

15/11
Hindia

Agenda for social justice

Long considered an inconsequential way station for ascendant politicians or a punishment posting for inconvenient ones, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment finally has a minister with the nous to realise its emancipatory potential. In broad terms, Kumari Selja's endeavour ought to be one that seeks to promote an entitlements-based model of human development as the lasting answer to historically-rooted disadvantages and discrimination. The appeal of such an ethically sound and economically pragmatic approach is becoming increasingly evident against the recent backdrop of extreme disparities of high incomes and severe deprivations. The MSJE's target areas include the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, persons with disabilities and the elderly. The new minister's immediate priority should be to strive towards enactment of the draft bill on persons with disabilities – estimated at about 10 per cent of India's population – before the expiry of the current term of the Lok Sabha. A new law is critical to realise the legal guarantees and protections envisaged under the relevant United Nations Convention – one that New Delhi was among the earliest to ratify way back in 2007.

While the mutually reinforcing characteristics of poverty and disability are widely recognised, the burdens attendant to the process of ageing are inadequately appreciated. India's elderly – those 60 years and above – who constitute 7.5 per cent of the total population according to credible estimates, are projected to touch 13 per cent by 2025. India is already committed to orienting its policies to promote healthy ageing and to address the special needs of disabled elderly persons when it adopted the Yogyakarta Declaration of the WHO South-East Asian Region in September 2012. Investing in the well-being of the disabled can also bring benefits for the elderly, as both face similar problems in certain situations. The Ministry also needs to examine the soundness of a 2007 law – in terms of principle, as well as practical enforceability – that fixes criminal responsibility for the neglect of elderly parents on their offspring while absolving the state of any role or responsibility. Continuing economic deprivation and even official complicity in the atrocities perpetrated against the Scheduled Castes and backward communities is a reality more than six decades after political independence. This bleak scenario is a commentary on the absence of both effective and impartial law enforcement and of genuine commitment to promote equality of opportunity. Ms Selja has her task cut out. With commitment and imagination, she could impart real meaning and substance to the name of her ministry.