

Misplaced Targets

Manas Joardar

With gross domestic product (GDP) growing at a nearly two-digit rate during last several years, India is being projected by various quarters as a potential economic super power. In the count of billionaires too—36 out of a global total of 946—India is a brilliant performer. In this way to excelling others, India could surpass all the rich countries of the world barring only America at the top.

Most of the Indians ~ as despair as ever ~ however, feel little urge to celebrate this great economic upheaval. And quite rightly so. That a substantial growth in GDP may not bring about a fair increase in income of the general mass of people, has been explained by social scientists.

Supposing one ~ out of a total of 100 ~ has an income of Rs 2,40,100.00 per annum and 99 others Rs 100.00 each. The per capita income stands out at Rs 2,500.00. If during the next year, income of the first person jumps up to Rs 2,65,100.00 and that of the others remains unchanged, per capita income of them all goes up to Rs 2,750.00. An overall ten percent rise results in per capita income of all, albeit 99 percent have no increase in their actual income!

SHINING INDIA?

In per capita GDP score, India ranking 123rd in 2000 occupies 117th position in 2005 among 177 countries of the world. In terms of Human Development Index (HDI), however, position has come down from 124 to 128 during the same period (Table - 1). It is horrifying to see that over 80 percent of Indian population is poor or nearly so under the \$2-a-day income criterion and more than one third extremely poor (\$1-a-day). China, another potential superpower, is much better off.

Whereas computation of HDI is based upon longevity, knowledge and a decent standard of living, that of Human Poverty Index for the developing countries (HPI-1) considers the percentage of people not expected to survive to age 40, percentage of illiterate adults and percentage of people without access to safe water, health services and under-5 under-weight children. Here also India remains far behind Sri Lanka and China.

According to a UNICEF report, India ~ an abode of the highest number of under-nourished children of the world - could achieve only 1.4% improvement in the prevalence of under-weight children between 1990 and 2004 and is quite far off from the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing under-five mortality rate by two-thirds within 2015. Similar dismal is the performance record on other social sectors (Table - 2) including the MDGs: halving the proportion of extremely poor people and people without access to sanitation and safe water, achieving primary education for all, reducing maternal mortality rate by three-quarters, ensuring gender equality, environmental stability etc, all within 2015.

The government of India while glorifying the market economy for the economic growth cannot entirely hide out the inconvenient truth either. "It is indicative that the country has done better in terms of per capita income than in

other components of human development" - goes the observation made in this year's pre-budget Economic Survey.

TWO WORLDS

India, in pursuit of a whooping GDP growth through economic reforms, liberalization and globalization, has, as always, grossly neglected the plight of the downtrodden condemned to live a sub-human life.

The report *Development Challenges in the Extremist Affected Areas* (DCEAA), submitted recently by an Expert Group set up in May, 2006 under the aegis of the Planning Commission, on "Development Issues to deal with Causes of Discontent, Unrest and Extremism", remarks—"we have two worlds of education, two worlds of health, two worlds of transport and two worlds of housing, with a gaping divide in between."

The Indian Constitution pledged for a progressive reduction in social and economic inequalities. A score of legislations have been enacted to abolish—for example—untouchability, manual scavenging, atrocities on SCs and STs, bonded labour system, gender based wage inequality and so on. So many Commissions—National Commissions for SC and ST, National Commission for Safai Karma-charies, National Commission for Backward Classes—to name a few—have been constituted.

All this notwithstanding, there is hardly any let up in the woes of the targeted section. "Inequalities between classes, between town and country, and between the upper castes and the under-privileged communities are increasing"—goes the view of the Expert Group expressed in DCEAA.

Dalit and adivasi communities remained excluded from the main stream education system through ages. Even sixty years after independence, their literacy rate is much lower and school drop-out rate and poverty much higher than the national average. Of the total SC households, 10 percent are landless and another 77 percent near-landless.

According to a study, out of around 60 million people who have been displaced/affected during 1947 to 2004 due to various development drives such as power plant, irrigation, mining and industrial projects, 40 percent are tribals, 20 percent dalits and another 20 percent OBCs. Only one third of them have been resettled so far. Whereas the population resettled after displacement during 1951-1995 was 34 percent in Goa, 33 percent in Orissa, 28 percent in Andhra Pradesh, it was only 9 percent in West Bengal and 13 per cent in Kerala.

