

**Sub-Commission on the Promotion and
Protection of Human Rights
Social Forum 2005:
Poverty and economic growth: challenges to human rights**

Poverty in an Economically Growing India

Sr Valsa Palathingal Joseph FMM

“The earth has enough for everyone’s needs, but not for some people’s greed”.

- Mahatma Gandhi

India has made giant strides in every sphere of economic development and has witnessed rapid growth both in the private and public sectors. Ever since the Indian Government opened its market to the outside world, the economic growth has been impressive. Because of the boom in the Information Technology Sector and other developments, the demand for settlements in urban areas has proportionally increased. To cope with these demands, roads needed to be reconstructed and broadened, telecommunications to be reformed, etc.

Despite all those achievements, the benefits of economic development have not reached the Indian masses, due to the uneven distribution of the wealth. Almost half of the country’s population is still living in poverty and is deprived of basic facilities such as education, food, clean drinking water and health benefits. On the contrary, most of them have suffered from the economic changes. In fact the poor have become poorer due to this type of neo-colonialism. Despite the fact that in the

past 20 years (1980-2000), the Indian Government has spent Rs. 62,000 crores (approximately 14 billion USD) on poverty eradication programs (Planning Commission's Mid-term Appraisal MTA). It is disheartening to note that a good amount of money has not finally reached the targeted groups.

The poorest have been confronted with new forms of exploitation which have worsened their situation, especially those of marginalized communities, such as S.C (Scheduled Caste), S.T (Scheduled Tribe), and B.C (Backward Class), commonly known as Dalits. Caste and poverty are intertwined and the lack of social status lies at the root of Dalits' poverty. Despite certain Constitutional provisions, oppression and discrimination against the Dalits continue. The abuses committed against them must be considered in a holistic manner.

Economic growth alone is not enough to eradicate extreme poverty and exclusion, from which Dalits are suffering. It is a question of human dignity, of respecting all their rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural, irrespective of religion, caste, class and creed, as it is written in our Constitution.

I am asked to share my experience in living among the poorest groups of the society in India. I am from Kerala, South India, but my life and work have been for twenty years among the Dalits and the Tribals of Tamil Nadu, South India. With three other sisters, I was living in a village called Pallapalayam, Udumalpet among Dalits belonging to Arunthdiar caste. We were in one of their houses built by the government for this particular caste, with hardly any conveniences. At the very beginning, we went to work with the Dalits, for daily wages in order to experience the struggles they were undergoing. We believed that this experience would help us to understand their reality. This gave me a taste of what it means to be exploited by rich landlords, treated inhumanly and humiliated. This experience of life was at the base for our work with that community.

We realized that their situation would not change, unless the Dalits were empowered to become agents of their own liberation and truly recover their dignity. In our village of 150 families, only one person had received high school education. He was a primary school teacher, belonging to the same caste, which is traditionally

dealing with scavenging, and hence, considered as the lowest group even among the Dalits themselves. The school, dedicated for this population, was situated in another village, and most of the children were going there. However, there were many drop-outs after the second or third grade. They were either taking care of the younger siblings, or working as bonded laborers for their landlord. Illiteracy was high in the place. From the beginning, the children were flocking around us, asking us to teach them. That was the felt need of the people. We thought that it was a good entry point, and we started non-formal education programs for the adults and for the school-going children, gave coaching classes and supervised their studies in the evenings. Having had no place and facilities, we gathered them in groups, under the street lights. Children became motivated and interested in studying and began to do well in school. This helped to change the attitudes of others towards them. Earlier they were looked down upon. Slowly the drop out rate was reduced.

Our living out with them helped us to understand that culture and traditions played a very important role in their lives. Yet, they had no opportunities to come together and celebrate their inherited richness except on the occasion of weddings and temple feasts. Once it happened that we gathered children and their families for the national feast of Deepawali (festival of lights). All experienced the connectedness with one another and realized the importance of getting “bonded” with each other. It was after this experience that they expressed their need to come together often, as a village. The village started celebrating together common feasts, national as well as religious. We looked at opportunities to gather in a common place, for prayer and for various cultural programs. This gave chances to kids and teenagers to present their talents through songs, dances, skits...etc. The parents felt excited and proud of their children, seeing their performance. All the villagers showed a greater enthusiasm on these occasions which helped to build confidence in them. Though they were confronted with many problems and difficulties in their daily lives, they became aware that culture was very important in their life, and an indispensable way to express human dignity.

