

POVERTY DISCOURSES AND GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Harsh Mander, Virginius Xaxa, Lakshmi Lingam and Amita Bhide

The perspectives in this chapter challenge the notion of a homogenous, voiceless and global 'poor' who litter the literature of NGOs, frequent the policy documents of institutions concerned with their alleviation, and inhabit the imaginations of people living more comfortable and secure lives. As outlined in the Introduction to this edition, the development of the idea of poverty is embedded in the historical evolution of western industrialised societies, notions that seeped into other cultures and thinking. So, too, did ways of tackling impoverishment, many of which deny the agency of those designated as 'poor.'

The four contributions presented here – from various quarters in India and diverse perspectives – seek not only to answer the question 'who are the poor?' but to illuminate how simplified conceptualisations of them can shape poverty alleviation programmes by government and civil society that may be inadequate or damaging. Further, in unpacking discourses of poverty in India, the authors emphasise that those designated as 'poor' may not always be resource poor; and even those who lack basic necessities, are vulnerable or marginalised are not, as Virginius Xaxa says, simply 'mute spectators' of the processes they encounter, but active participants in the struggle to transform their lives.

DESTITUTION, SOCIAL BARRIERS AND FOOD RIGHTS

Harsh Mander

In the dark shadows of this land, the silent tragedy plays out of millions of women and men, boys and girls, who go to sleep hungry. The experience of chronic hunger in distant villages of India, as much as on its city streets, is one of intense avoidable suffering; of self-denial; of learning to live with far less than the body needs; of minds and bodies stymied in their growth; of the agony of helplessly watching one's loved ones – most heartbreakingly children – in hopeless torment; of unpaid, arduous devalued work; of shame, humiliation and bondage; of the defeat and the triumph of the human spirit.

Such high levels of hunger and malnutrition are a paradox, because they stubbornly survive surging economic growth and agricultural production which outpaces the growth of population (although it has worryingly stagnated in recent years). The riddle deepens because the state in India runs some of the largest and most ambitious food schemes in the world. The persistence of widespread hunger is the cumulative outcome of public policies that produce and reproduce impoverishment; of failures to invest in agriculture, especially in poorer regions of India and for rain-fed and small farmers; of unacknowledged and unaddressed destitution; of embedded gender, caste, tribe, disability and stigma which construct tall social barriers to accessing food; but in the last analysis it is the result of a profound collapse of governance.

The colonial Famine Codes – developed since the 1880s to codify and prescribe state responses to cataclysmic famines which took tens of thousands of lives – continue to cast a long shadow over responses of the state to hunger, even though both the nature of famine and the political economy of the state have been completely transformed in free India. They continue to regard starvation as a temporary aberration caused by rainfall failures rather than as an element of daily lives. The effort remains to craft minimalist responses, to spend as little money as is absolutely necessary to keep people threatened with food shortages alive. And the duties of state officials are not legally binding, in ways that they cannot be punished for letting citizens live with and die of hunger.

Allegations of starvation deaths are typically met with official denials and the blaming of the victims. Public servants believe mistakenly that death from consuming no food whatsoever is the only 'proof' of starvation. But starvation is a condition of not just the dead but the living, and people who have lived with prolonged food denials mostly succumb not directly to starvation, but to health conditions which they would have easily survived had they been adequately nourished. There are seamless lines between dying of and living with starvation, prolonged food denials,

malnutrition, and the subjective experience of hunger. Starvation is closely related to the equally neglected phenomenon of destitution, in which people lack even the minimal economic means for bare survival. The state must acknowledge these conditions, identify people threatened by them, and address and prevent the enormous and avoidable toll of suffering, sickness and death that they entail.

The state in India implements massive food, livelihood and social security programmes – some of the largest in the world – which theoretically support vulnerable people from even before their birth to their survivors after death. Expectant mothers are fed in Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres, along with infants, children up to the age of six and adolescent girls. The child in school gets school meals. As adults, women receive maternity support, breadwinners are guaranteed 100 days of wage employment in public works; and if classified as poor, they can buy subsidised cereals from a massive network of half a million ration shops. The aged – and in many states widows and disabled people – are given pensions. And if an earning adult dies prematurely, the survivor is entitled to insurance.

These programmes are plagued by corruption, leakages, errors in selection, delays, poor allocations and little accountability. They also tend to discriminate against and exclude those most in need by social barriers of gender, age, caste, ethnicity, faith and disability, and by state hostility to urban poor migrants, street and slum residents, and unorganised workers.

