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POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN INDIA TODAY

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

A philosophical world-view of the past and the present human development processes indicates that the story of the progress of mankind is replete with multifarious illustrations of dichotomies and contradictions in terms of proclaimed values on the one hand and failed impotent institutional infra-structures on the other to realise the goals envisaged vis-a-vis the values. The value profiles of UN Declaration of Human Rights, the French Revolution and Indian Constitution are three glaring examples. The indomitable urge in every thinking human being is to possess freedom and achieve progress. But when these values are put together collectively as a vision for realization, mankind's experience all over the world has been a painful and disappointing one, because the reality is appalling and full of frightening situations. A quote from the words of Nehru in this context is more appropriate: "The spirit of the age is in favour of equality, though practice denies it almost everywhere" . . .¹

1. A Worldview of A New World Order

The first and fundamental principle of a preferred New World Order and Real Human Development is that every individual on earth 'enjoys autonomy for his self-realization and creativity'. This is also known as freedom, and the primary condition of freedom is survival, which includes protection against violence, both external and internal, decimating uniformity and destruction of property and environment. The second principle is the value of equality of all human beings. It also means preservation and enhancement of the dignity of all,

1. Bêteille Andre, *Inequality Among Men*, 1977.

especially ordinary men and women, and liberation from economic deprivation and misery. It includes the value of justice and human solidarity as a common goal. And the third is the ability of the individual to actively participate in making decisions that effect his life. It means democracy at different levels of collective and community action. The absence of all these values means disparity at different levels leading to poverty of the people, especially the marginalised.²

“Development means the development of people. A new road extends a man’s freedom only if he travels upon it . . . Development is about people making choices based on values about quality of life in the world”.³ Therefore, poverty is a lack of choice. When you don’t have choices, you are poor. And when the poor people have no land, no education, no health and no housing, they don’t have choice.⁴

The UN Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 25 to 30) declares everyone’s:

- i. right to an adequate standard of living;
- ii. right to security;
- iii. right to education;
- iv. right to democracy; and

v. right to a social and international order for realization of these rights for the benefit of all . . . It is indeed difficult to believe that the values behind these cherished concepts/goals and declarations are meant for sincere realization, because almost all the rich countries, which have signed such declarations, have the historical responsibility “for the fact that the majority of mankind today lives without any of these rights”.⁵

2. Global Human Situation Today

On the basis of the aforesaid world view, if we look at the overall global human situation today, we discover a meaningless

2. Rajni Kothari, *Footsteps Into the Future*, 1974; and John Desrochers csc, *The India We Want To Build*, 1994.

3. Julius Nyerere, *Freedom and Development*, 1973.

4. Xavier Gorostiaga, *The Function of Governments: A Third World View*, 1985.

5. Erik Dammann, *The Future In Our Hands*, 1988.

injustice: Europe and North America - a mere third of humanity - have gathered to themselves almost complete power and influence over the family of mankind. They possess this power because they have gathered the overwhelming majority of industries, schools and weapons and thus gathered the power and knowledge to direct the apportionment of the world's raw materials to their own advantage. The rest of the world - Africa, South America and most of Asia - starves, but must yet place their resources of food and labour at the disposal of the rich countries.

Today, as in the past, a vast majority of mankind is faced with four major problems: war (particularly civil war), poverty, (esp. poverty of women and children), social inequalities and environmental decay. While these problems continue to haunt almost all the poor nations, the rich nations are haunted by over-production and experiences of excess consumption. Deprivation, hunger and starvation on the one side, because too *little* is available; and abundance and excess on the other side, because too *much* is available. There is no logic in such a situation. Why, then, such anomalies?

The crux of the problem is in the hypocrisy of the rich countries and powerful elite groups within the poor nations which are incapable of taking an objective view of the global situation but at the same time are capable of and interested in pursuing 'cow-boy economics' and short-term interests for self-aggrandizing benefits which in turn cause, no doubt, economic growth, but without a human face, aggravate the levels of consumerism to a deadening end, that too by more and more production of luxuries to be consumed and enjoyed only by a privileged few, and marginalise the poor and the poorest of the poor and leave them in an alienated atmosphere to fend for themselves. Here lie the roots of economic disparity, inequality, social injustice, poverty and environmental degradation.

