being asked to cater to xenophobia, legitimise male supremacy, and suppress plurality by wearing Mera Bharat-Mahan on our sleeves, and fooling ourselves that our real problems are not hunger, deprivation, inequality, corruption or bigotry.

In this sense, this election is a plebiscite on prejudice. It is of course an extremely complicated affair with many competing parties, and conflicting choices. The BJP's opponents are divided. The Congress is in no great shape. The Third Force is almost finished. No one is presenting dazzling new alternatives. And yet, at one level, the choice is starkly simple. Either we succumb to the politics of false identities and vote for the NDA. Or we reaffirm our real priorities, re-emphasise our true concerns, and vote for secular, democratic parties. Ultimately, it is an either-or choice. We must make it wisely.

Defamation, Zionist Style

by Edward Said

I have always advocated the acknowledgment by each other of the Palestinian and Jewish peoples' past sufferings. Only in this way can they coexist peacefully together in the future.

GIVEN the approach of the final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, it seems worthwhile to record here the lengths to which right-wing Zionists will go to further their claims on all of Palestine against those of the country's native Palestinian inhabitants who were dispossessed as an entire nation in 1948.

To this very end, an article has recently appeared in *Commentary*, a small extremely conservative Jewish monthly, which attacks my life and story as a Palestinian by pretending to show that I am neither Palestinian, nor ever lived in Palestine, nor that my family was evicted from Palestine in 1948.

It should be remarked that this is the third such attack on me by *Commentary* in twenty years: the first being an enormously long critique in 1981 of my book *The Question of Palestine*, the second a reckless article in 1988 or 1989 entitled *The Professor of Terror*, the third being this one, written by someone called Justus Weiner, an Israeli who claims to work for an obscure Israeli right-wing research centre in Jerusalem.

Weiner's argument is buttressed by his pretence that he spent three years on his study of my life, spoke to 80 or so witnesses, and found many inconsistencies in what he says is "my story," which he fabricates more or less at will. It seems astonishing that he obtained funding for this project, although he tactfully doesn't say why, how much, and from whom. Thanks to the extremely pro-Zionist point of view, his article has aroused the interest of the international press, which has been calling me for comment and reaction.

It is part of the Palestinian fate always to be required to prove one's existence and history. The only problem with the current hulla-balloo at the outset is that during his three years of assiduous research Weiner never once contacted or in any way spoke to me, an extraordinary omission by a man who pretends that he is both a scholar and a journalist but actually uses the methods of neither one nor the other. Another fact about his method is that he did not properly consult my memoir, *Out of Place*, completed in September 1998, and to appear next month. (Extracts from it will appear shortly in the *New York Review of Books*, *The Observer*, *Harper's* and *Granta*.)

There, I scrupulously record the facts of my early life spent between Jerusalem, Cairo and Dhaur el Shweir (Lebanon), making clear that being the member of a privileged class I was spared the worst of the *nakba*. I have never claimed to have been made a refugee, but rather that my extended family, all of it — uncles, cousins, aunts, grandparents — in fact was. By the spring of 1948, not a single relative of mine was left in Palestine, ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces. *Commentary's* Weiner does not mention that, allowing himself the preposterous claim that my memoir began in 1994 and completed in 1998, was written to refute him in 1999.

To make matters worse, Weiner's strenuous display of scholarly rigour is undercut by many mistakes of fact. He calls Boulos Said my father's brother, whereas he was my father's cousin. Boulos's wife, Nabila, was my father's sister. Weiner does not know that. He does not realize that the *kuchan* or *tabo* is rarely complete and that the family house was in fact a family house in the Arab sense, which meant that our families were one in ownership. Together Boulos and Wadie Said, cousins, partners, and close friends, owned the Palestine Education Company, with branches in Jerusalem and Haifa.

All, plus the house, were lost to Israel in 1948. Weiner says that we didn't register the property, thereby deliberately obfuscating two facts: that my father did in fact try to sue the Israeli government for reparations, and second, that by 1950 the law of absentee property passed by Israel had converted all Palestinian property into Israeli property, illegally of course. No wonder our efforts were unrewarded. He says that

I didn't attend St George's School. This is an outright lie. He does not admit that the school's records end in 1946, and I was there in 1947 or that my father and cousins had attended the school starting in 1906. Had he been a decent researcher he might have sought out one of my classmates, Haig Boyagian (who lives in the US now and quite coincidentally called me a week ago) and my mathematics teacher, Michel Marmoura, a retired professor at the University of Toronto, for verification.

