

The Gandhian Way to Poverty Alleviation

J.S. Mathur*

Ever since we gained freedom, successive Prime Ministers, Planning Commissions and every leader of political parties have been making promises to abolish poverty.

But the reality is that more and more poor people have been pushed to BPL.

Recently, a debate and academic exercise was carried on to find out the extent of poverty. Arjunsen Gupta estimated it to be 77% (47% Antyodaya), Suresh Tendulkar estimated 49% Saxena estimated 59% and the Planning Commission only 29%. Obviously the Planning Commission cannot admit its failure. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh has claimed it to be 37%.

A large number of farmers have committed suicide (statistics are reliable). A report in a leading newspaper has said at least 10 persons die on the streets of Delhi every day. People commit suicide because of poverty. Children in a village near Allahabad were found eating mud, The Supreme Court set up an enquiry and its finding was that 80-90% of children live on mud.

Statistics reel out various aspects of poverty undernourished children, diseases of the eye, of mothers who do not get enough nutrition and the like. Whatever poverty is poverty and needs no definition. Reactions of those in authority are only knee jerk moves.

There are political objectives in government policies in its effort to fight poverty. Examples of these efforts are Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, to provide cheap wheat, rice, etc. to those below poverty line. Everybody knows that in all such schemes the beneficiaries hardly get a morsel. The bulk is pocketed by middle men and yet we continue to prepare such plans and advertise them may be through media as panacea for removal of poverty. Such targeted policies work best when they are aimed at a small minority. It is difficult to cover 50-70% of the population.

In fact, these schemes are not solving problems of absolute poverty. We do not want the poverty-stricken people to live on alms thrown at them either by the people in power or some rich person to gain popularity as donors.

Gandhiji observed: "the ill clad or the naked millions of India do not want charity, but work they can do in their cottages."

These people serve as cheap labour for growing industries. They live in slums, in abject poverty and are assets to industries. The whole emphasis ever since the first Five Year Plan has been industrialization and Heavy industrialization and more and more sophisticated machinery.

* Retd. Professor of Commerce, Monirba and Director, Institute of Gandhian Thought & Peace Studies, University of Allahabad.

Development has been defined as growth in G.D.P. (as against Gross National Happiness) and it can grow through heavy industrialization. We take pride in the growth of big industrial houses and observe that our industrial houses are amongst the top rich individuals of the world and that this number is increasing. In recent years, there are some 52 U.S. \$ Billionaires in India whose wealth has shot up by nearly 500% in the last few decades.

Recently, there was news that a special saloon costing nearly Rupees three crore will be manufactured for our President, (Gandhiji lived in a cottage). Palace on wheels and a special airport for billionaires' jet planes to have direct flights, represents the spirit behind our plans for development ! I think it is time to listen to Gandhiji who said:.

“In a well ordered society, the securing of ones livelihood should be and is found to be the easiest thing in the world. Indeed, the test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns, but the absence of starvation deaths among its masses.”

Our present emphasis is not rural development, but urbanization of rural areas so that they can provide cheap labour and a large market for everything – useful or harmful produced by large scale industries. Words like democracy and right to vote, human rights, etc. are cheap slogans.

We have chosen a development model which has created very small islands of power and prosperity amidst wide oceans of exploitation of poverty, deprivation, dehumanization and corruption. Pratyush Sinha, who retired as India's chief Vigilance Commissioner observed that about 1/3rd of the people are utterly corrupt, another 50% on

border lines and only 17-20% are honest regardless of temptations because they have a conscience. To quote Gandhiji again:

“Swaraj for them the poor can only mean to support themselves without begging. To awaken amongst them a feeling of discontent with their lot, without providing them means of removing the cause thereof is to court certain destruction, anarchy, outrage and plunder in which they themselves will be the chief victims.”

Here is another quotation from the Father of Nation:

“Such is the position of millions of people of India– for them liberty, God and all such words are merely letters put together without the slightest meaning.”

“I have found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song of Kabir.

“Invigorating Food, they cannot be given it. They must earn it and they can earn only by the sweat of their Brow.”

The remedy lies in industrialization of rural areas and not setting up of car manufacturing plants, McDonald's and the like, but development of Khadi and village industries which will meet everyday requirements of the ordinary people with priority being on food items, clothing, education, health, etc., so that villages do not depend upon the city. Villagers will be their own producers and consumers. Science should be used to invent small machines which can be handled with little training by the village folk.

So far science has been used to create big machines to concentrate power and resources in fewer and fewer hands creating problems of pollution, misuse and exhaustion of non-renewable resources,

exploitation all-round, corruption of all sorts, widespread inequalities, social discontent and violence. Alexis Carrel in his book "Man the Unknown" observes – "After all, the purpose of civilization is not the progress of machines but the progress of man."

To quote Gandhiji once again – "unemployment and idleness of millions must lead to bloody strike." Another quotation from the Father of Nation – "A violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one day unless there is voluntary abdication of riches and the power that riches give and sharing them for the common good."

We are witnessing violence and corruption (itself violence) on a large scale. There is violence at individual level – frustration and rat race of competition; at family level in the shape of breakdown of families, neglecting children and parents; at social level giving rise to distrust and clamors for reservation in election, government jobs; at different religious groups; at national level in the shape of regional disparities, demand for higher allocations of central funds, on claims for recognition of different languages, at international level in seeking markets, capture over sources of powers, etc.

In the post independence period, violence has become the rule at all levels. Murders, robberies, bank dacoities, mass strikes on some issue or the other, lathi charges, strike by saphaikarmcharies, teachers, I.I.T's Professors, doctors, nurses etc. have become common; there is discontent amongst policemen, army and even M.L.As' and M.P.'s about their salaries and benefits.

If an independent agency undertakes research, it is quite likely to find that in post independence period there has been more of lathi charge, firing, arrest of people and

violation of human rights than in the pre-independence period. Violence and corruption and exploitation in present India is hyper-headed physical, emotional, institutional, social, environmental, economic and commercial level.

It is time we take some bold decisions and take the bull by its horns and give back to villages what is due to them. Conditions are deteriorating very fast. To quote Gandhiji again:

"We must refuse to wait for generations to furnish ourselves with a patient solution of a problem which is ever growing in seriousness. Nature knows no mercy in dealing with stern justice. If we do not wake up before long, we shall be wiped out of existence."

Here it is pertinent to quote a poem from Oliver Goldsmith:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay',
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade,
A breath can make them, as a breath has made,
But a bold peasantry, their country's pride,
When once destroyed can never be supplied.

I quote the father of the nation again:

"I will give a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest men whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore to him a control over his life and destiny? In other words will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and starving millions? Then you will find your doubts melting away."

We are walking on the wrong road, we must set our feet on the right road as a first step. Other steps will automatically follow.—————●