

**FEATURES**

**SOME SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECTS OF JANASAVIYA**

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This paper tries to highlight some of the critical socio-political aspects of the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) of the Sri Lankan government known as 'Janasaviya'. In doing so, it identifies a number of Processes and Issues critical to the success of the programme, which, in the view of the authors, should be sensitively and qualitatively monitored through the period of implementation. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of any group, committee or organisation of which they may happen to be members.

The paper deals with Processes and Movement, and not with Events and Statistics. It largely ignores the Theories Concepts and Frameworks that are often imposed on the reality by Academic Elites. It avoids not only the Stifling Jargon but even the 'Indicators' of both Poverty and Development that continue to be fashionable in International Development Dialogue. It offers no Schemes or Packages in Support of Janasaviya. It tries to unfold processes, highlight issues and provide insights into the concept of Janasaviya. Put in a different way, the authors try to grasp the reality of poverty and the challenge of its possible Alleviation from the vantage point of Communities of the Rural and Urban Poor with whom the organisation to which the authors belong identifies its own work.

**The Socio-Political Processes Through Which Poverty Has Found Itself Defined**

The policy thrust of every government since Independence has been to place primary emphasis on uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the Poor. This soon became a cornerstone of our political culture. Policy Makers, Administrators, Politicians and Academics comprising various sub-sections of the 'Establishment' continuously developed Policies, Strategies, Programmes and Projects to 'uplift the socio-economic conditions of the Poor'. Those planning and implementing the numerous programmes addressed to the Poor, used different

Indicators to define and identify the Poor.

Some Programmes sought to identify the Poor with reference to Land Ownership; others identified the Poor in terms of Nutrition Levels; still others in terms of Family Income; some in terms of Levels of Employment; some identified the poor in terms of Access to Social Amenities; some with reference to Housing Standards etc, depending on the nature and emphasis of each specific programme. Likewise, the various other actors on the development scene such as Economists, Sociologists, Bankers, Accountants, Cultural Activists, Religious Thinkers, Social Activists etc also developed their own specific frameworks and definitions for identifying the Poor.

What is important to realise is that the rural and urban Poor, for their part, viewed and perceived all these often well-intentioned Actors on the development scene as constituting another Order. The Poor perceived them as a kind of 'Agency' which controlled numerous Resources which they were ready to 'hand-out' to the Poor through their various programmes and projects. The Developmental Actors continued to be seen by the Poor as a 'They' and not as a part of a 'We'. They were perceived as an 'Agency' or 'Establishment' that had access to (and often also enjoy the use of ) resources which were needed by the Poor. The political, cultural and economic processes that alienated the Developmental Actors from the Poor are outside the scope of the present paper.

Despite the efforts that continued to be made to develop Sri Lankan Political Society into a Participatory Democracy, the socio-cultural and political distance between the 'They' (Viz : the Developmental Actors including Planners, Government Functionaries, Politicians, Academics etc.) and the 'We' (the people) by and large continued to remain unbridged. While the 'They', operating within their often narrow compartments

continued to apply various Indicators to define and identify the Poor, the 'We' in our wisdom continued to apply 'Our' creative skills to get more and more of 'Ourselves' (Viz : the People) included under one or other definition of the poor so that increasingly greater numbers could benefit from programmes designed for 'improving the socio-economic conditions of the Poor'. To get included within categories defined by Developmental Actors as 'those qualifying to benefit from programmes designed for the Poor', people were not slow to manipulate local power structures for their benefit. The socio-political process through which Poverty came to be defined was further strengthened by the growth of Patronage Politics. Those development practitioners functioning in the political sub-sector of the Development Scene, – in other words 'Politicians', – competed with one another within the ethos of patronage politics to have more and more of their 'clients' (i.e. Supporters, Voters) included within the category of 'The Poor' so that they may share the benefits of programmes addressed to the poor.

