

Safety net missing out on most of the poor

The gaps should be filled in for the sake of poverty alleviation

A World Bank survey shows that poverty alleviation, the focal point of MDGs, has not taken place on the basis of a need-based plan, as less than one-fourth of the poor in the bottom rung have so far got the benefits of the government's safety net. The point will be made clear by the fact that Rajshahi Division, where the number of the poor is higher than any other region, got the lowest coverage of the safety net compared to other divisions where poverty rate is lower.

The WB findings bring forth not only inconsistencies in the poverty alleviation programmes but also the truth that the decision makers showed a marked bias towards certain areas, which is a clear violation of the principle of dealing evenhandedly with the poor people all over the country. The point becomes all the more relevant in light of what the monga-stricken people experience regularly in some places in the northern region. Clearly, the governments in the past could not find a solution to the problem, and recurrence of the near-famine situation every year in those small pockets was attributed to the immediate past government's lack of will and efficiency to handle the issue properly.

There is of course no doubt that the poorest areas should have topped the priority ladder. It is not known why exactly the opposite happened while extending the safety net coverage to the people. The decision makers should have been aware of the plain truth that the western part of the country is lagging behind the eastern part in both development and poverty alleviation. It has been a rather inexplicable lapse on their part.

The WB report has also provided some other statistics that the planners should take note of to counter economic ills like unemployment. If we have to create 2.2 million new jobs each year, as the report suggests, a lot more emphasis has to be laid on industrialization and job creation in all other sectors.

Finally, due importance has been attached in the report to creation of education and healthcare facilities as part of empowering the poor. Here also the less privileged people have to get preferential treatment which will uphold the principle of justice and fair play.

The report has, at least, made it clear that only creation of the safety net will not serve the government's purpose, its coverage has to be symmetrical and consistent with our social and economic realities.

The worsening situation in Sri Lanka

Rajapakse government and LTTE must go back to talks

IN these past few weeks, conditions in Sri Lanka have taken a serious turn with government forces and the LTTE engaged in what seems like a fierce struggle for supremacy in the north and east of the country. Sri Lankan forces have been pounding away at LTTE positions, with the government claiming that it has been scoring major victories in its drive against Velupillai Prabhakaran and his men. If that is one side of the picture, there is another as well. And it is the claim of the Tigers that they have been inflicting heavy losses on government forces and are far from the defeat the government in Colombo claims is near at hand for them.

The reality could be anywhere between these conflicting claims. More important, though, is the terrible truth of the country having slid back to a war one had only a couple of years ago thought could be reaching an end through negotiations brokered by the Norwegian government. That move was looked upon as a new beginning, not only because it offered the prospect of an end to the conflict but also because it seemed that the two sides were ready to tone down their demands. The LTTE appeared to be coming close to accepting a devolved status within the Sri Lankan federation instead of demanding a separate state for Tamils. And much of the credit for the beginning of the peace process must go to then prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who reached out to the Tigers and thereby offered hope to his country. But then came the anti-climax, when first Chandrika Kumaratunga and then her successor, President Rajapakse, decided on a hardline approach to the crisis. In the process, the fitful momentum for peace could not but come to a dead end.

At this point, the crisis in Sri Lanka is far from over and both sides will be deceiving themselves if they think they can win an outright victory in what is fast becoming a twilight struggle. To all intents and purposes, the LTTE has been weakened by the ferocity of the government onslaught, but for anyone to write it off would be a mistake. Which takes us to the thought, once more, of the two sides exploring the chances of a negotiated settlement to the issue. The Sri Lankan state needs to remain intact. At the same time, the Tamils in the east and north need constitutional guarantees of self-government in the future.

Have they gratified us in any way?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

THEY came, they saw, they smiled! Ah! What a blessed nation we are! What more do we need? Thank God we survived the incredulity to see this again and again and again on numerous TV channels for the next seventy-six hours. Let us rejoice, brothers and sisters. Let us write to friends and foes abroad that the nation is going ga ga over the two netris meeting one another armed



Bridge the gap ...

with tailor-made smiles (whoever fixed the smiles on their faces did a neat job).

Anyway, they came and they looked at one another for some fleeting moments and then looked elsewhere. Can't blame them. Sustaining eye-to-eye contact with someone you intend to "liquidate" is an impossible task (who knows what they would have done had they not been in the cantonment!). We may let our imagination go wild for a while. Oh! how I wish we all could read what was going on in their minds at that moment.

