

Globalization and Feminization of Poverty

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In his presidential address to the nation on the eve of the jubilee of the Indian Republic, K.R. Narayanan, has voiced the anxieties, pain, fears and frustrations of those citizens, men and woman, who are empathetic with and critically conscious of the plight of India's poor and the impact which the dominant economic policies have on them. Two of his most candid observations could be cited as instances. "The greatest national drawback is the raw deal we give women and our greatest national shame remains the conditions of the Dalits." Second, in his candid indictment of the dominant economic policies, he stressed particularly on advertisement consumerism, of the frustration it is unleashing, the unabashed, vulgar indulgence in conspicuous consumption and said: "one half of our society guzzles aerated beverages while the other half has to make do with palmfuls of muddied water, our three way fastlane of liberalization, privatization and globalization must provide safe pedestrian crossings for the unempowered India also."¹

Simultaneously, pronouncements and exhortations, antithetical to this message by heads of states and multinational corporations (MNCs), get columns in print media, stressing the need for integrating the third world economics into the global market economy. Since the World Trade Organizations (WTO) conference at Seattle in December 1999 there has been a refurbishment of flashing news on globalization: 'liberalise further and plug into the global economy' was the message to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from the Prime Minister of

1 As reported by Harish Khare in *The Hindu*, Jan. 26, 2000. p. 1.

Singapore.² He is encouraged to find a pro-investment climate in Tamil Nadu, in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

The general Director of AIWA, Japan, said, "the investment climate in the country has improved since the market was thrown open and the policies changed in the early 1990s... the Indian market will get more attention in the future as one of the most growth oriented market in the world." Informing that his company's concentration at the moment is on the Internet, he said, "Internet will change the world. It would change communication, information and lifestyle - in short, people's behaviour. It would be a cultural revolution."³

The easily perceptible frenzy among the heads of states in India, to get into the bandwagon of globalization - foreign investment, accelerated gross national product (GNP) and trade linkages - stand in sharp contrast to what the statistical reports of the United Nations Organisation's satellite bodies such as the UN Development Programmes, (UNDP) Human Development Report 1999 and of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) say. The latter's report 'The State of the Children 2000' highlights the deteriorating situation of women and children and states that at the end of the 21st century

the overwhelming majority of the people in the world who live in poverty are children and women. They are also the overwhelming majority of civilians who are killed and maimed in conflicts.... Their rights as set forth in the convention on the rights of the child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) are violated today.⁴

The impact of globalization on the poor, particularly on women and children, is underscored by the same report.

The number of people living in poverty continues to grow with the juggernaut of globalization - one of the 20th century's most

2 The Hindu, Jan. 25, 2000. p. 12.

3 Ibid. p. 12.

4 T.K. Rajalakshmi "Economic Orphans and their Rights," *Frontline*, Jan. 21, 2000, p. 85.

powerful economic phenomena. It strangles the lives of people without the resources to become investors or the capabilities to benefit from the global culture. It is axiomatic that women and children, the most vulnerable components of society, are the worst affected.⁵

According to reports of this 'genre' the most disastrous effect and impact of globalization on women is the accentuation of the process of the feminization of poverty. The conceptual understanding of the feminization of poverty is the permeation of poverty into all layers of women's life, particularly among women in the Third World and the poor women of the First World. And this process has provoked a string of discussion and debates on the reception/rejection of globalization. Any serious attempt at the study of the impact of globalization inevitably gets enmeshed with a few questions such as, a) what are the implications of poverty that when connected with globalization, assume intellectual and political reaction both at the micro and macro level? b) where lies the multiplier effect of globalization that makes feminization of poverty contagious and contaminated among poorer nations and enables capitalist powers enjoy pyramidal accumulation of money, power and political influence?

Poverty and its implications

Poverty is a reality. It is a human situation and an experience. It is a situation of human beings who are deprived of the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter, clothing, health facilities and educational opportunities, that help them become dignified and responsible in all spheres of life. Poverty is deprivation, dispossession and disempowerment which reduce a man / woman to a position of helplessness and powerlessness, particularly in deliberation and decision making in all matters and in all spheres of family and social life. It is not basically, an economic problem. Rather it is a particular state of social, political, psychological and existential being that defines the human condition at a given point of time.⁶

5 Ibid. p. 85.

6 Rajni Kothari, *Growing Amnesia: An Essay on Poverty and the Human Consciousness*, New Delhi; Viking, Penguin Books, 1993, p. 2.