In the circumstances in which they were placed, the People can be seen to have acted very sensibly in getting greater and greater numbers included within the category of 'The Poor'. To start with, the dominant Political Culture focused on the poor – so to get the attention of the State, it was imperative to place oneself within focus – i.e. to be seen as Poor. Then again, the People were dealing with what they perceived to be 'Development Agencies' which not only controlled resources but were also drawing up plans and programmes and inviting the People to 'Participate' in the development programmes formulated by them instead of moving close to the people, understanding the People, understanding the People's Development Plans and Processes and applying the resources that they control to support the mainstream processes of the people. In such a set of circumstances, the People responded sensibly by applying their creative genius to manipulate the 'Development Agencies' and draw more resources to themselves. Their strategy of manipulation, within the Poverty-focused Political Culture in which they were operating, resulted in greater numbers presenting themselves as falling below the Line separating the Poor from the Non-Poor. As a result, nearly 50 percent of all Sri Lankan families are seen to

have, family incomes of less than Rs.700/- per month according to the Food Stamps Scheme — a near preposterous position.

### What Constitutes Poverty

Within their own societies, rural communities and urban garden communities define and identify their Poor in terms of a few broad qualitative criteria. These criteria are casually inter-related one with the other :—

- \* Families whose basic needs are not adequately satisfied are considered to be Poor. This includes families without proper shelter; families which are not able to send their children to school; ill-clad families; those who cannot adequately feed themselves; families that cannot afford minimal medical attention for the sick etc.

- \* Families which do not have a regular/secure/assured Source of income are seen as being Poor. This includes families of labourers who cannot be sure of a regular number of days of work per week; families of small highland farmers whose income is critically related to rains which have proved to be uncertain; families of artisanal fishermen whose fishing days get severely constrained by weather conditions or of fishermen whose resources have been seriously depleted through over-exploitation; families of craftsmen and other small producers whose products are being competed out of the market by substitutes that are mass-produced in factories etc.

Families which are not well integrated into the development process — i.e. families on the fringes of the development process — are seen as being Poor.

Families which often as a result of their economic deprivation have lost courage, hope and initiative are seen to be Poor. This reflects a state of mind in which have families concerned, oppressed by an overwhelming sense of failure, resign themselves to a hopeless future one in which there seems no chance of overcoming their Poverty; A state of mind which nullifies any interest in the political process the develop-

ment process or in the processes of change, because their experience of Poverty is so deep and intense that they entertain no hope of improving their situation through participation in either the political process or in a process of development and change. Poverty has sapped the strength and crushed the hope and initiative of these families; hopelessness, resignation, acceptance of the statusquo, lack of faith in the possibility of improvement through effort — these are thus often seen as external signs of Poverty.

- \* Families which need some external support — a helping hand — to get more integrally linked to the development process and thereby uplift their socio-economic conditions are seen as being Poor.

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### Assessment of Past Approaches to Poverty Alleviation and the Emergence of the Janasaviya Concept

The Janasaviya Concept constitutes an innovative approach to Poverty Alleviation that is qualitatively different to all Poverty Alleviation Approaches that have been followed in the past. At the same time, it presents itself within the parameters of the dominant political Culture of the post-independence period. A culture that re-affirms to itself from time to time the existence of poverty as a serious problem and recognises the Alleviation of poverty as being the prime responsibility of Political Society. To this extent, Janasaviya is a mainstream political programme that has evolved within the mainstream political culture of the post independence period. Whether the extent of poverty that the political culture likes to think exists, actually does exist or not, is another matter. More over, the State of Poverty is a Relative one and not an Absolute State; One is seen as being Poor in relation to someone else. But while being almost aggressively anchored in mainstream political culture —(and that is why no political party can dare oppose the 'Concept of Janasaviya'

without risking alienation from mainstream politics) —, the concept, strategy and Approach of Janasaviya reflect a series of radical departures from the Strategies and Approaches of the past.

- \* Past approaches have viewed the Poor as Objects of Development for whom programmes were planned and implemented by others.