Well, we all saw, they sauntered towards one another and they

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

The two netris have met, but they must not nurture the notion that they have obliged us in any way. They must not believe that they have gratified us in any way. They should rather be told in clear terms that the people hold them responsible for not having a decent relationship all these years when the nation faced one catastrophe after another.

exchanged a few pleasantries, while security personnel stood close enough to tread on their feet. Their display of civility before a thousand pairs of eyes seemed like two adversaries bowing to one another gracefully before engaging in a duel.

So, that night democracy was happy. Advisers were happy. Cantonment was happy. Media was happy. There was a feeling all around that the nation has been salvaged from a grave crisis! There was a feeling that from here on all our miseries would end, prices of essentials would go back to the time of Sher Shah and we shall live happily ever after. If we do not live happily ever after then it would mean we are not patriotic enough or maybe we did not attach any significance to the meeting of the netris.

Who could imagine that it would require such a prolonged melodrama for the two authoritarian leaders to meet at a neutral venue for the cause of democracy! They supposedly fought for democracy jointly, but they never stood side by side on a dais to talk about the country. A friend of mine pointed out that by sheer "chance" they always meet inside the cantonment! Last time they had met inside cantonment too. Does that mean they do not trust their own civilian areas where they go begging for votes? Ironic, indeed.

The hoopla aside, think for a while

about the state of our politics at the top level. Compare this with the situation in the developed countries. Do we ever see leaders of different political parties turning their faces away at the sight of one another? Didn't McCain shake hands with Obama after his defeat? Didn't Hillary congratulate Obama when he was nominated by the party? So, what is wrong with our leaders, especially those two ladies?

It is a matter of great shame that these two senior leaders of two major political parties talk all the time about the welfare of the people and progress of the country but refuse to even greet or look at one another in parliament. How would they solve the numerous problems of the country, if they refuse to recognise the existence of the representatives of almost fifty percent of the total number of voters!

What is more disconcerting is that such childish behaviour of the two leaders has been encouraged by the senior leaders who surround the two netris twenty-four hours. They are known to pour poison in the ears of the two credulous ladies, not only about leaders of other parties but also about those of their own party! It is widely felt that if the senior leaders of the two parties had always talked about building a working relationship with other parties possibly things would not have come to such a pass.

The two netris have met, but they must not nurture the notion that they

have obliged us in any way. They must not believe that they have gratified us in any way. They should rather be told in clear terms that the people hold them responsible for not having a decent relationship all these years when the nation faced one catastrophe after another. While floods engulfed vast areas, while militants killed innocent people across the country, while Sidr devastated mile after mile of human habitat, while food became scarce, the two leaders



... for the nation's sake.

chose to stay in two different poles happily enamoured with their own stubbornness.

Are they keeping in touch since that "eventful" evening? Have they become best of friends since then? Well, we do not want them to play together with skipping ropes but we want them to display cordiality and common courtesy before the nation and international community. Maybe they are not aware, and need to be told so, that the behaviour of senior political leaders in public has direct upshot in the crisis-ridden image of the country. They are making it worse.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star

Sangh parivar turns hysterical

PRAFUL BIDWAI

NOTHING speaks as eloquently of the Bharatiya Janata Party's massive Rightwards shift as prime ministerial-hopeful LK Advani's falling in line with his colleagues' hard-Hindutva position on the Malegaon blasts. His statement attacking Maharashtra's Anti-Terrorism Squad as "politically motivated" and his defence of Pragma Thakur and Lt.Col. Prasad Shrikant Purohit is a big departure from his earlier attempt at "moderation" by saying that "terrorism has no religion."

As the sangh parivar feels the heat, the BJP has turned hysterical. It has abandoned all pretence of political decency in venomously branding its opponents "ISI agents." Party spokesperson Prakash Javadekar is outdoing abusive sadhus by claiming that the government has no right to accuse sadhus "and the army" "of terror." This confuses one officer with the entire army.

BJP president Rajnath Singh stridently insists that votaries of "cultural nationalism" (Hindutva) can never be terrorists -- by definition.

Let's leave aside all the evidence, including the use in Malegaon of a motorcycle registered in Thakur's name, other links between the network and bombings, and the fact that army personnel present at Purohit's interrogation have endorsed the ATS.

What's relevant is the BJP's argument that the law shouldn't apply to "saints." Besides, the detention of a shady sadhu like Amritanand isn't a conspiracy against the Hindu community!