Weiner says that my mother was Lebanese, whereas she was only half Lebanese: her father was Palestinian. She had a Palestinian passport and in 1948 did in point of fact become a refugee. The Talbiyah house was built for my family in 1932 by Sab' Samaha. Weiner gets that wrong too. The Egyptian branches of the family business were not nationalized but sold to the Nasser government; nor were they burned by revolutionary mobs but rather by the Muslim Brothers and so on and on. All this, someone who claims that I have falsified the past to pretend that I am a victim. What he cannot understand, and has not been able to understand from any of my writings, is the fact that I have been moved to defend the refugees' plight precisely because I did not suffer and therefore felt obligated to relieve the sufferings of my people, less fortunate than myself.

Weiner is a propagandist who like many others before him have tried to depict the dispossession of Palestinians as ideological fiction: this has been a constant theme of Zionist "information" since the 1930s. Actual sources are never given, but innuendoes are used. In the body of his article he does not name the people he allegedly talked to "on four continents" or the documents he consulted, or what exactly they said, when, and in answer to what question.

My cousin Robert, for example, told me that when at first he refused to talk to Weiner, Weiner then threatened him. And because he is relatively unknown Weiner tries to make a name for himself by attacking a better known person's reputation. I have had many such attacks levelled against me in the past. Weiner's attempt now may be useful as a way of discrediting all Palestinian claims to return and compensation, which will be a central issue in the terminal phase of the peace process.

Weiner's polemic also covers up the racism of Israel's Law of

Return, which allows any Jew anywhere to emigrate to Israel, whereas no Palestinian, even someone born there, has any such right. If someone like Edward Said is a liar, runs the argument, how can we believe all those peasants who say they were driven off their land?

The Likud argument (Weiner's) is that the land all belongs to the people of Israel given to them by God. All the other claimants are therefore prevaricators and pretenders.

Likely several survivors of 1948 from my family are still alive and well. My oldest cousin, the last person to leave our Talbiyah house, is eighty years old now and lives in Toronto. Why was he not contacted? As my school teacher, Martin Buber and took him to court when he refused to leave the house after his lease was up and our family returned from a year in Cairo. What about our neighbours, other relatives, friends, members of the church community? They were never contacted.

Several children of the pastor who baptised me are still alive also: they could have been contacted. No: what *Commentary* wants is not the truth but the big Zionist lie. The irony is that a few weeks ago American newspapers carried a front-page story on the revision of Israeli history schoolbooks which, thanks to the efforts of the new Israeli historians and, of course, the Palestinian themselves, are beginning to acknowledge the events of 1948 as they really occurred, with the ethnic cleansing, destruction of villages, massacres, etc., which have for so long been denied.

It is not entirely surprising, however, that an American Israeli and an American Zionist journal turn out to be more Israeli than Israelis themselves, less honest, less willing to deal with facts, more inclined to propaganda and smear tactics, less likely ever to understand history or how their skewed perspective produces only calumny and falsehood.

I have always advocated the acknowledgment by each other of the Palestinian and Jewish peoples' past sufferings. Only in this way can they coexist peacefully together in the future. Weiner is more interested in using the past — either an individual or collective past — to prevent understanding and reconciliation. It is a pity that so much time and venom as he has expended couldn't have been used for positive purposes.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

Communal Politics: Dealing or Doing Away with?

by Monirul I Khan

The wise response of the progressive forces would be persistently upholding the ideological superiority of secularism than doing away with it. When it is visible its vices are permeable and when banned it gains virility. Thus the trade off is ours.

IT is indeed intriguing to write on communal politics in Bangladesh. It runs the risk of earning displeasure of the perpetrators, as it is not an easy task to unveil the bitter facts of pseudo secularism. Raising the demand for banning communal politics would not be a risk-free venture at all. It then exposes the person to the lethal wrath of the followers of the respective creed. One needs supportive political platform to fight back communal politics while political party's support is not unconditional.