In all past approaches, the Authors or Subjects of Development were Politicians, Planners, Government Functionaries / Administrators and Expatriate so-called Experts; Programmes were planned and implemented at levels removed from the Poor. A socio-cultural distance separated those who planned and implemented programmes for alleviating poverty from those whom the programmes were meant to benefit. Government functionaries or administrators who constituted what is defined in jargon as the 'delivery mechanism of development for the poor', often reached the poor at community level through a better off (non-Poor) villager or urban garden dweller with whom the functionary would socially and culturally feel more comfortable. Such persons could be teachers, government functionaries, traders land owners and educated persons belonging to the community. These are also usually the people who hold office in Community Organisations, thus giving legitimacy to their role as intermediaries between the 'Government Delivery Mechanism' and the Poor.

The socio-cultural distances separating these different actors on the traditional poverty alleviation scene are reflected in the stereotype images each has been known to have of the other. Most government functionaries / administrators and the non-poor through whom they reach the Poor, and also many politicians see the Poor as lazy (alasa), lacking initiative (udaseena), lacking confidence, negatively pulling back (pasugami), needing to be taken by the hand and helped along indefinitely, irrational in the use of money, prone to alcohol and to other items of 'wasteful' expenditure, unreliable in financial transactions, generally dishonest and unreliable etc. The Poor see the non-poor as people with whom linkages of dependence can be forged: The Poor do not generally perceive the non-poor as 'Exploiters' or 'Class Antagonists' except in some exceptional instances. The Poor perceive government functionaries/administra-

tors and politicians as persons functioning in a kind of 'Development Agency' that has distanced itself socially and culturally from the Poor: An 'Agency' that is powerful in that it controls resources needed by the Poor: An 'Agency' that the Poor have to manipulate in order to draw some of their resources for themselves. The social, structural, cultural and attitudinal distances separating the administrative system, the political system and the non-poor sections of the community from the Poor are such that programmes for alleviating poverty have been 'delivered' from above in the absence of a willingness to trust the Poor to make a success of them on their own. Built into these programmes, therefore, are structural ties of dependence linking the Poor to the administrative and political apparatus which continues to thwart the initiative and innovativeness of the Poor, even after linking them into the process of development. The Janasaviya Concept provides a dramatic break with the past. Janasaviya is paradoxically also a top-down programme: But a top-down programme that immediately stands the old-type top-down approach on its head. Janasaviya evolves on the premise that the persons most concerned with Poverty Alleviation — Viz : The Poor themselves — should be the Subjects and not the Objects of a Poverty Alleviation Programme : And those who are seen to constitute a somewhat alienated 'Development Agency for the Poor' should re-structure themselves into a kind of 'Support Organisation at the Service of the Poor'.

- \* The Success of Janasaviya requires a fundamental re-structuring of the relationship between the People and the Development Organs of the state : This calls for alterations in power relations and changes in control over developmental resources : It calls for major attitudinal changes on the part of planners, government functionaries, politicians, academics, the non-Poor and the Poor.
- \* The Success of Janasaviya requires capacity-building among the Poor to undertake the responsibility for Poverty Alleviation as the Authors or Subjects of the process itself rather as the objects of someone else's programme: This in turn requires State Intervention to remove the existing constraints to a People-based Process of Poverty Allevia-

tion: It also calls for the provision of appropriate Support Services to the Poor for strengthening a People-based Process of Poverty Alleviation.