Poverty is also considered as a consequence of 'development', as it is conceptualised and concretised by economists, elitists, bureau-technocrats and statesmen of capitalist societies. For them development is economic growth, the manifestation of which is the gross national product - the aggregate national/global production of goods and services. It was Harry Truman, the US President during the first ten years after the second world war, who provided the pivotal concept of development and a corresponding world vision, whose revival after about half a century we are witnessing in the form of GATT's Dunkel Draft and globalization.

Truman declared that all the peoples of the earth were to move along the same track and aspire to one goal, namely development, and greater production was the key to prosperity and peace.⁷ He could also outline a programme of scientific and technical assistance to countries of the North fallen in economic ruin on account of the war and to those of the South - Asia and Africa which had just gained political independence, and Latin American countries, immersed in economic deprivation and backwardness. With the U.S. assistance through Marshall Plan, the Western European countries reached an unprecedented level of economic progress and prosperity: mass production of consumer goods of not only of nourishment but also of transport and communication, particularly social communication media (radio, cinema, T.V with multiple channels), of provisions of leisure (music, cinema, TV, sports, athletics, swimming, yachting, skiing, holidaying at local, national and international vacation spots and tourist centres).

Out of this atmosphere of material superabundance and unprecedented scientific and technological development, a convincingly conceptualised formula of development had been elaborated: the GNP (Gross National Product) and GNP - trickled down, that is to say, when a country produces more, the benefits of economic growth gets trickled down (like nectar in the sieve), reaching the wider sections of the society. Le Bret would say that economic growth conceals the problem of distribution of economic benefits and

7 Wolfgang Sachs, "On the Archeology of the Development Idea," *Lokayan*, Jan-Feb, 1980, p. 8.

believe in 'growth theory', in prosperity and well being but in reality it is the upper and high middle classes that alone benefit from growth in national aggregate product while the bulk of the population find themselves in stagnation or in regression of life.⁸

Development equated to economic growth trapped leaders of the emerging independent nations. Nehru, for instance, declared, "We are not going to spend the next hundred years in arriving gradually step by step at the stage of development which the developed countries have reached today. Our pace and tempo of progress has to be much faster."⁹ Hence India followed a policy of economic planning of industrialization and modernization with scientific, technological devices and was bent on increasing the rate of economic growth through Green, White and Blue revolutions, in agriculture, dairy and fishing respectively. As the two globally powerful institutions of finance, - the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD or World Bank) had been keen on accelerating this process of growth, the developing countries could easily get monetary and technical help needed for the modernization of the national economy.

Gustavo Guetierrez finds that poverty is the result of the policy of development, which has two clear tendencies - i) a thrust toward modernization entailing strong economic growth and ii) tendency toward the pauperization and growing exclusion of vast majority of of the population (Latin Americans in his study) from production. He states,

these contradictory tendencies favour the appropriation by a privileged minority of a large part of wealth as well as the benefits created by science and culture. On the other hand, they are responsible for the poverty of a large majority of our people, who are aware of being left out and of having their growing aspirations of justice and participation blocked.¹⁰

8 Joseph Louis Le Bret, *La Dynamique du Concrete Development*, Paris: Les Editions Ouvrieres, 1960, pp. 34-36. (Translated by the writer of this article)

9 Wolfgang Sachs, "On the Archeology of the Development," p. 10.

10 Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation and the Poor: the Puebla Perspective" in *Third World Liberation Theologies - A Reader*, Deanne Welliam Ferm(ed.), Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987, p.29, 39.

Saying that a structural conflict would arise as a result of these two tendencies, he defines poverty as a product of economic, social and political situations and structures.

Poverty is Structural-Political

Though there are many causes for the state of misery and poverty, its origin and its support could be found in mechanisms, which, because they are impregnated with materialism rather than any authentic humanism create a situation on the international level where rich get richer at the expense of the poor, who get even poorer.¹¹ Pope John Paul II insisted on the structural factors in the mechanisms that generate poverty when he told the Amerindians of Oaxacu and Chicpas that they have "a right to have the barricades of exploitation removed."¹²

According to Rajni Kothari poverty is basically a structural and a political issue. It had to do with the distribution of power in society. It is an inbuilt phenomenon of the institutional structures that were evolved for running the state.