Why do we repudiate communal politics? Because it yields hatred within and among the communities practicing different religious ideologies. Such hatred might reach the point of annihilation. Ethnic wars and riots are the consequences of such destructive feelings. Numerous manifestations often include genocide, loss of property or eviction from one's own homeland. It re-shapes the geography of a country. Communal politics glorifies certain ideology, ethnic identity or cultural traits vis-a-vis others. It portrays the followers of other religions, members of other ethnic groups as adversaries or villains. It mobilises the members of one group to downgrade or eliminate those of the other. It fractures the social bond of a community necessary for integrative life and imbues distrust and fear. One might feel that these are well known facts but what is notable is the re-emergence of communal politics across time and space and people's indifference to its 'badness'.

Communalism and Communal Politics

Apparently the two are interrelated, but subtle difference does not escape important implication. There may be communal politics without the advocacy of communalism or glorification of a particular religion as its ideology. Even a political party officially pursuing secularism may take recourse to communal politics for strategic reasons. What is communalism? In simple terms it may be defined as one's identification with an 'ethnic identity' at the cost of systematically negating that of others. We would call a political ideology 'communal' when it derives from a religion. When a political party formally pursues a particular religion as its ideological basis or wants to establish a particular religious regime it amounts to communalism. In this context the concept of secularism further illuminates the meaning of communalism. In secularism, religions are considered matters of private domain. It also advocates keeping social and political activities separate from and above religion.

Social consequences of communalism, racism or tribalism are not very different al-

though their ideological basis might be apparently so. For instance, the conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi or Black and White, or Chinese and Malays are different in terms of manifestation at the surface level but they run a common binding chord. And that common chord is hatred. Tutsi hate the Hutu, Whites abhor the Blacks and Malays despise the Chinese.

There is a view differentiating religion from communalism. The argument goes like this: all religious people are not necessarily communal. This is empirically true but the insulating factor is not precisely figured out. In other words, the argument does not clearly point out what is there in religiosity that prevents one turning into a communal person.

Concrete Basis of Communalism

To what degree communalism emerges from one's deeper commitment to a certain religious ideology? Is it a part of some political strategy? Such complexity merits one's attention to disentangle the knot. For example, there is a proverbial saying about Muhammad Ali Jinnah that he was not a regular religious practitioner whom one can compare with a long bearded and white *akhla* clad *mullah*, still he championed the cause of the Muslims. In other words, even without being a religious devotee one may strategically use religious ideology to pursue non-religious goals. If not passion for religious ideology what else would then account for the emergence of communalism? This is something what we would like to call the concrete basis for communalism. It would allude to a sense of deprivation/exploitation/discrimination/subjection harboured in a person that from time to time may ventilate in communal terms. Although examples will not be very few to illustrate how communal sentiment was whipped up to realise some ulterior motives, the most common is economic and political deprivation that provokes one religious/ethnic community against another.

Communalism is an outcome of a long drawn process. In simple terms the people of a religious community who feel deprived gather under common platform before they rise against the cause of deprivation. For example, several peasant revolts (SADRI revolt, Fakir revolt, Munda revolt, Sakral revolt) during the colonial Bengal took place under the banner of religious movement. These were communal in the sense that they took place along religious lines. Radical

critics would say that if a political movement takes place under the garb of religion it would indicate the evidence of backward consciousness of the community. However, in everyday parlance the connotation of communalism is generally branded as something reactionary.

This is not to rule out that there is no existence of religious fanatics who would not be carried away by the zeal of communal politics. What is notable, however, is the higher probability of coming across such fanatics more among the rank and file than the leaders. One may turn attention to the quite old Machiavellian tactic to appreciate the meaning of such inclination of the leaders to religious ideology despite the fact that in their heart of heart attachment is of doubtful quality. One very pertinent example in this regard would be General Ershad who during his rule very religiously visited Dhaka city's mosques on several Fridays while his bold statement about his extra-marital life hardly matched with the religious edict. The objective of offering so many arguments is to bring home a fact that there is a discernible gap between the manifest objective of communalism and its latent goal.