### Strengthening the Mainstream Process of Development among the Poor: Another Way of Looking at Janasaviya

In any community of the rural or urban poor, individual families have risen to overcome poverty through their own efforts and improve their conditions of life. There is in any rural or urban garden community a certain - albeit small - degree of social mobility out of the ranks of the Poor without the direct intervention of the State. This constitutes the Mainstream Process of Development among the Poor. The mainstream no doubt, is small. It includes families which have come out of poverty by educating a child who then obtains a secure job and brings to the family a new standing in society: It includes families of persons who have developed small enterprises through the application of their own skills to a small material resource: It includes families of persons who, having temporarily migrated to another part of the country or abroad have invested their hard-earned savings in income-generating activities: It includes families of persons who have developed a profitable business on a small initial investment, etc. Mainstream success in overcoming poverty is seen to be usually associated with a combination of two or more of the following factors:—

- \* A desire to improve oneself (as opposed to an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and failure).
- \* Some types of skill (which is usually available in most poor families)
- \* Access to small material resource for starting-up an activity
- \* A feeling of freedom to take decisions unconstrained by linkages of dependence.
- \* Ability to identify Opportunities either by oneself or else by accessing information.
- \* Accessing appropriate low cost technologies which are often available with the people themselves.

- \* A feeling of confidence in one's own abilities (which is usually associated with a feeling of freedom from dependency linkages that bind one to others for one's sustenance).

Janasaviya can be seen as a programme for strengthening the Mainstream Process of Development among the Poor. Viewed from this angle, Janasaviya projects a two-pronged strategy:

- \* Strengthening the factors associated with Mainstream Success through clearing the Access Channels and providing Support Services.
- \* Weakening and even uprooting those politico-social, cultural and attitudinal factors which are seen to conscribe the mainstream process.

The mainstream development process of the Poor is presently a small one. The aim of Janasaviya is to stimulate it to become broad enough to provide large numbers of presently poor families with sustainable income and a livelihood. The degree of success in achieving this objective will depend — among other factors — on the resolution through praxis of the following inter-related conditions intrinsic to the Janasaviya Programme itself:

- \* Selection of Janasaviya Beneficiaries:

The guidelines are clear. The thinking is unambiguous. Each hamlet of around 100 houses meets and selects 4 members for its Support Group (Sahaya Kandayama) to which the AGA adds one government functionary to make the group 5. Together with its own Support Group (4 members of which are selected by the hamlet itself), the hamlet families select the beneficiaries at a public meeting. No hard and fast Indicators of Poverty are imposed on the hamlet by the guidelines. In fact, the hamlet is free to apply its own qualitative criteria to identify its poor. The power to define, identify and select the Poor has to all intents and practical purposes been completely devolved on the people living in hamlets and rural garden clusters. The strategy is to trust the people and devolve responsibility on them. With what degree of

responsibility will the hamlet identify its poor? It depends on the way the hamlet perceives the Janasaviya Programme. If it is perceived as a traditional-type Government Programme — i.e. where decisions are taken by government functionaries and politicians outside the community and benefits are 'delivered' to the people from outside, it is likely that the people's response will be the same as that given to any traditional top-down programme. In such an environment, the hamlet can be expected to include as many names as possible in their list of beneficiaries. People's perception, in turn, will be conditioned by the response of government functionaries and politicians to the decision making powers that have been devolved on the hamlet community. For instance if an M.P. or a Provincial Council Member or the Grama Sevaka or AGA or even the Government Functionary serving as a member of the Hamlet Support Group ties to intervene either in the appointment of the Support Group or in preparing the list of beneficiaries, people will perceive Janasaviya as yet another government programme and respond to it as they would to any other top-down programme. For a hamlet community to be activated to act with responsibility in identifying their Poor, there should be no outside-political or administrative — interventions at hamlet level. The extent to which this will be possible is another matter. In practice, it is likely to vary from area to area depending on the calibre of local political and administrative functionaries on the one side and the level of empowerment of the people on the other.

