



NEWS LETTER

A day in a village...

Chinakapavaram (situated in the West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh) is like any other village dotting rural India. And just like most other Indian villages, Chinakapavaram has its 'dalit colonies'. While touring these parts, one realizes that, India still has a long way to go to reach the platform of social equality. Though the dalit colony is primarily characterized by, pervasive poverty and a lack of even the basic minimum facilities, its people's resolve to improve their current situation stands out.

The quality of services like health and education in the Dalit areas is very poor. We cannot talk of a nation's progress without including the progress of these sections of society. Keeping this in mind, Lok Satta representatives led by Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan visited Chinakapavaram, Ramayyagudam and other villages in the West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. The aim of this visit was to gather first hand knowledge of the current conditions and to identify areas that need improvement.

While visiting the local school in Ramayyagudam, it was learnt that even the poorest among parents were willing to borrow money so that they could send their children to a 'convent' (private, English medium) school rather than the government aided school, where their children could have obtained education for free. This indicates the strong demand for quality education amongst even the poorer and disadvantaged sections of society. The condition of the government aided school personified the state of affairs in the village: one teacher teaching five classes, simultaneously! Given such conditions, in government aided schools, it is no surprise that parents have more faith in convent schools. The same trend is mirrored in the health sector where

it is seen that villagers are willing to incur debts for taking their sick to a private hospital rather than to the local government hospital for 'free' treatment.

The villagers also pointed out other issues such as lack of clean drinking water and basic sanitation. While interacting with the elders of the village community, Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan stressed the need for discouraging money power in elections. Lok Satta emphasized that the power to change the nature of politics was in the hands of the villagers. This could be done by encouraging good candidates to participate in the elections. Accepting money from a candidate during the election meant that the villagers were subservient to him once he was in power. Such trends are contradictory to the functioning of clean politics whose ultimate aim is to benefit the people.

Speaking to members of the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), a self-help group, the Lok Satta representatives found out that there were not enough number of micro financing institutions in place to provide financial support. The loans thus far taken by them were being used in establishing cooperatives. This shows that provided with the necessary assistance, the weaker sections are able to improve their livelihoods.

This visit helped bring into the limelight the core issues requiring development. It also exposed the misplaced priorities of the overall policy making and thought process in the current political system where the focus seems to have shifted away from the public. Giving the required attention to these sections of society is the only way which will lead to an India that is comprehensively developed.



India needs Merit *and* Social justice

The recent debate generated by the proposal to reserve 27% seats in Union educational institutions for backward classes has predictably been very shrill and hysterical. Reservation is a classic zero-sum-game issue and polarizes society intensely, as the gains to a social group are matched by losses to another. Prejudice and bitterness in this debate must be overcome by facts and logic. We all need to step back a little and take a deep breath.

Dalits in India

According to the 2001 census, scheduled castes comprise 16.2 per cent of the total population of India, that is, they number over 17 crore. Scheduled tribes comprise 8.2 per cent of the population, that is, they number over 8 crore. Both together constitute 24.4 per cent of the Indian population, that is, they together number over 25 crore.

- ▶ Rate of Illiteracy - 62.59 % among SCs
- 70.40 % among STs

(Source: 1991 Census)

- ▶ Formal education above 10th class amongst Dalit literates is not above 7.0 %

(Source: 1991 Census)

- ▶ Among those enrolled for Post Graduation in Sciences in India (2.62 lakhs), Dalits comprise only 3.43 percent (0.09 lakh)

(Source: Selected Educational Statistics [96-'97])

There are three critical issues we need to examine before reaching any conclusions. First, even today the future of a child can be predicted fairly accurately at birth based on caste, family and gender in most cases. Such a predictable future determined by the accident of birth and unrelated to abilities and hard work is an unacceptable disgrace in modern civilization. Poor children from deprived sections are as brainy and sharp as others, and yet they seldom fulfil their potential, as opportunities for vertical mobility are denied. As a result, much of the gene pool of our society is wasted. Sustained high growth can be preserved only if we include all social groups in a modern, humane vision of an egalitarian society where all sections are winners. There is a clear and compelling case for strong affirmative action policies to promote equity and opportunity and preserve peace and harmony. Otherwise, violence will become arbiter of social justice. Equity and social harmony cannot be delinked.