The bureaucrats wanted to see poverty as a thing-in-itself, as a mere quantitative state of deprivation where providing a certain amount of income or of food solved the problem. But the politically conscious people have seen it as an issue of equity and have agreed to structural changes - but their efforts are without much impact; they all seem to be powerless before the powerful forces, (local, national, multinational business, industry, land owning classes, financial institutions).¹³

Poverty, a Product of Social Sinfulness

The pernicious social order with inequity and inequality, injustices in terms of caste, class, race and gender is a situation contrary to the Gospel; it is a breach of friendship with God. 'Poverty'

11 Ibid. p. 58.

12 Ibid. p. 32.

13 Rajni Kothari, *Growing Amnesia*, p. 5.

and 'poor' are dealt within the Old Testament and the Hebrew synonyms bring forth epithetically the 'poor person'.¹⁴

'Ani' describes a situation of inferiority in relation to another; 'ani' is one who is dependent. 'Dal' is used in two senses, one refers to physical weakness and the second, to a lowly, insignificant position in society; when combined with 'ani' it describes an economic relationship. 'Elion' means a person who is in a wretched state, which makes him a beggar. 'Rash' is a term which refers to a poor/needy person. The socio-economic meaning appears to be prominent in it. 'Misken' means 'dependent', a 'social inferior'. To sum up, the poor in the Bible are depicted as helpless, indigent, hungry, oppressed, needy, dependent and humiliated.

The poor women in the Third World countries fit well into this identity frame. Gutierrez gives an apt profile:

The poor do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in socio, political life. Those found in this category are principally our indigeneous peoples, peasants, manual labourers, marginalized urban dwellers and in particular the women of these social groups. The women are doubly oppressed and marginalized because they are not only poor but poor women.¹⁵

How is this feminization of poverty further intensified by globalization?

Globalization

Globalization is the most astutely accomplished feat of the capitalist world. It is described as the dominant force in the 20th century's last decade, in shaping a new era of interaction among nations, economics and people. It is increasing the contacts between people across national boundaries, i.e., in economy, technology, culture and governance. Globalization is a capsule containing a three-dimensional international trade and economic policies, namely privatization, globalization and marketization.

14 Elsa Tamez, "Good News for the Poor" in *Third World Liberation Theologies - A Reader*, p. 193.

15 Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation and the Poor", p. 34.'

Globalization is a success story of a hegemonical world combine - the MNCs, the G-7 countries, the two powerful financial institutions, namely, the IMF and the World Bank, and the managing body of international trade and tariff called the GATT (the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff) substitution of which today is WTO (the World Trade Organisation). All these powerful economic forces are under the control of the super power, the United States of America.

To have the whole world economy in their hand this combine has drafted a world vision of a new economic world order with the ideology of globalized capitalism that goes with unlimited economic growth, material affluence, wealth, power - economic - political. Science and technology are their most effective tools; globalization, privatization and economic liberalization are their strategies; democratic state power is their most trusted ally.¹⁶

As for the aim of G-7 (the USA and the European Community as the most influential members) it is criticised that it pursues two closely related strategies in order to perpetuate a global system in which its wealth and its power remain dominant. The first strategy is to build an economic system which would protect and enhance the G-7's power of investments, its trade and its technology and to invent a development philosophy that would safeguard their interests. This economic order is to be protected through political manipulation, military invention, cultural brainwashing and biased information system.¹⁷ The second strategy of G-7 is, in order to carry out its political and economic projects, to establish and exploit powerful and imposing international economic and financial institutions and policies (Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) - which remain subservient to the top heavy global structure of the G-7 and which will deprive the people of the South of their economic sovereignty, of their right of self-determination, of the opportunity of devoting a greater portion of their resources to alleviate the suffering of millions, which is caused by acute poverty. They will openly advocate a roll

16 Mary Pillai, "New Economics: Its Cultural and Gender Effects" in Jeevadhara, XXV: No. 145 (Jan. '95), p.13.

17 Ibid. p. 14.

back of welfare benefits that were the hard-earned achievement of struggles for economic justice by earlier generations.¹⁸

The 'glorious' accomplishment of these two strategies of G-7 and of MNCs, whose interests they foster, is the Dunkel Draft which emerged out of the last Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations (started in September 1986 and concluded in December 1993). The proposals contained in the final Dunkel Draft are quite crucial for all sectors of the Third World's (India included) economy - agriculture, industry and services. New issues included in this Draft are trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPS), trade-related investment measures (TRIMS), services such as banking and insurance, communication media (telephone, cinema, radio and T.V), transport (roadways, railways and airways), education and health care services.

When India accepted GATT proposals, it was pointed out, it was "only the latest in a series of shameful surrenders to the dictates of external powers. This would prove ruinous for the country's ability to frame policies in accordance with its own interest and impair the livelihood of millions."¹⁹ Particularly small farmers, agricultural labourers (rural women constitute a majority in the total work force), organised workers and the vast unorganised labour force in the services and manufacturing sectors will get victimized.