\* **Structural Integrity of the Support Group:**

The Support Group of Five has a critical role to play in the Janasaviya Programme at community level. Their task is to stimulate and activate the beneficiaries and access support for them to become economically self-reliant in two years. Their structural role is that of Hamlet level. Resource Person cum Link between Janasaviya Beneficiaries and External Agencies supportive of Janasaviya. As it is very likely that the Janasaviya Programme — in

Praxis — despite all its planning and training will generate a certain level of structural tension between the socio-cultural-political interests of external agencies and those of local communities in the process of possible empowerment, it is imperative

that the structural integrity of the Support Group does not get compromised by tilting their allegiance onto the side of the external agencies with whom they would establish contact through their role in Janasaviya and from whom they have much to gain in terms of power and influence for themselves. If the Janasaviya Process is not carefully managed — as is possible in a context in which a massive scale of activity is launched within a very short period of time — Support Groups at least in some areas can evolve into new groups of hamlet level oppressors who draw their authority from their external contacts.

\* **Awakening the Poor into the Future:**

A common characteristic of the Poor is their overriding sense of failure and hopelessness. Poverty is also a state of mind: A mental state that accompanies long period of deprivation: A frame of mind that is not conducive to initiative and innovation: A deep sense of resignation born out of the experience of hopelessness for the future. A major thrust of Janasaviya is to offer a different experience to the Poor, and by doing so change their mental state into one that generates hope, initiative and innovation. The new experience presents itself in the form of Consumption Support to the value of Rs.1,500/- per month regularly for 2 years with which to satisfy basic needs, and Investment Support of Rs.25,000/-. It is expected that this very material offer of hope will 'awaken' the Poor, galvanise their latent skills, initiative and innovativeness into economic activity of a level that will also provide them with a regular and secure income. The level of success in 'awakening' the Poor and activating them into a process of self-reliant economic activity will be conditioned by other processes that will have to work themselves out through praxis. Providing finan-

cial resources — by itself — cannot activate the poor into the mainstream of socio-economic development.

The attitudinal structures of the administrative and political systems which feel impelled to make decisions for the Poor, impose programmes on them and make the Poor dependent of them, have been a major obstacle to the human development of the Poor. As shown earlier, the existing attitudinal stances of most administrators, politicians and the non-poor towards the Poor are antithetical to the very Concept of Janasaviya. Existing attitudinal structures are the result of decades of training and practice. Unlearning and Re-learning, though an integral part of the Janasaviya strategy, are usually slow processes that take years to accomplish. But Janasaviya cannot wait: it has to accomplish itself within two years.

— The Unlearning and Re-learning Process (i.e. Attitudinal Change) cannot be accomplished on such a massive scale through Training Programmes alone. A change of attitudes and values of the scale expected in the Janasaviya Programme can only be achieved through a determined National Effort, spearheaded by the political will and Determination of the President and galvanised into action with the political clout of his entire government. And for such a national effort to succeed in a big way, the socio-political environment should be so conducive as to enable the nation to focus on Janasaviya. The level of Success will increase if the socio-political environment of the country improves.

— The Janasaviya Approach recognises the need to uplift the Poor morally and psychologically if they are to be activated into participating in the mainstream of socio-economic development. But it seems ironical that some of the key words of the Janasaviya vocabulary are themselves somewhat dehumanising rather than uplifting. For example, to be called 'Poor' (duppath) and especially to be called 'Extremely Poor' (dugee duppath) or to be described as one who 'has nothing and can do nothing' (nethi-beri) is not by any means Uplifting — morally and

psychologically — but demeaning and almost oppressive. It could be helpful to re-examine the basic Janasaviya vocabulary and develop new words to reflect the new attitudes to an old reality.

Hand-outs have in the past always reinforced the mental state of poverty among the Poor. When hand-outs are received, the nethi-beri (have nothing and can do nothing) mentality gets further reinforced. Food Stamps have had this effect on many families. The impact of hand-outs on the recipient runs counter to the very objective of Janasaviya. It is in this context that one has to reflect on how the Consumption Support with a value of Rs.1,500/- per month will be perceived by the Poor. Will it be perceived as another hand-out? Will it reinforce the 'nethi-beri' feeling and serve to negate the process of Awakening the Poor to the Future? The Consumption Support Component has to be very intelligently comprehended and very skillfully presented at all levels if its psychological impact is not to contradict the primary objective of the Janasaviya Programme.