Origin of Communal Politics

This is not the right place to undertake the uncovering of the historical perspective of communal politics in this part of the sub-continent. However, without some amount of understanding of the background it would not be easy to appreciate its evolution in the course of our politics. The most popular theory on its origin in this part of the world identifies its beginning in the colonial period of British rule. The argument is the following: the British colonial rulers wanted to divide the two most important religious communities of India (Hindu and Muslim) by implanting communal hatred in order to consolidate their rule. However, many would not like to stop here by uncritically accepting the implantation thesis. They would argue that there was internal condition supportive to the process of implantation. How that is alluded to by internal supportive condition? It goes like the following. Hindus were far ahead of Muslims both in terms of education and economic condition during the colonial period. Muslims sought to overcome the gap following sectarian politics. In this context we would not like to give much credence to the view that says that there is

built-in communal spirit in both Hinduism and Islam because the evidence of syncretism in both religions is far from scarce. To us the theory of social origin of communalism is more relevant.

By the end of nineteenth century and the first quarter of the on-going century a stable section of Muslim elite class emerged all over the then India: sizable in the sense that they could compete for political power. Partition of India is the most important evidence of how intensive the conflict of power was between the Hindu and the Muslim elite. The meaning of communal riot would be correctly perceived if one filters it through the concept of hegemony as propounded by Gramsci. This concept says that the ideology of the ruling class — *sagun* dominates the ideological expressions of the dominated classes. One common question put forward in this regard is the following: what benefits does a poor person derive by killing another poor person of different religion except the appeasement of false consciousness?

However, the Bangladesh movement and its aftermath incorporated a new dimension into the issue of communalism. The notion of Muslim nationhood that was concretised through the emergence of Pakistan was replaced by a new one. All the religious communities of Bangladesh fought for its independence with the nationalistic identity of *Bangalee*. There is no doubt that the *Bangalee* nationalism that provided the ideological premise of Bangladesh movement was integrative and indifferent to religious divide. However, later political developments showed that both General Ziaur Rahman and General Ershad mixed religious background of the majority with the definition of nationalism and shaped their political strategy drawing its element.

During the regime of Ziaur Rahman the principle of secularism was removed from the constitution and it was provided Islamic flavour. General Ershad went one step forward by declaring Islam as the state religion. However, the inclination of Zia and Ershad were different from a more dogmatic one that goes to the extreme of infusing *shariat* laws into constitution (e.g. Iran and Pakistan). One might say that secular politics in Bangladesh was overshadowed in the process by religious rhetoric. Some might disagree with the above analysis in empirical terms. If the politics of Zia and Ershad, it might be argued, is compared with the variant of a communal

one then what label should be stuck to the politics of Jamaat or those parties vowing to replace the existing constitution by an Islamic one? The answer could be the following: Zia and Ershad resorted to communal politics while Jamaat preaches communalism (thus more strong communal politics).

The question needs to be pondered over concerns the degree of religiosity of the people of Bangladesh. Do the majority of Bangladesh feel more impelled to identify themselves with a religious label than a secular one? Raising such question is valid because Zia emerged as a popular political leader despite his manifest religious tinge. Or how to account for Sheikh Mujib's joining the conference of the Islamic states being the head of a secular state? If it was to appease the religious sentiments of the community then one could say that what was once a matter of the ruling elite has now taken a deep root in popular culture.

One of the widely publicised posters of the ruling party in the last parliamentary election was the portrayal of its main leader offering prayer with closed meditating eyes. Also there is scope to reflect over the contrasting fact that the arch communal Jamaat lost as many as fifteen valuable seats in the last parliamentary election over a period of only five years. Some political analysts said off record that it was the outcome of a tacit electoral understanding between Jamaat and AL to unseat BNP which was their common foe at that time. It is difficult to dig out the actual truth but it indicated the preference of means to end by the political forces conventionally identified with secularism. It in turn exposes the further complexity of communal politics.

What to Do with Communal Politics

What is to do with the communal politics in Bangladesh? Can we frame legal rules to stop its function? At this point of history this is not a feasible thinking. We are now less sensitive to the existence of communal politics and more permissive to the invocation of religion at different levels. Recent past showed that playing religious card paid dividend in politics. Be it poverty, the fear of external foe or the impact of Islamic zeal people in this country by and large devoted to religious goal in their social pursuits. The existence of communal politics has to be seen in that light. The wise response of the progressive forces would be persistently upholding the ideological superiority of secularism than doing away with it. When it is visible its vices are permeable and when banned it gains virility. Thus the trade off is ours.