Untouchability Offenses Act, 1955, could not abolish the curse from most parts of the country. Over one million people are still engaged in manually removing human excreta. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 took four years for the Centre to notify it in the Gazette. In most of the States it is still hanging fire. Implementation record of the Protection of Civil Rights Act and the SC & ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act is awful. In the opinion of the Expert Group, "incidence of atrocities on SCs and STs is on the increase." Minimum Wages Act remains on paper only. National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, that could go a long way in providing job opportunities, is plagued with utter neglect and heinous corrupt practices.

NAXAL ACTIVITY

In a press conference held in February, Mahasweta Devi, the noted writer with a long working experience among the tribal people, delineated before the media persons that atrocities from various government agencies over the years compelled the poor people to lend support to the Maoist party. The DCEAA resonates—"Much of the unrest in society, especially that which has given rise to militant movements such as the Naxalite movement, is linked to lack of access to basic resources to sustain livelihood." Much quoted assertion of Romain Rolland might appear quite revealing in this context—"When order is injustice, disorder is the beginning of justice."

Naxal activity is now quite widespread, infesting around a quarter of India's rural districts. The Expert Group affirms that "the main support of the movement comes from the *dalits* and *adivasis*" who constitute 24 percent of the population.

To achieve the objective of establishing an egalitarian social order, use of arms~whether one likes it or not~is not a forbidden proposition in the Maoist political lexicon. It is precisely on this score that the ruling State power calls the shot in cleverly diverting public opinion against the radical left only to shield its abysmal record of non-performance. That is why a Maoist tag to any dissenting voice raised by individuals or civil society organizations including civil rights bodies is so desperately sought after.

Whether substantiated by any material evidence or not, branding a mass movement~or for that matter any dissenting stance~not playing in tune with the State machinery as Naxal hatched, has become quite handy in recent times.

So Dr Binayak Sen~a great champion of human rights, general secretary of the Chhattisgarh chapter of PUCL, an internationally recognized social activist and a staunch believer in nonviolence is being charged with Naxal links and made to remain in incarceration without trial for more than a year. Also one sees Govindan Kutty~editor of the journal "People's March" of Kerala, Prasanta Rahi~a senior journalist of Uttarakhand, Lachit Bardoloi~an adviser of the Manabdhikar Sangram Samity of Assam, Leitang-them Umakanta Meitei~the secretary general of the "Threatened Indigenous People's Society" of Manipur, along with thousands of others, getting arrested for raising voice of protest.

It is ludicrous to hear Prime Minister, a distinguished scholar, nonchalantly declaring Naxalites as the biggest internal security threat to India since independence. People see in many of the States, enactment of special security legislations together with security measures like *Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh and countless* violation of human rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

WEST BENGAL SCENARIO

Radical left political activity has not been formally banned in West Bengal. For propagating a progressive image, the left front government has enacted, instead, rules to accord first class status to all political prisoners. In practice, the law is violated almost without exception. The format of State repression is little different from the other States'. Agitations are most likely to face police or party cadre outrages. Even junior left front partners are not spared.

Legal hassles against Kaushik Ganguly, a teacher of the University of Calcutta who was arrested and brutally tortured in 2002 under allegation of Naxal links,

are still going on. A few thousand hapless people framed with fictitious charges have been passing through years of interminable agony. Promulgation of no special security rules has been needed for the purpose.

A front page news item published in *The Statesman* (2 June) reported ~quoting a senior IB official of West Bengal that "top CPI(Maoist) leaders have sought assistance from all human rights organizations in the State" for setting up "pressure groups" in the city. A well known human rights activist having close contacts with front ranking Maoist leaders is acting ~goes on the report~"as a linkman between CPI(Maoist) and human rights organizations." The ploy is, needless to say, the same~put rights bodies under fire.

Chhoton Das, the general secretary and ten others of the Bandi Mukti Committee~a human rights body~were arrested and severely beaten by the police on May 3 at the Ranaghat Court area during their programme demanding release of all political prisoners.

The latest in the row is an attempt of the police to intimidate~ after being informed from ruling party political quarters~five lady students of *Matangini Mahila Samity* in the Jadavpur area who were known to have questioned the recent land acquisition drive of the government at Singur and Nandigram. Being challenged by the rights activists that included some Jadavpur University teachers and students, who were manhandled by the party backed locals, the police had to back off. They failed in their mission to pick the ladies up and place them behind bars for an indefinite period as they did in an earlier case.

For allegedly putting up Maoist posters at the Bagha Jatin railway station on 23 March, the police arrested five ladies of the *Nari Mukti Sangha* who are still languishing in judicial custody.