In relation to ideologies and theories, Adam Smith's (1776) doctrine of laissezfaire economics and capitalistic pursuits, John Locke's Social Contract Theory, Hume's doctrine of utilitarianism and the Calvinistic understanding of work ethics and poverty, upholding the salvation of the economically elect through the survival of the fittest, are the major influencing ideologies behind the perpetuation of gaps between the rich and the poor. The Marxian concept of

poverty as a product of economic and social forces rather than as a result of individual failure, and André Gunder Frank's theory of 'Development of underdevelopment' vis-a-vis a chain of exploitative relations between the rich and the poor countries through a series of metropolis-satellite links, further enlighten us about the painful agonies behind the widening gaps between the rich and the poor nations. In fact, it seems more and more true that the IMF and the World Bank, by virtue of their links with the Third World countries, have come to stay as remnants of the colonial legacy, and the multinational companies (MNCs), in alliance or connivance with the IMF and the World Bank, have come to stay as perpetrators of the metropolis-satellite links. The debt-burdens of the poor countries and the impact of GATT upon local industries and the people of the poor countries are typical examples of such exploitative relations.

Hence, this paper is an effort to elucidate why people all over the world and in India in particular continue to stay poor. To quote Victor Hugo

So long as laws, which create hells in the midst of civilization, shall exist, so long as men are degraded, women ruined and children afraid, so long as there shall be ignorance, poverty and wretchedness on this earth, stories such as this one must be told.⁶

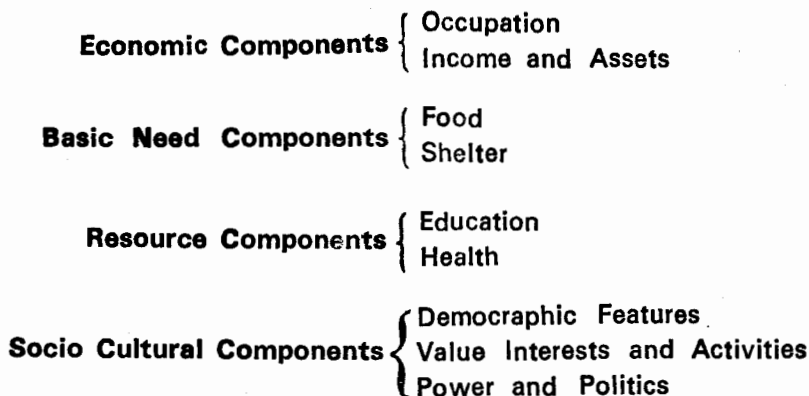
3. Different Components of the Vector of Poverty and Inequality

All over the world, different approaches have been used with regard to the identification of the poor and the diagnosis of poverty and inequality. Inequality and poverty, being a complex phenomena, cannot be understood by a single measure or single approach. The following diagram indicates that a set of measures is necessary to analyse these phenomena. It also indicates the usage of quantitative and qualitative techniques, as well as inductive techniques. The components constituting the vector of inequality and poverty include certain features of social structure, such as rural-urban background and, in terms of satisfaction and deprivation, consumption patterns and cultural gaps, caste, income, occupation, demography, health, education, power and politics. Each of these components contributes to the life-styles of the people-either happiness or misery. Each

6. Victor Hugo (1802-1885); *Les Miserables* (1862)

affects the other and thereby perpetuates the system of poverty and inequality as depicted in the diagram:⁷

VECTOR OF POVERTY



II. AN ANALYSIS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN INDIA TODAY

1. Dichotomy in India's Development

Broadly speaking, a nation's poverty is expressed in terms of poor resources, low national income, low per capita income, high disparity in income distribution, weak defence, and so on. In India, it is the poor and inefficient utilization of resources, rampant corruption and large mismanagement of resources at political and bureaucratic levels, low national income, low per capita income, high disparity and glaring inequality in income distribution, and above all, lack of collective national will to place the poor as subjects and agents of their own development in order to eliminate the curse of poverty which point to the ubiquitous presence of poverty and underdevelopment.