Victimization of Poor Women

It is within the wide backdrop of globalization as a hegemonical policy and practice of Western economico-political powers, just described, that the victimization of women in poverty is to be analysed. This analysis can be done with articles 22, 23, 24, and 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and comments made on it by a French Sociologist Le Bret as referential frame. Article 22 says that everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality. According to article 23, everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment; everyone without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for

18 Ibid. p. 14.

19 Sukumar Muralidharan "Ruinous Surrender," *Frontline* May 6, 1994, p. 5.

equal work; everyone has the right to just and favourable remuneration, ensuring for himself and his family an existence worth of human dignity and the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 257 is of great significance for the poor women in India:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age and other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Referring to this particular Article and the poor in the Third world Le Bret asserts,

in order that all men/women have the necessities of life, production and distribution of basic (essential) goods should be the first and primary objective of the regional and international economy. Any economic management that does not consider this, should be treated as inhuman and the economic policy that does not submit itself to this ethics is to be considered as fallacious.²⁰

Analysing the impact of globalization on women in terms of right to work, to favourable conditions of work, to protection from unemployment, to equal pay for equal work, right to a standard of living that assures food, clothes, housing, health and so on and the right to social security, we are led to conclude that globalization is out against the poor women. For instance, globalization policies pertaining to agriculture, investment measures, services, introduction of advanced technologies and trade regulations have already deprived women of whatever little they possessed before and rendered them disempowered.

Agriculture and Allied Occupations

With Green Revolution, Indian agriculture underwent a metamorphosis - capitalistic mode of production has made an entry into agricultural sphere and has extended itself through mechanisation (tractors), package programme of scientific inputs:

20 Joseph Louis Le Bret, *La Dynamique*, p. 41.

hybrid seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, electricity, pump-sets and so on. As a result medium/small farmers have been reduced to peasantry and landless labour force respectively. Men and women had to go to urban centres for survival.

Globalization accentuated this process of heavy capital investments, commercialization, export-orientation and techno-bureaucratization. There is a non-stop shifting in cropping patterns, away from food grains towards cash crops (oilseeds, coconut, coffee, tea, rubber), the cultivation of which requires skilled labour, which women unfortunately are not. Hence the increasing rate of women's unemployment and the declining per head food availability in rural areas. Utsa Patnaik states that such a decline may serve to enrich the already rich, while endangering the food security of the assetless and the asset-poor sections, the majority of whom are women. Further decline in food grain availability leads to rise in the price level of food grains, filling the pockets of the large farmers (the net sellers), while hurting the small farmers and landless labourers (net buyers). Women workers in agricultural sector are the worse hit and hurt.²¹

The emerging decline both in food production per head and in food absorption (resulting from the lack of purchasing power of the rural population and the conflation of two related macro-economic processes - a highly uneven pattern of capitalist investment and output expansion in agriculture and adverse movement in terms of trade) has substantially enlarged the set of person who are vulnerable to starvation. The most affected are the rural households depending on marginal farmholding and agricultural labourers. They constitute half of the 43% of Indians who live below povertyline; they also constitute 84% of all economically active women.

Another group of the Indian work force, victimised by globalization are the fisher women, who constitute about half of the fishing community, which is over 75 millions in the marine sector itself. Fisher women had traditionally been in occupations which are invisible such as cleaning, preservation and selling of fish. As such they contributed considerably to the economic security of the family. Globalization sounded death-knell to this security. First their major source of income, namely net-making, had been snatched away by

21 Utsa Patnaik, "The Long Transition," review by Venketesh Athreya in *Frontline* Jan. 7, 2000, p. 77.

nylon nets manufactured by machines; introduction of ice and refrigeration of fish and the entry of merchants with capital are the next blow to the women's fish marketing; with the capitalised, internationalised, export-oriented pattern of fishing - mechanised boats, trawlers and purse-seiners - traditional craft and gear men become powerless at the face of capitalistic competition. As a result, in about 13% of households, men have been forced to migrate to urban port towns or distant/over seas to work on trawlers. This increasing trend leads to feminisation of poverty. Another calamity befallen on fisher women is in the form of mindless/ruthless fishing of the international fishing fleet, depleting the fish resources with two consequences: first the fisher community and women are deprived of the only available nutritive food, since the fish it is being exported to urban or overseas centres; second, local women are obliged to travel long distances to buy fish, which they sell in the inland houses and markets. The permission to prawn culture granted to MNCs has its adverse effects on both men and women.²²

Whether it is in agriculture, fishing, weaving or in any other occupational spheres, the effect of the whole set of macro-economic policies is seen at the microlevel, because that is the locus where people produced, reproduced, sustained and survived. The responsibility of the survival of the household and keeping the family members fed, clothed and cared for is the woman's concern since it ties up with her share of work as per the sexual division of labour.²³

Women and Alternative Employment.