One of the realities of the village was also debt bondage. For celebrations, like weddings, people borrowed money from the landlord. It is usually a small amount, but the monthly interest is very high and it gets accumulated into a larger

amount. Unable to repay, they start working for the landlord as bonded laborers until they pay back their debts, which they never get to. This debt is passed on to generations. This entails that men work in the landlords' fields for much reduced pay while women go to sweep the landlords' houses, collect water, and wash dishes etc, before the day starts. As wages those women are given the remaining food of the previous day and once a year a set of clothes. Some children take care of the landlords' cattle for the whole day while others are called upon at any time to do all kinds of things. Often they do not know their wages and what is due to them. They are kept ignorant from knowing and they are afraid to ask questions due to the inhuman treatments they risk incurring.

The objective of our non-formal education programs was to conscientize them about their rights as human beings. Through meetings and regular reflection they were able to realize the unjust system which they were in. For example, education made the children become gradually aware of the oppressive dimensions of their life. The amount of work put in every day by the family, for years together, was not matching the little amount of money they had received, while the debt was always on the increase due to high interest rates. It was impossible to get a better paying job somewhere else, because the landlord did not allow them to as long as they had a debt to repay. Children and youth became aware of the unjust system, in a country where child labor is banned, and minimum wages guaranteed. They became conscious of the social discrimination due to their caste status. Their self-confidence helped them to question the system. Little by little they became empowered.

As a result, women and youth felt the need to get organized. They were politically, socially, economically, powerless. They felt, that being voiceless, money-less and land-less, their only possible strength was in unity and decided to get organized. The Government of India has various schemes to offer loans for Self - Help - Groups (SHG) of women. We helped them to tap these resources and they were able to start self-employment schemes. Once in two weeks, women came together, to share and to discuss the different events taking place in the village and in their workplaces. Leaders emerged among them in the process. We helped them to know how to express themselves, how to contact officials, how to represent the village in public meetings, as well as how to participate and network with similar

organizations. They started to take their future in their hands. Though it was not an easy process, they became the agents of their change. We were only the force behind them and our role was to point out the way and encourage them in their process of gaining self-confidence.

Our main role here was “formation”, so that they take up the leadership and remain united. Women were very much interested and enthusiastic. At this point, we started to meet a lot of opposition from the Higher Caste people. Our life was at risk. Menaces were made, and sometimes we were threatened. Some villagers were bribed in order to divide the group. It was hard to keep unity among them. However, people stood together, and were determined not to give up.

The women groups continued in their efforts towards self-employment. They produced mainly food items that were sold in the surrounding villages to people of their own caste. High caste people would not buy their products because they were made by Dalits. Hence, marketing became the biggest hurdle. It was difficult to continue with a limited market. They were also confronted with the competition from big companies, flooding the market with cheap and well commercialized products. The government provided some solutions, such as organizing, once in a while, region-wise display of products, buying some products for the school midday meal scheme, etc. but none of these initiatives was a lasting solution. The marketing issue is a limitation of the governmental policy encouraging SHGs. If people don't do more in this area, it is due to the lack of market access.

With the modernization of agriculture, most of the landlords moved from food crops to cash crops. As a result, the availability of traditional food grains, which is the main diet of the people, has been reduced and become more expensive. They used to receive at harvesting time, some of the food crop for family consumption. Now, with the same daily wage, they have to buy it. Another impact of globalization is that, while drinking water and milk are still difficult to get, big international brand sodas are cheap and available in every remote village.

Our experience is that, to be successful, people have to be included at all levels of planning, organisation, implementation and evaluation of the program.

People have to become masters and mistresses of their own destiny and change. They need to bring to this process the wisdom of their life experience and feel responsible for its implementation.

Secondly, a holistic approach is needed to tackle poverty. All aspects of human dignity have to be taken into account. It is impossible to target only some basic minimum rights, such as water and food. We need to defend the whole set of human rights, civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural. Treating symptoms of unjust structures will not bring about a better life for the poor.

Thirdly, the poor and downtrodden need a special attention; because the general economic growth of the country is not, and will not, automatically improve their situation and national authorities should focus on doing something constructive to implement their various programmes if they really want the conditions of the poor.

Based on my own experience with communities living in poverty in a country which is undeniably growing economically, I would also like to urge the Social Forum to:

1. clearly state in its report to the Sub-Commission that economic growth is not a sufficient answer to eradicate poverty and that a human-rights approach must be also adopted in this endeavor;
2. call for a participatory approach where people are included and empowered at all levels of programs aiming at combating poverty;
3. recall that human rights are indivisible and interdependent and must be respected, protected and implemented. Therefore, the drafting of an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is a key step to grant justiciability to this set of rights;
4. call upon governments to fully respect the principles of accountability and good governance in implementing programs to eradicate poverty.