In fact, India represents a dichotomy in development. Despite a dramatic and significant transformation in the growth of the Indian

7. Srivastava, R.S.L., *Engineering Mathematics*, 1980; and S.P. Gupta, *Structural Dimensions of Poverty*, 1987.

economy, reflected in varied industrial infrastructure, augmentation of internal resources for development work, food grain production and banking facilities, especially for agricultural and industrial schemes, the number of people below the poverty line has been on the increase. *The paradox is 'one of strange symbiosis'. Economic growth has been achieved by sustaining poverty and material deprivation for a massive majority of the people who live in sub-human dehumanizing conditions without a future.* The top-heavy model of development or the theory of 1960's that economic growth would automatically trickle down to the poor, has been proved ineffective, and the growth pattern reveals that the rich have become richer by keeping the poor poorer for their own survival and enrichment. How else do we explain the fiasco of four decades of planning which has had the upliftment of the poor and eradication of poverty as its priority ever since 1951?⁸

2. Measurements and Manifestations of Poverty and Inequality

1. Out of the total population of about 915 million people in India, about 460 million are considered to be poor people. Out of these 460 million, about 60 to 70 million are considered 'absolute destitutes'. They are the old, the sick and the disabled people who cannot be employed, but who are in need of some social security. It means that the rest of the 460 million people, living at various levels of poverty, need to have employment opportunities for earning income to meet the minimum requirements for survival.

2. In the rural areas, the poor are 'the landless labourers, casual labourers, marginal farmers, displaced village artisans; and in the urban areas, these poor are the non-unionized industrial workers, vegetable, fruit and flower vendors, servants in tea-shops, small workshops, domestic servants and daily wage earners'.

3. Malnutrition (below 2100 to 2400 calories per day), low income and consumption expenditure (below Rs. 150/- per person per month at 1990-91 price level), chronic illness or poor health, illiteracy, unemployment, and insanitary housing conditions are some

8. F. Franco, *The Structural Nature of Poverty in India: Challenges and Responses*, ed. by J. Muricken, 1988.

of the major characteristics of being poor in India; the poorest of the poor are the worst affected lot in terms of these characteristics.

4. Due to constant increase in population, the per capita income has not gone up. Disparity in the rural and urban per capita income within the country is also glaring.⁹

5. The consumption pattern is another glaring manifestation of poverty and inequality. The top 5% consume 14.2 percent of the total annual expenditure; the next 5%, 9.7 percent the next 30%, 38.6 percent; the next 30% 23.6 percent and the poorest 30%, 13.7 percent.

6. A little more than 70% of the Indian population need to be provided access to sanitation facilities; more than 55% to drinking water supply (about 70% of our inland water is polluted), and nearly 55-60% of our people need to be made literate. The sluggish growth of literacy lies in our failures in the fields of primary and adult education and our failure to implement the constitutional directive of providing free and compulsory education to all children up the age of 14.

3. The Other Side of Poverty and Inequality and Its Consequences

Illiteracy, overpopulation, unemployment, underemployment, poverty and starvation are concomitant realities. They cumulatively aggravate the problems of the poor even to the extent that the poor are not only caught in a vicious circle, but also develop for themselves an enduring sub-culture of poverty which is passed on to future generations. *The increase in India's population is mind-boggling. 'Every 6th person on the globe is an Indian'*. With no political party or government seriously committed to contain population-explosion, we are sure to have appalling over-crowding of our cities, mushrooming of unauthorized housing layouts, pavement huts, proliferation of slums and a virtual break-down of transport, electricity, law and order and other services.

9. Ram Ahuja, *Social Problems in India*, 1992.

In fact, starvation deaths continue to take place in different parts of India. If one looks at the region of Kalahandi in Orissa, one tends to ask whether Somalia is the other name for the region. For, such is the fate of the starving people who, 'waiting for help or death whichever arrives earlier, are victims of human neglect or of the deeply entrenched corruption that shows no signs of abating'.¹⁰

*The disaster of India today is that 'five out of every ten Indians, three out of five women, and eight of ten STs and SCs' continue to remain illiterate. Of the total illiterate population, over 100 million are in the age-group of 15-35, considered to be the most productive age group and crucial to the task of national reconstruction.*¹¹

The lot of the SCs and STs and the lot of poor women of India are all the more agonizing and painful. Almost everyday there are press reports on the atrocities committed against the SCs, social discriminations heaped upon them, displacements of tribal people from forests without proper alternatives and encroachments by outsiders. By virtue of her illiteracy, poverty and subjugation under patriarchal domination and gender discrimination, the poor Indian woman, who silently suffers and copes with the tyranny of male domination, is expected to be fertile atleast until she bears a son and is cajoled and led into 'government-sponsored sterilization camps' like a mute lamb. She seldom exercises her rights. Her labour input in terms of household activities, such as cooking, rearing children and collecting firewood and water is never counted as a contribution to the national GNP.