Deprived of work in the agricultural sector and in the urban industrial units, women are pushed into jobs that are unskilled, low paid, insecure and that require long hours of work, most of them export-oriented, small-scale industrial units such as garment-making diamond-cutting, fish-processing and so on. In big enterprises they are hired as casual labourers to be fired at any time. The ad hoc nature of such works make their lives economically and socially insecure. In the organised sector in metropolitan cities, employment opportunities stagnate due to foreign direct investment, shrinking women's employment opportunities.

22 "Voices from India - Women Towards Beijing", *Lokayan*, July-Oct.'95, p. 90.

23 *Ibid.* p. 80.

On account of this insecurity poor women have to experience manifold negations in life: lack of employment opportunities, of access to schooling for their children, deprivation of health/medical facilities, forced migration in search of livelihood. All these might push them from marginalization to total exclusion; women belonging to the BC/MBC and SC/ST shall have just one more step to fall from the precipice.

With the entry of MNCs into the significant service sectors - banking, transport, education and health - the benefits accrued to poor women will disappear. For instance, all research and development in health care are said to be skewed to serve the well-to-do. The pharmaceutical industry is cited as a case in point. According to the Report of UN Development Programme 1999, of annual health-related research and development only 0.2% goes for pneumonia, diarrhoea and tuberculosis which account for 18% of global disease burden. With the growing involvement of private sector in health care, prices of medicine and medical care go up rocketing; sophisticated medicare would be the special privilege of the well-to-do while the poor, especially poor women, would be left uncared, deteriorating bodily.

As far education, which becomes trade-related in the service sector, highly sophisticated educational centres would appear, catering to the needs of the upper classes; and those in the lowest rung in the society have to be satisfied with low quality education. With the frightening threat of gradual cut in the State allocation of funds for social welfare schemes and of the prospect of changing the Constitution of India, the future of the women in poverty is very bleak. Dark clouds are seen to be hovering over them in the new economic policies.

Culturally, Western modernism and hedonism are making heavy inroads into the Indian society even into its remotest corners. Mass Media, particularly the T.V., brings home an awful package: sex and violence, pornography, values of a typically free society characterized by pleasure and passion, body-cult, money mania and unbridled consumerism. Media brings in another package of age-old superstitious beliefs and practices, images of expensive religious and social, family celebrations and value systems which fossilize the negative profile of women nurtured for centuries; cinema is another opium for poor women, besides T.V. to which they seem to get glued.

How to Counteract?

There was an interesting incident at the abrupt conclusion of the Seattle conference of the World Trade Organisation, held in December 1999. Northern NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations for safe guarding human rights and environment) had put up a severe agitation contrary to the policy of globalization. It was reported that the protest groups calling themselves 'Rainbow Coalition' and 'Red Green Alliance' declared (as a main stream labour leader does) "we refused to be marketized; we have to name the system that tolerates 'sweatshops' and child labour and that system is corporate capitalism. Making a classification of 'free traders' and 'fair traders' they remarked that for the fair traders it is the livelihood issue, quality of work and protection of natural resources that count. For free traders, trade means progress, not an end itself. For the free-traders even the more modest of whom argue that trade optimally promotes growth, which alone can expand labour and environment. Free traders are wrong. Increased trade does not mean more jobs or higher wages. It allows corporations to source goods from the cheapest production centres - typically paying abysmally low wages, often employing bonded labour and children.

The N.G.O's voice could be powerful as the Seattle incident shows. Pointing to this Dr. Dani Rodrik, professor of International Political Economy, in an interview, said,

the anti - WTO bloc . . . care about poverty and about human rights and are allies of the developing countries. What the developing countries need to understand . . . they must build alliance and common ground with the Northern NGOs, the one who are genuinely concerned about poverty and about making the WTO more accountable and transparent. With many of the NGOs you can link the issues of labour, environment and poverty.²⁴

The past involvement and committed service of most of the NGOs within and outside India can be said as an effective evidence to what Dani Rodrik remarked. A strong fight against feminization of poverty can be successfully waged by the Church and other women non-governmental organisations.

24 Interview with Dr. Dani Rodrik (Professor of International Political Economy of Harvard University) by C. Rammanohar Reddy in *The Hindu - Business Review*, Dec. 29, 1999.