The absurdity of the BJP defending terrorism after making it a central plank of its election campaign should be self-evident. Yet, that's the message from the sangh parivar's November 16 Panipat conclave, at which Rajnath Singh and Uttarakhand Chief Minister B.C. Khanduri joined hands with anti-secular sadhus to announce an outrageously communal campaign.

Nothing can condone the presence of these leaders, one an elected public

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

As the sangh parivar feels the heat, the BJP has turned hysterical. It has abandoned all pretence of political decency in venomously branding its opponents "ISI agents." Party spokesperson Prakash Javadekar is outdoing abusive sadhus by claiming that the government has no right to accuse sadhus "and the army" "of terror." This confuses one officer with the entire army.

official with Constitutional responsibilities, and the other the topmost office-bearer of a big party, at the gathering. The Panipat meeting will probably go down as a rabid version of the BJP's 1989 Palanpur conclave, which resolved to demolish the Babri mosque.

The parivar brazenly defends Hindutva terrorism in the belief that the public believes it's patriotic. In reality, the parivar seeks to destroy India's essence as a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious society through an anti-secular counter-revolution.

Prejudice, hatred, militarism and violence against non-Hindus have been integral to "cultural nationalism." The public knows that Hindutva has a history of assassinations, bloody riots and anti-minority pogroms.

People know that Nathuram Godse killed Gandhi because of Hindutva's vicious prejudice against Hindus who try to prevent communal riots. If the Godses and Narendra Modis are "patriots," India will only breed assassins and terrorists acting in the name of a community whom they don't represent.

For years, the RSS-BJP tried to distance themselves from Godse by claiming he wasn't an RSS member when he killed Gandhi -- although he had been one earlier, for years, and was inspired by the same ideology. Today, even the BJP defends Abhinav Bharat's ultra-communal president Himani Savarkar, Nathuram Godse's niece.

Hindutva is particularly amenable to terrorism. Its principal difference

with other forms of religious extremism is that it tries to pass itself off as nationalist by claiming to speak for the numerical majority, which isn't separatist. This view is dangerously majoritarian, and hence anti-democratic. Majoritarian extremism is also more widespread and enjoys state indulgence.

Hindutva terrorism cannot be seen in isolation from the culture of divisiveness and hatred that the BJP has promoted in its cynical pursuit of power. Violence is integral to this and to the party's political mobilisation strategy.

This culture has percolated into the police forces. Thus, the Maharashtra police recently told a Dhule court: "It's an established fact that Muslims are the masterminds behind all terrorist activities across India."

They also exonerated the Hindu Rakshak Samiti, by saying its violence (in which seven of the 10 people killed were Muslims) was "mere retaliation to what has been happening in the country for the past few years."

The BJP is now hardening its rabid Hindutva posture. If the Rajnath Singh line prevails, as is happening, and if the BJP does relatively well in the assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi, it will feel vindicated in its defence of saffron terror.

This will encourage it to mount a grossly communal and divisive campaign in the Lok Sabha election, the like of which India has never seen, with potentially terrible consequences.

Disturbing signs are already dis-

cernible. Mr. Narendra Modi has emerged as the undisputed successor to Mr. Advani. He has gained even more legitimacy through Tata Motors' decision to shift the Nano car project to Gujarat and through his endorsement by Big Business.

The RSS has tightened its grip on the BJP. As membership and attendance in its shakhas plummets, the RSS will try to play a more active role in other parivar outfits, including the BJP, and of course the VHP-Bajrang Dal.

The Panipat conclave, and the BJP's hardened stance, demolish the wishful argument that incumbency in power would impel the BJP towards "moderation" and sobriety.

The BJP isn't that kind of party. It will always occupy the dark region between parliamentary politics as an instrument of power, and its foundational loyalty to the sangh parivar's hate-driven ideology and violent politics.

The BJP has entered its most communal phase. It's playing with fire. It must be stopped.

It goes without saying that the unearthing of the Hindutva terrorist network presents a major challenge to the Indian state. It has become a litmus test for its secular credentials and loyalty to the Constitution.

The police must investigate the network impartially and professionally. They must refrain from making premature statements to the media before investigations are completed and solid evidence is obtained.

The Union home ministry has done well to ask the states to furnish reports on the activities of Hindutva groups. It should now act on them by banning the VHP-Bajrang Dal and the RSS.

True, bans have their limitations. But their value in de-legitimising extremists must not be underrated. They can put the more dangerous organisations in the parivar on the defensive and enable the government to prosecute BJP members connected with them.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in