The state and fate of working children and homeless street-children – about 55 million if put together – is another side of the story of poverty in India. With no parental care or concern, no schooling experiences and no opportunities for exploring the possibilities of childhood hopes and youthful aspirations, they roam and wander aimlessly, having bus-terminals, railway stations and road-side pavements as their shelter or resting resorts after some day-long hard-work experiences at different places and at the cruelty and mercy of the employers.

Another alarming side is the size of foreign debt which India owes. The external debt alone comes to about US\$ 91 billion

10. Gargi Parsai, "The Truth Behind Starvation Deaths". in *The Hindu*, 16.5.1993.

11. *Frontline*, April 13-26, 1991.

(more than 45,000 crore). The servicing of the debt robs about 30% of our annual earnings. India is the fourth largest debtor among the 96 Third World countries. It is almost a debt-trap making India gasp for breath.

The Government of India, on the one hand, claims that the percentage of people below the poverty line is coming down, and on the other hand, it is particular to wear 'the badge of poverty' so as to plead with a 'perpetual begging bowl' for concessional aid, that too more and more every year, from the international community.

The dichotomy is all the more ironic and paradoxical when we are aware that we are the world's largest democracy, but yet we have many crooks and criminals in fact, too many to be counted – as our national, regional and local 'netas', and we spend crores of rupees every year on our 'politician-maharajas' who have grand life-styles, and that we are, culturally speaking, a nation known for unity in diversity, but yet we are falling apart and drifting into many nations within a nation by virtue of our caste and clannish mentality and ghetto ethnic consciousness. And economically speaking, the present government of India, with Manmohanomics as its influencing factor, has been trying to usher in an outward-looking economy with high talks of globalization of our economy but it little realizes or is wittingly blind to the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening day by day and year after year.¹² As long as we do not realise and rectify these contradictions, we are only 'shooting in the dark' in our effort to eradicate poverty.¹³

4. The New Economic Policy (NEP) and its Implications for the Poor in India

The Indian Constitution enjoins on the Government of the country the mandate to work for an egalitarian society. It implies that all citizens are ensured a human living. Based on this criterion, the New Economic Policy (NEP) announced in 1991 has very little to offer to the poor of India. 'The policy seems to have mesmerized

12. Gopabandhu Patnaik and Damodar Panda, "The New Economic Policy and the Poor" in *Social Action*, April-June, 1992.

13. Dasan, A.S. and Shenoy, B.V. ed.: *India: A People Betrayed*, 1993.

all the political parties and the middle class'. It has conveniently discarded, almost without any second thought, the type of economy built over four decades. By liberalizing investment and trade, it has accepted and opted for the globalization of capital, but not of labour, increase in productivity through advanced technology, but not for increase of employment opportunities by enriching the traditional systems of knowledge available among the poor, and above all, for softening the anxieties of taxation of the formal sector and the middle class by sacrificing some of the social welfare measures meant for the poor, e.g., allocation for IRDP, displacement of tribals and deprivation of their lands and their livelihood. It means the formal Vs. the informal, Productivity Vs. Social Justice and above all, it's a sort of indulgence in and exploitation in the form of a neo-colonial economy. The big unanswered questions are: Productivity for whom? and Who owns the productivity assets and profit accumulations?¹⁴

5. India's Assent to GATT and its Implications

It means, first of all, that all technical barriers to trade will have to be eliminated; implies the harmonization of technical and food safety standards. Pushed by the world's largest multinational food monopolies, harmonization is also 'a campaign to disempower citizens by removing their right and ability to self-determination on health, safety and environmental matters'.¹⁵ Most of the provisions of GATT and the Uruguay round are clearly weighed in favour of inventors of technology and against the users of technology. The extension of patents to seeds and plants, the denial of process patents and the dilution of compulsory licensing are all going to have a negative impact on the Indian economy. Seeds will become expensive, drugs will become costly and industrialization in high-tech areas will receive a setback'.¹⁶

III. CAUSES OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

1. If we look at the history of mankind, we see that 'in every social system known hitherto, barring primitive society, - whether it is

14. *Social Action*, April-June, 1992.

15. *Legal News and Views*, October 1993.

