

outlays on food subsidies, at 6.2 per cent, means a cut in real terms.

There is also a rather clumsy dodge on the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. To begin with, it was given Rs.11,300 crore when it needed much more. And that was for 200 districts. Now it is to be "expanded" to 330 districts. But the outlay goes up by just Rs.700 crore. So the number of districts covered goes up 40 per cent. The money goes up six per cent.

The 'huge' hike in outlays for health still does not bring us to even the modest 2-3 per cent of GDP level promised in 2004. View education outlays as share of GDP and you see how far behind we still are. In the end, though, it's not just about sector to sector funding. It's the whole direction. And in that very little has changed. India is still on a path damaging and dangerous to the poor.

Big media, though, now view the Finance Minister with a 'how-could-you' air of injured innocence. He actually had to face some questions on television. He was questioned. But from a point of view which, at most other times, he would have been happy with. That is, the liberalisation and 'reforms process' from a corporate outlook. (India Shining has been back for a while, jostling for space with India Rising and India Poised. But that's another story.)

Mr. Chidambaram accused one interviewer of being obsessed "with the corporate sector." That was code for 'wait till after the State elections.' ("Our programme continues after a small non-commercial break.") He even tried to explain that a "thrust" on agriculture in fact favoured Indian industry. And he had a real point there. But I doubt it went home. The debate amongst the elite is still in terms of a 'let down.' A 'setback in the pace of reforms.' For the media, this is India with a shining black eye. _____

And so we have a budget that gives 'top priority' to agriculture. And eight more farmers have taken their own lives in Vidharbha. This is now a region where farmers killing themselves are directly addressing the Prime Minister or Chief Minister in their suicide notes. After the Prime Minister's Independence Day Speech in 2006, you might have expected something different. That was a rare occasion. Dr. Singh spoke clearly of the state of our farmers. Even more rare for an 1-Day speech, he singled out Vidharbha for special mention. And he clearly acknowledged a major crisis was on in agrarian India. Not a trace of that sentiment can be found in the philosophy or the numbers of this budget.

Nor is there even a sense that much has been learned from the polls in Punjab and Uttarakhand. There is even some bravado about how the Congress has fared better in rural Punjab. The price rise, among other things, was and is a major issue. But the government's response to it is at most levels tokenism. Not a lesson has been learned by this government. Like others before it, it imagines it will make a few 'course corrections' just before the polls. It has forgotten the reasons for its win in 2004. Nor does it want to see just how awful the crisis in the countryside is.

We are now at that mid-way mark where, historically, the Congress revives the Bharatiya Janata Party. A party gasping for breath after 2004 regains its oxygen. The Congress is hard at work on this in Maharashtra, too. The government's terrible power cuts have a clear regional, urban, and class bias. Talleyrand is said to have remarked of the Bourbon monarchs of France after their restoration that they had learned nothing and forgotten everything. We don't know that he really said that of them. But it fits the UPA. This budget reads like a Bourbon Manifesto.