Second, our quest for social justice and opportunities for all must be combined with search for excellence. Clearly, in a modern society competence and

performance are critical for economic growth, service delivery and governance. We need to devise means of affirmative action which ensure high standards of performance.

Third, thousands of youngsters would never have found dignity and opportunity without affirmative action policies. While there are obvious distortions, the fact remains that reservations benefited large sections, and many of them performed creditably once opportunities are provided. Equally, the benefits of reservation are uneven, with families which prospered early through preferential treatment enjoying a huge lead over the poorer, uneducated families.

Given the complexity of the issue and the unevenness of outcomes leading to distortions, there is resentment on both sides. The poorer SCs, STs and OBCs feel cheated by politics of tokenism and lack of access to education and employment. The other sections, particularly the poorer among them, feel discriminated and resent diminishing opportunities relative to demand. Given the enormous hunger for quality education, the availability of seats in institutions of excellence and the perceived fairness of selection are hugely contentious issues.

Can we promote equity with efficiency? Can 'merit' and 'social justice' be made compatible? Can preferential policies be taken out of the prison of zero-sum-game through win-win solutions? Happily, rational solutions are available to these dilemmas. Policy makers and media need to focus on them, instead of indulging in feverish invective and hype. Political expediency, social ostracism and rage must give way to rationality, wisdom and long-term solutions. What, then, can be done?

First, preferential policies must be coupled with incentives for performance, particularly in professional courses and institutions of excellence. This can be done by giving a head start to candidates from disadvantaged groups. For instance, if 90% is the cut off score for general candidates, preferential groups can be admitted at, say 80% or 75%. This provides motivation and incentive to reach a benchmark, and guarantees uniformly high standards. The preferential candidates must be given free, intensive coaching during plus two course to meet these standards.

Second, a 'Means Test' must be adopted for preferential treatment. Among disadvantaged groups, reservations can be primarily for families with low income, and those below a certain grade in government or profession. And among other sections,

poor candidates can be guaranteed free tuition, and no student will be denied higher education for want of money. A system of scholarships, endowments and soft loans can be institutionalized.

Third, there is a case for rationalizing the reservations for BCs. Mandal Commission report is over 25 years old, and periodic surveys and reclassification are needed for determining groups deserving preferential treatment and identifying the most backward classes (occupational groups) for special privileges.

Fourth, there is need for deregulation and expansion of higher education to suit the needs of a growing, large economy. Accreditation, academic freedom, rating and transparency instead of licensing and regulation will expand opportunities vastly. In addition, state institutions must significantly expand capacity to meet the demand for quality higher education.

Finally, school education and healthcare must be the corner stones of governance. Tony Blair staked his

government's reputation and survival on the quality of education; George Bush was elected in 2000 on the basis of his record in school education as Texas Governor. In India, public policy, political discourse and governance are largely divorced from education. Education engages the attention of politicians and media only when reservations become an issue. The appalling failure of state in social sector is at the heart of persisting inequities.

But those who argue that good school education is a substitute for preferential treatment must recognize that the poor and disadvantaged cannot be held guilty for monumental governance failure. Neglected groups are hungry for good education and opportunities. Even poor rural Dalits are spending Rs.200 per month per child in the hope of 'convent' education. The nation needs preferential policies and good school education. Meanwhile, we can design programmes to combine equity with efficiency.