16. *Ibid*, February, 1994.

Slavery, Feudalism, Capitalism, Colonialism or Socialism - a privileged minority has enjoyed life based on the labour of others. The masses who have laboured have largely lived in poverty. The privileged minorities have used the power of the State in order to protect their position with the development of society, and this power has assumed more complex forms, but its purpose has remained unchanged, which is to enforce the will of the minority on the majority. This enforcement has become more and more subtle in the 20th century'.¹⁷

The case of India is no exception to this historical and social phenomenon. Considering poverty as a social phenomenon, the causes of poverty in India need to be identified with the help of a scientific analysis of the existing socio-economic system. Even before the arrival of the British in India, the poverty of the Indian masses or the impoverishment of the nation as a whole was there, and ideas of distributive justice never existed even in the pre-colonial set-up. Caste-based and class-based exploitation was in vogue, and the British colonial masters did nothing against such an oppressive system. Instead, they subordinated the entire system to further their own economic interests, viz., the British economy. It was this undisturbed Indian elite that took over the administration of the country from the British after independence.

Once again, if we look at the distribution of wealth within the country, almost all the available statistics 'reveal to us that 10 percent of the population both in urban and rural areas earn and spend most of the national income and own most of the production assets'.¹⁸ The inevitable conclusion is that most of our 'development achievements' - even after independence - have gone in favour of the rich and the powerful lot who control the entire system. Here lies the root-cause for the marginalisation and alienation of the poor in India. The anti-development process of the poor can be seen in the following statistics:

1. 50 percent of the Indian population own only 4 percent of the available land; claim less than 1/3 of the national income and own only 7.3 percent of the rural wealth.

17. Young India Project Report: *Papers on Development and Rural Poverty*, ed. by Nandita Ray, 1988.

18. *Ibid.*

2. The top 1 percent of the population enjoys 10 percent of the total income of the country; another top 20 percent, 18 percent; the next 10 percent enjoy 34 percent; the lower 50 percent enjoy 22 percent; and lowest 15 percent enjoy just 4 percent.
3. On the basis of urban property distribution, 10 percent of the population own 57 percent of the property; 20 percent own 23 percent and the remaining 70 percent own just 20 percent.¹⁹

It is crystal clear that 'poverty is the situation of the majority in the country, and not the fate of a minority', and all our development strategies have failed to address this real issue. Here lies the betrayal of the people of India. In other words, poverty is the creation of these filthily rich and powerful minority elite-groups and socio-economic inequalities perpetuated by conscious human and political, decisions without human face, which in turn continue to keep more than half of India's population still below the poverty line.

To these poor people, who have no say in the distribution of available resources or in government's development schemes concerning their own lives, economic freedom is an empty dream, political freedom an absurdity and life in general a perennial and painful struggle. Sad and tragic though, it is these people who unwittingly serve not only as 'sustaining agents' of urban middle-class life but also as 'valuable vote-banks' for our so-called national, regional and local 'netas' to perpetuate their power-games, indulge in looting and sacrifice the welfare and development of the people at the altar of a blemished and tainted democracy.

2. The Indian Constitution makes us - the people of India - believe that the State, as the sole or main agent of development of the people, would ensure an egalitarian society by safeguarding the right of every citizen to a decent human living. This 'tryst with destiny' has not happened. The tragic failure is in the travesty and distortion of this ideal. *The betrayal of the poor of India lies in the failure of our politicians and bureaucrats to adopt a suitable delivery system to translate this ideal into a reality. The fault lies in the fact that we, the people, have failed to exercise enough vigilance over 'the com-*

19. Ibid.

missions and omissions' of our politicians and bureaucrats who continue to be the failed, discredited and disappointing policy-makers of our national destiny. With inspiration from Gandhiji and other great leaders of the freedom struggle, our forefathers and elders succeeded in driving away the colonial Masters who believed in world-looting, but we have failed to educate and discipline our own Indian bourgeois, ie, the ruling elite, who believe in self-aggrandizing power, looting and scooting. Our hope of setting right things in and through elections is belied because elections in India today are won more and more with the politics of liquor, money, caste and lumpen elements. We have given ourselves into the hands of petty politicians and willing bureaucrats and heartless businessmen - a combination of rich elite groups - who are mortgaging the country and its future for their own successful survival and pushing the people into the 'nirvana' of misery. No shock or surprise, then, why the educated and well-intentioned youth of India think that 'brain drain' is better than 'brain in the drain'.