Successful or not, attempts are endless. One may recall in this context what happened in Nandigram. State government's bid to push through the hypothesis of extremist insurgency in the troubled area was foiled by the CRPF, saying that there was nothing to suggest that Maoists were ever there. The National Human Rights Commission also refused to buy the theory of any Maoist attack. Yet another alleged scheme in Nandigram also came~to much discomfort of the organizers~a cropper when a group of young men masquerading as Maoists were subsequently identified as cadres of the dominant ruling political party.

RESPONSE

Perpetration of reckless State coercion~whether at the central or at the provincial level~without addressing the causative economic, social and political issues is indeed a misplaced target.

The Expert Group asks the authorities to recognize Naxalite movement as a political movement and not merely as a law and order issue and urges for a political settlement. They suggest withdrawal of *Salwa Judum*, projected so far~in propagandist hyperbole as an outcome of people's upsurge from Chhattisgarh. The Supreme Court also questioned legal validity of the *Salwa Judum* activities. They pointed out that it was illegal to arm civilians and allow them to kill.

The Group finds no reason why the government's Status Paper should seek to pronounce that "there will be no peace dialogue by the affected states with the

Naxal groups unless the latter agree to give up violence and arms", when they have been either conducting or are willing to conduct peace talks with the Naga rebels, ULFA and J&K insurgent outfits.

Report of the Expert Group does not appear to have impressed the mind-set of the ruling powers to any significant extent. They are in no mood to relent. While China has~ in the face of growing agitation from the dislodged people and reduced area of agricultural land~withdrawn quite a few of their SEZ based industrialization projects, India is going ahead with brouhaha and seems to have gained legitimacy of sorts.

"While suicides of landholders does attract public attention if not government response, the fate of the landless poor, mainly SCs and STs, who meet the same situation by offering their children in bondage or allow trafficking of their daughters into the flesh market, is less well known and less documented, though it is as tragic if not more" goes the observation of DCAEE. Fate of other under-privileged sections, irrespective of caste and religion, is not much different from that of SCs and STs. In an article "Predatory Development" Prof Amit Bhaduri, who was a member of the Expert Group, writes - "The ideology of progress through dispossession of the poor, preached relentlessly by the united power of the rich, the middle class and the corporations colonise directly the poor, and indirectly it has begun to colonise our minds... If this process of growth continues for long, it would produce its own demons. No society, not even our malfunctioning democratic system, can withstand beyond a point the increasing inequality that nurtures this high growth." □□□

TABLE-1

HDI rank	Country	HDI rank		Human poverty index (HPI-I)		GDP per capita rank		Population below income poverty line (%)		
		2000	2005	2000	2005	2000	2005	\$1 a day	\$2 a day	
38	Argentina	34	38			4.1	44	47	6.6	17.4
51	Cuba	55	51	4.1		4.7	90	94		
52	Mexico	54	52	9.4		6.8	55	59	3.0	11.6
63	Malaysia	59	63				52	57	<2	9.3
81	China	96	81	14.9		11.7	96	86	9.9	34.9
99	Sri Lanka	89	99	17.6		17.8	108	106	5.6	41.6
128	India	124	128	33.1		31.3	123	117	34.3	80.4
136	Pakistan	138	136	41.0		36.2	131	127	41.0	36.2
140	Bangladesh	145	140	42.4		40.5	130	140	41.3	84.0
151	Zimbabwe	128	151	36.1		40.3	116	142	56.1	83.0

[Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2002, 2007/2008]

TABLE-2

Country	Adult illiteracy (%)	Population lacking safe water (%)	Population lacking safe sanitation (%)	Infant mortality rate (per 1000)	Under 5 under-weight (%)	Maternal mortality rate (per lakh)
Argentina	2.8	4	9	15	4	77
Mexico	8.4	3	21	22	8	60
Malaysia	11.3	1	6	10	11	62
China	9.1	23	56	23	8	45
Sri Lanka	9.3	21	9	12	29	58
Maldives	3.7	17	41	33	30	120
India	39.0	14	67	56	47	450
Pakistan	50.1	9	41	79	38	320
Bangladesh	52.5	26	61	54	48	570
Zimbabwe	10.6	19	47	81	17	880

[Source : UNDP Human Development Report 2007/2008]

TABLE-3

	Literacy rate (%)			School drop out rate (I-VIII) (%)		
	SC	ST	Others	SC	ST	All
	2001			2003-2004		
Male	67	59	79	57.33	69.04	51.85
Female	42	35	58	62.19	71.43	52.92
Total	55	47	69	59.42	70.05	52.32