(The text of this article appeared in the Financial Express dated April 21st, 2006)

MOVEMENT UPDATES

LOK SATTA GUJARAT CHAPTER

Right to Information Act 2005: Building Awareness & Capacity to use amongst the Common Citizens

- Based on discussions with the concerned State officials and Gujarat State Information Commission (SIC), Loksatta Gujarat has submitted and is following up with a large numbers of applications under the RTI Act with an objective of testing the system from the 'Supply Side'. Regular feedback on our experiences will be shared with the State Government and the Gujarat SIC.
- Loksatta Gujarat has conducted workshops for approximately 30 senior reporters and editorial staff of a Gujarati daily *Divya Bhasker*, having a readership of more than 4 lakh readers. The newspaper has agreed to carry 52 weekly articles on the RTI Act; including experiences of Lok Satta and those of the larger civil society. It will also carry a column featuring readers' questions, comments and experiences.
- Presentations were made to CII-Ahmedabad and their member association on effective use and implementation of the RTI Act.

- A discussion on the VOTEINDIA campaign was organized at the CII Economic Summit. The participants included various members of civil society, academicians and students. At the occasion Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan made a presentation on "Good Governance for sustainable Economic Development".

LOK SATTA MAHARASHTRA CHAPTER

The aim of the **VOTEMUMBAI** campaign is to implement participatory democracy and bring about devolution of local self governing powers to the local residents. In this regard, it seeks to implement the 74th Amendment in the context of the urban local self government. In the recent years, there has been massive growth and development in the city. Following this, the urban quality of life has deteriorated and this creates an urgent necessity to have vibrant and efficient urban local government bodies that can deliver adequate services and improve living conditions. Although we have the necessary legislations to achieve this, due to a variety of reasons it has not been converted to reality.

Campaign on Systemic reforms in the Public Distribution System

This campaign has been undertaken to benefit the conditions of the poorest of the poor. Based on the

- ▶ According to the second National Family Health Survey conducted in 1998-99, 38% of the children (age: 0-3) in urban India are underweight and the growth of 36% of them is stunted. The corresponding figures for rural areas are 50% and 49%.
- ▶ The same survey found that 58.1% of the mothers of these children themselves were undernourished.
- ▶ National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau, which had been conducting surveys on nutrition since 1970s in rural areas, shows that 62.5% of children between the age of one and five were undernourished in nine states of India in 1975-79. This figure decreased to 47.7% in 2000-01. It also shows that even as late as in 1998-99, the level of undernourishment among the tribal children was 60.2%.

statistics provided by various studies (see box above), the glaring fact is that a large population needs food and nutrition urgently. However the public distribution system presently in place caters to mere 6.5 crore families that are below the poverty line. This leaves an estimated 33 crore people who are 'nutritionally at risk'.

The aim of this campaign is to redefine the term 'Below Poverty Line' to include other members of society who need support and are getting along on a bare minimum existence, currently.

Beginning of the Lok Satta movement in Nasik

Pointing to the increasing activism amongst civil society members, citizens of Nasik have taken up the task of establishing the Lok Satta movement in their city. This has the potential of developing into the new district chapter of Lok Satta Maharashtra.

Giving the Narmada PAPs their due

In April, the Prime Minister set up a three member committee to oversee the relief and rehabilitation of the Project Affected Peoples (PAPs) from the Sardar Sarovar dam. The Committee will conduct sample surveys to ascertain the status of rehabilitation and gather facts such as total number of families affected by the potential submerge due to the planned increase in dam height. It would also go into the issue of total number of families who have not received relief and rehabilitation package and verify whether alternative land was offered to those evicted.

The committee has been asked to recommend a system within three months to ensure that all families who would be affected by the submerge when the dam height is raised to 121.92 metres receive relief as per norms laid down by Narmada Award, the Supreme Court and the Grievances Redressal Authority (set up by the Madhya Pradesh government).

The former Comptroller and Auditor General of India V K Shunglu heads this committee which includes G.K. Chadha, former Vice Chancellor of the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Dr. Jayaprakash Narayan.

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