3. The Alienation of the Poor will Continue :

i. As long as the poor, like the poor of other countries, offer themselves as 'the subject of writings and speeches, never their authors, and allow themselves to be interviewed, photographed, measured, weighed and analysed';²⁰

ii. As long as they, especially the poor women of India, remain illiterate and ignorant, hapless and voiceless, and unorganized and away from the national mainstream of Indian polity and civilization;

iii. As long as our politicians and government servants indulge in being expensive parasites upon the people by means of their corrupt behaviour, graft and canny manipulations of development policies and schemes, and couch their language with apparent but delusive concern for the poor;

iv. As long as our businessmen, caste-conscious groups maintain their elitism, vested interests and inclinations for exploitation and accumulation of wealth, power and status at the cost of the poor;

20. Pierre Spitze, *Silent Violence: Famine and Inequality*, 1978.

v. As long as our religious and educational institutions and social service organizations opt for the status-quo, and are not prepared for a fight against unjust social structures and unfair distribution of income and available resources;

vi. As long as foreign aid flows into India more as 'help' rather than to understand the socio-economic-political crises afflicting the people, and to initiate necessary plans of action for justice; and,

vii. As long as the well-informed among the educated in India remain passive and indifferent to the miseries and sufferings of the poor.

IV. REMEDIAL MEASURES

1. If poverty is a man-made phenomenon, then the remedy lies in replacing the men and women responsible for this situation and replacing the system or structures aiding them to perpetuate this situation. Proponents of this remedial measure suggest that collective ownership of all means of production could be a strategy.²¹ It implies that political stakes and costs are high in the implementation of this measure, but it is worth trying, provided the poor are organized for a mass movement and mass-uprising for a collective revolution that would pressurise the ruling elite to pave the way for the realization of the aspirations and demands of the poor.

2. Real development demands 'placing the last (the poor) as the first priority' in our national agenda of development. They need to be involved as agents of their own development. Basic awareness, education of the poor, their active participation and involvement in decision-making processes concerning their own lives should be the key words and prime strategies in averting the alienation of the poor and enabling them to stand on their own legs with a sense of self-reliance and self-esteem with an assertion and recognition of their human dignity in society.²² This means a conscious and committed option for the poor with redistribution of wealth and transfer of resources in favour of the poor.²³ *It means that the*

21. V.M. Dandekar and N. Nath, *Poverty in India*, 1971.

22. Paulo Ferrere, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

23. Michael Lipton, *Why Poor People Stay Poor*, 1982.

powerful elite of India, which includes the ruling class, instead of reassuring themselves and being sorry for the wretched plight of the poor, need to change their relationship with the poor and should be willing to come to their help by distributing the riches which have been taken away from them.

But here the question is: how many of us are ready to understand development this way and urge the government and the bureaucracy to reformulate development strategies at the national level in tune with this understanding? Are our politicians and civil servants interested and committed to this type of development? Perhaps, a quote from Helder Camera, the well-known retired Brazilian Archbishop, is an answer obvious enough in this context: *'It I feed the hungry, they will call me a saint, but if I ask why they stay poor, they will brand me a communist.'*

3. Instead of rushing to blame the ignorance and sub-culture of the poor for their ever-lasting poverty, or justifying poverty in the name of karma-dharma, issues like the non-implementation of effective land reform measures, reasons for low wages, unemployment, lack of access to basic health and education services and the need for placing the poor as subjects of their own development, need to be raised and discussed through all available means of communication without further delay. The voluntary sector – at least a considerable number of NGOs – has been doing a reasonably good job in India in this regard. Official international donor agencies and more and more NGO donor agencies could come forward to support the voluntary sector in India to take up and concentrate on these and other similar issues.

The opening up of the broadcasting and telecasting media to private agencies with collective ownership/trusteeship could be a great step in this regard, in view of diffusing new ideas and fresh and correct information.

4. Reviewing the government-sponsored community development programmes should be taken up without delay and with all seriousness and sincerity of purpose. The affected people should be mobilised to pressurize the concerned government agencies to take up this task. *Corruption, middlemen, politicians' lipservice, officials' lack of interest, and above all, absence of people's involvement while formulating these programme are at the bottom of the failures of these*

schemes. The colossal draining of resources meant for the poor, is the hallmark of these schemes. Even UNICEF-or Danida-sponsored schemes are failing, because of these reasons and because they depend too much on government agencies for implementation. NGOs could be given a better status in the planning and implementation of such schemes.