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Get the Picture? The Media Elite Don't

The recent collision between two trains in eastern India, killing perhaps 300 people, has received much global media attention. But, asks a *Gemini News Service* writer in this opinion piece, what about the unseen disasters that kill or devastate millions without ever making great pictures?

P Sainath writes from Mumbai

THE death of some 300 people in a train crash is a human tragedy of huge proportions. But it is also, for the media, an event spectacular. A picture of four huge rail carriages piled on top of one another in a twisted heap of torn and mangled metal makes for stunning television footage and front page pictures. Of course it has to be covered, and covered well.

Between 1997 and the middle of last year as many as 400 cotton farmers committed suicide in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Economic liberalisation since 1991 had shredded what little remained of state-supported rural credit.

The new policies had also jacked up the prices of farm inputs. All those farmers were deep in debt to private moneylenders charging interest rates often in excess of 100 percent.

Then came crop failure. Many of the farmers killed themselves by swallowing their overpriced pesticides. Chemicals that had little effect in eradicating pests did a swift job with the farmers.

The story did not make the cover of a single major English language news magazine in India at the time. Leave alone foreign newspapers, it did not even hit the front pages of most national dailies for a long time.

When it did, it sank quite soon, though similar suicides were being reported in other states including wealthy ones such as Punjab and Maharashtra.

Between then and now, however, you can count several magazine covers on the new cars being introduced on India's roads.

So how do you get covered if you are not rich? Maybe you have to die in large numbers in one spot at one time.

Globalisation means that for the media in the West, too,

the train-type disaster is a comfortable one to cover. It fits in with the old 'coups, chaos and catastrophes' formula used to package 'Third World News'. An added bonus is that it lacks complexity, at least on the surface, so reporters and editors don't have to work too hard.

Floods in Bangladesh and train disasters may fit easily with this type of news coverage, but perhaps it is not just a matter of large casualties at one time in one place. There has also to be an element of panic, horror, of the spectacular.

Remember the 'plague' of 1994 in India and the hysteria it caused? That made the front page almost everywhere in the world quite effortlessly — here was the Third World slipping into the Middle Ages. Actually, the 'plague' — scientists now are not even sure it was a plague — took 54 lives.

By contrast, just one disease — tuberculosis — claims over 450,000 Indian lives each year. But TB would be so lucky to get a couple of lines in Indian newspapers through the year. If it does, it is when the country's distinguished chest physicians, some of whom count newspaper owners among their clients, hold their annual congress.

Right through the 1980s and into the first years of this decade diarrhoea claimed the lives of close to 1.5 million infants each year in India — an infant every three minutes. It gets a pathetic amount of space in the media.

Every fortnight, over 7.5 million children below the age of five in India are afflicted with diarrhoea. Close to 19 million contract acute respiratory infections, including pneumonia, in the same 336 hours.

But plague makes for better copy. Who dies is no less important than how many. And that

is another reason why the 'plague' got so much media attention. It threatened the Beautiful People, not just the ones 'out there' in the villages or in urban slums.

Plague germs are notorious for their non-observance of class distinctions. In this country, class divisions usually extend to compensation packages as well. If you are an Indian killed while riding your bicycle, the compensation might not do much more than replace the bicycle for your surviving family.

Bus accidents do not rate much cover. If on the other hand, you die in an air crash, the pay-outs are many times larger. There is yet another danger: big compensation packages, grandly announced under the media glare, may not materialise later. Politicians know the media will soon have lost interest.

Covering disasters the way we do looks particularly unethical when we look at things we do not cover. Year after year, the Human Development Programme of the United Nations Development Programme points to sharply widening disparities across the globe, between nations and within them.

These disparities are policy-driven in our age of Market Fundamentalism — an economic creed that has not spared the Indian railways.

Since 1992, successive governments have piled on over 900 trains to an already overburdened rail system — something perhaps without parallel. The calculated neglect of the public sector and the growing impoverishment of hundreds of millions signal not one but many giant tragedies, not waiting to happen but occurring daily before the global media's firmly shut eyes.

That is a pity, for a lot more than 300 lives are at stake.