#### Capacity-building and Empowerment:

\* The ability of the Poor to integrate themselves into the mainstream of economic development and thereby broaden the mainstream process is a function of their Capacity to do so, which in turn is a function of their level of Empowerment. Capacity and Empowerment are related concepts. The main aim of Janasaviya is to build-up within two years the capacity of the Poor to join the mainstream of economic development by developing their own income-generating enterprises and activities. Families of the Poor have resources of Labour and Skills: Janasaviya provides them with Consumption Support to satisfy basic needs, with a Start-up investment capital of Rs.25,000/- and — hopefully — a socio-cultural environment that weakens the processes that bind them on the one hand to their poverty and on the other hand to structures of dependence. Within a two year period the Janasaviya Concept aims at empowering the Poor by:

- Weakening their links of dependence on oppressive structure.
- Motivating them to work towards a better future.
- Accessing — through chains of Support Groups at hamlet, divisional, district and national levels — the necessary financial, technical, managerial, informational and marketing support for productive economic activities.
- Providing a start-up investment capital of Rs.25,000/-.
- Operating in scale so that large numbers of poor families may share each other's hopes, problems and experiences and provide strength to one another in a shared process.

Will the external Support Institutions which have normally thought it unproductive and undesirable to deal with the Poor, respond with Support when accessed? Will their attitudinal changes be such that they are more amenable to supporting the Poor? Will the practitioners of patronage politics intervene to direct support only to politically selected families? Since accessing support for the Poor will be time-consuming and tiresome, will the members of the hamlet-based Support Groups be able to spend much time on these Voluntary Services while attending to their own economic and domestic activities at the same time? Are there divisional, regional or provincial institutions that can be accessed by the Janasaviya beneficiaries for information and support on commercially viable micro enterprises — both agro-based and non-agricultural? If various facets of an emerging community level investment pattern of Janasaviya beneficiaries were to be rendered non-viable by the open economy policies of the government, how will such a contradiction be resolved? At the end of the two year period, what proportion of Janasaviya beneficiaries will feel confident of their capacity and power to take their future into their own hands? What will happen to those Janasaviya beneficiaries who, at the end of the two year period, fail to successfully integrate themselves into the mainstream of economic development? These are the challenges of Janasaviya: The challenges of what is presented in conceptual terms as a mass movement of popular empowerment.

#### Some Possible Political Implications of The Janasaviya Concept

\* In most developing countries, the State is distanced from the People. The socio-political and cultural distance separating the State from the People is sometimes so great that there is a serious lack of the dialogue and understanding between the State and the People. In such circumstances, radical political movements move into empower the people: To make the people aware of their potential and capacity to make them aware of their own power: To make them conscious of the failure of the State to alleviate their living conditions and provide them with, at least, their basic needs. While radical political movements of the Poor are known to undertake popular empowerment on a mass scale, radically-oriented NGOs also empower small communities of the Poor almost always on a very small scale and in a few isolated pockets. Empowerment of the People results in the sharpening of the contradiction between the State and the People, leading in most instances to confrontation and conflict. Although in Sri Lanka the distancing of the People from the State is not as large as in most developing countries of the world, a sizeable socio-political and cultural distance does separate the State especially from the poor. Before this contradiction can mature into confrontation and conflict, and before any radical political movement of the Poor could empower the Poor and mobilise them for a confrontation with the State, Janasaviya moves into resolve the contradiction before it can mature into conflict. The Janasaviya Concept has within it the potential for attempting to resolve this contradiction in advance. On the one hand it seeks to mobilise and empower the Poor before any radical political movement were to attempt to do so. On the other hand it seeks to transform the administrative organs of the State from being institutions that impose their decisions — top down — on the People, into becoming Support Organisations that give a helping hand to the initiatives, decisions and mainstream processes of the Poor.

\* Political Society in Sri Lanka is