

Reality of inclusive growth

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- Published Date: Mar 17, 2012 12:18 AM
- Last Updated: May 16, 2012 6:37 PM

Our self-preservation and promotion must be sacrificed as we rise as a people and nation to engage in social processes.

Madam President, I was heartened to read the highlights of your address to Parliament. Besides economic growth, improving transparency and ensuring 'faster, sustainable and inclusive growth', you have focused on some essential public policy aspects such as food and economic security, skills training and empowerment of vulnerable groups etc.

Identifying lack of public expenditure on healthcare as a lacuna and building infrastructure and expertise around district hospitals is a good direction towards ensuring provision of equitable healthcare services, even as you mention the accomplishments of the National Rural Health Mission in decreasing infant and maternal mortality rates and making our country polio free.

The attention you have drawn to the needs of those engaged in manual scavenging and other disadvantaged groups, particularly the urban homeless, weavers and street vendors is commendable. The department constituted to deal with disability affairs is certainly a feather in your cap, especially since the poorest in our country are also those living with disabilities and require dedicated commitment.

Schemes such as the NREGA, the ICDS and the RSBY, amongst many others, were developed in the past to support the needs of the poor. The interlinkages between poverty alleviation and inclusive growth or development have been established ever so often. If we as a country are committed to the Millennium Development Goals, much of what you propose will indeed have to turn into reality.

All the Bills, Acts and the speech read very well — are truly wholesome and well intentioned. Progressive legislation and plans are required. But the conversion of these proposals into action is where we fail repeatedly. Being a grassroots worker in the homelessness and mental health spaces for the past 20 years, I work with the most marginalised. My work has taken me to remote villages and towns. Through the eyes of those whom I serve, I have been able to gain a somewhat macro view of the health and social sectors.

I believe that a significant part of our population is still poor. I believe that we do not promote an environment of equal opportunity and non-discrimination. Most of all, I believe that if we do not chase this ideal, we will fail as a nation to promote social justice and create for ourselves an era of inequity, poor governance and apathy. The same battered and homeless woman with mental illness, infested with maggots that I saw 20 years ago, I continue to see today. Many more wait in line for want of space, support, kindness and adequacy of services. Same is the case with rescue, care, access and empowerment. The works noticed are often not system- or process-driven, but are more leadership-dependent. Remember, the average worker who implements the scheme is also disillusioned and tired by the huge load of people seeking services and the limited human, social and financial resources and capital. Motivation or a missionary zeal that accompanies reformation or public work has truly hit an all time low.

All our policies in translation carry under and overtones of a charitable approach. While we try to promote inclusivity and equity, the clear hierarchy with which we approach these solutions is evident in the attitudes that prevail amongst many of the leaders and officers who execute these plans. Just a few days ago I was in a village where the mother of a boy with multiple disabilities was struggling to access a disability allowance, which according to

the Persons with Disabilities Act is an entitlement and cannot be denied. This is failure at multiple levels — lack of understanding of the Constitution and the rights that it bestows, inability of the system to tackle deprivation head on and ensure effective responses and a lack of proactive participation by society to reach out and assist.

Wealth and social class determine a lot in today's India. And this sadly is what makes a person eligible to contest an election, become a policy planner, a bureaucrat or for that matter even a social activist with a voice, like this author. Even amongst civil society organisations, advocacy is fragmented. Needs within groups vary and hence stronger lobbies find greater representation.

Any institutional mechanism makes one selfish and is directed at achieving its own agenda. We segment people into groups on the basis of ability/ disability, socio-economic status, demography, geography, caste, and religion and have a stratified approach to development.

Similarly politics is vote-bank driven and by its very nature will retain its primary goal of assuming power. Plans sound impressive, but are they delivered with a sense of honesty and integrity? The truth is there for all to see. Doctors are still absent in many primary health centres — people detected with chronic ailments like cancer or kidney disease in villages often reconcile to die in the absence of a better option. Children attending government schools end up with limited knowledge and will rarely ever be offered an opportunities to build their future. Sanitation and housing related issues plague the rural and urban poor. While we spend 10,000 crores on the renovation of an airport, many villages are still tucked away with minimal connectivity and abysmally poor infrastructure.

Distrust and disenchantment has seeped in, overwhelmed us and converted many an optimist into a sceptic. However, in all this bleakness, there is still hope — but it is now in society's hands, in the hands of individuals. It seems simplistic. But the greatest movements have always been the simplest ones. Collective responsibility of who we are and where we are has to be owned by us, the people. Our innate sense of self-preservation and promotion should be sacrificed as we rise as a people and nation to engage in the social processes of our country. Only in this is our redemption and future.

It is this spirit, Madam that needs to be inspired. We should aspire to instil a fair sense of balance and oneness in our society, with a sense of urgency. White papers alone will not do. My work, however small is testimony to a state of inertia, limited progress and social engagement and a growing divide. And this has to change for us to truly be proud and pat ourselves on the back. Not as yet!

(Views expressed in the column are the author's own)

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