5. The need of the hour is the emergence of dedicated and committed leaders who could take up the cause of the poor even to the extent of self-emptying of themselves. It is inspiring to know that the voluntary sector has produced leaders of such nerve, dedication and determination: Baba Amte, Mother Teresa, Annasaheb Hazare, Shankar Guha Niyogi of Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM) and Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) have proved to be 'the salt of the earth' in their tireless struggle for the cause of the poor. It would be wonderful and meaningful if such leaders emerge from among the poor themselves - leaders who could mobilize the poor for collective social action. Networking of these leaders from different parts of the country is a must for achieving desired goals and targeted results.

6. If only the National Literacy Mission (NLM) of India has the basic education of the illiterate women of India as its single goal and enable every woman under its mission to 'discover her right to self-hood, her right to independent thought and decision-making, her right to control her own reproduction, then we will witness not only a demographic revolution but also a social change of the most far reaching and positive kind. Do we have the courage to meet this challenge?'²⁴

Chaduvu Velugu (Light of Knowledge), an adult literary primer which contains a lesson entitled *Adavallu Ekamaithe* (if women unite) and which depicts the benefits of literacy and tells the story of how the Dubagunta women won their battle against alcoholism, has created positive ripple-effects in Andhra Pradesh.²⁵

7. In fine, getting involved in the education and development of the poor is a social responsibility. Being well-off or living even with some reasonable comfort, decency and dignity should instill in us a sense of obligation towards the progress of the poor, because we pos-

24. Srilatha Batliwala, "Control Population, Not Women", in *The Hindu*, June 6, 1993.

25. *Down to Earth*, June 30, 1993.

sess these privileges partly or rather largely due to the presence and contribution of the poor to our own well being in one way or the other within the existing socio-economic-political system. Therefore, any sort of neutrality or indifference towards the plight of the poor is a crime against the dharma of universal brotherhood and common human fellowship as we are all part of the entirety of humanity. Mere charity towards the poor is an inadequate expression of our human solidarity with the poor, and when charity substitutes justice, it becomes a hurdle in our common effort to eradicate poverty. As long as we keep up our indifference towards the poor, we only confirm, for ourselves and for our progeny, a Hobbesian view and way of life, viz. "life is nasty and brutish, and so, make hay while the sun shines". In that case, poverty, as an evil, will continue to bedevil all of us, like the bite of the apple that signalled the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden, amidst the struggle of the poor - a struggle of epic proportions.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the light of a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter in question done above, let me put forth the following questions for further reflection and response:

1. If value and quality of life are related to what it does to people, can growth resulting out of cow-boy economics be an absolute goal? Is there an inherent value in the absurd expansion of material wealth?

2. Buddha differentiated between needs and unending desires. Mahatma Gandhi differentiated between need and greed. Swami Vivekananda spoke of disinterestedness as work-ethics. Jesus performed an act of self-emptying for the well-being of humanity. How are these values practised by nations/people which/who preach and proclaim these values? What is the relevance of these values to the North-South conflict / Centre-Satellite relationships between rich and poor countries? How can Philosophical responses tackle contradictions and hypocrisies inherent in the dichotomies between ideals and capitalism-based and consumption oriented goals?

3. The West, inspite of being predominantly Christian, believes in progress that goes with profits. The conduct of business based on such a belief has led to (and still leads to) a blatant disregard for human rights and livelihood of common people, and unlimited expansion in a finite environment can only lead to ecological disasters and human catastrophe. Can philosophical truths reconcile human progress with profits, ecological balance and cosmic harmony that paves the way for human fellowships and a "one-world" image instead of First, Second and Third Worlds?

4. Can Indian Philosophers enlighten and provoke the conscience of our politicians, local elite groups, salaried classes, religious heads and institutions to come out of their ghetto-shells, think of their social responsibilities towards the progress of the poor and elimination of economic disparities? Can we reinterpret *Tatvamasi*, *Asatoma satgama*, *Jeevan mukti*, etc?

5. Have not our political parties been reduced to a farce/absurdity? And in what way can philosophy contribute to the emergence of one National party, collective social action and mass movements?.