Public policy – and even much of civic action and mainstream academia – do not adequately acknowledge or address the unconscionable reality of the unrelentingly precarious, lonely, humiliating and uncertain existence of women and men, boys and girls who grapple with critical hunger, chronic food denials and starvation as a part of their lived everyday experience. If their suffering is admitted, they tend to be blamed for it, as the ‘undeserving’ poor.

This links closely with the neglected chronic, invisible malaise of destitution. Destitute people are those who almost completely lack the resources (financial and material), the employment, assets, access to credit, and social and family support and networks which are required to secure the means for dignified survival. These are men and women, girls and boys who are powerless and disenfranchised, socially isolated and devalued, sometimes stigmatised and even illegalised,

and often with special needs born out of disability, illness, social standing and age.

For large numbers of these forgotten people who live routinely and precariously at the edge of survival, each day comes afresh with the danger of one push that will send them hurtling over the precipice. This may come from an external emergency, like a natural disaster, epidemic or riot, but even from local crises: a sickness in the family, a sudden untimely death of a breadwinner, or a brush with the law. These people who live on a regular basis in constant peril of slipping into starvation – or at least chronic, long-term, unaddressed hunger – may be described as destitute.

Karl Marx (1862/1990: 603) wrote evocatively of the exclusion of destitute populations from what he described as ‘political economy’: ‘Political economy does not recognise the unoccupied worker... The beggar, the unemployed, the starving [and] the destitute are figures which exist not for it, but only for the eyes of doctors, judges, gravediggers and beadles. Nebulous... figures which do not belong within the province of political economy.’ Incidentally, Marx was right about their exclusion, but not about their being ‘unoccupied workers’. On the contrary, we have found that the destitute are forced to labour in arduous, low-paid, undignified work in order even to stay barely alive as each new day dawns.

In a perceptive paper, Barbara Harriss-White tries to unravel the features and sources of destitution. First, it involves the absence of any control over assets and the loss of access to income from one’s own labour. This loss of control may result from mishaps, addictions, disasters, health emergencies, and collapse or withdrawal of family support.

A plausible common sequence involves the progressive liquidation of small stock, livestock, consumer goods and eventually the failure to protect from sale the key productive assets... The right to the asset of one’s own labour may be forfeited. This right may be sold (bonded) to others. The concept of dependence may be transformed and the labour of non-labouring dependents sold or bonded. The most extreme tactics do not involve the sale of labour so much as the marketing of the body itself (as in the sale of blood or of organs or the renting of the body as in sex work). (Harriss-White 2003: 2, 4)

The destitution and helplessness of highly marginalised



groups do not arise frequently from low incomes or even from their own intrinsic and irrevocable biological infirmities (such as of age and disability), but from the fact that in many cases these infirmities are externally imposed by social arrangements themselves. There are some echoes of this idea in some of the recent literature on social exclusion. Whereas concepts such as poverty, vulnerability, deprivation and inequality do not impute causality, a social exclusion framework implies not only that a person or persons are being excluded but that someone or something 'is doing the excluding'. The word 'exclusion' suggests that there is a core and a periphery, and that 'excluded' people are those who are actively blocked from access to the core. The importance of these perspectives is that poverty is not perceived to be a mere attribute of certain categories of people. Instead, it is seen as something that is actively done to people. It is not what they are, but what they have been made. It is interesting that the untouchables of India have discarded the appellation given to them by Gandhi – *harijan*, meaning children of God – which they regard as patronising. They prefer *dalit* – which means one who is crushed – because the term implies that they have been oppressed, and it has therefore acquired a cultural context of assertion and anger. In this sense, the term 'exclusion' is useful.

So also is the word 'social'. The most evolved definition of food security so far at the time of writing that we could locate in the literature appears in *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001*: '[Food security is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, *social* and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO 2001; emphasis added).

The inclusion in the definition of 'social' access is highly significant, because it acknowledges that people may be barred from access to food even if it is locally available and they have the economic means. These social barriers to food security may include gender, caste, race, disability or stigmatised ailments.

The expulsion of those who most need it from support and succour, from care and rights – often by their own families, by local communities, but most importantly by the state – requires us to identify those classes, social categories and local communities who are destitute and socially expelled. Even in the more intimate context of a village, many of these socially excluded groups are invisible, barely known

or acknowledged. In most contemporary cultural contexts, social categories that consistently tend to be highly dispossessed and vulnerable in their access to food include disabled people, both as breadwinners and as dependants; single women and the households that they head; aged people, especially those who are left behind when their families migrate or who are not cared for by their grown children; people with stigmatised and debilitating ailments such as TB, HIV/AIDS and leprosy; working and out-of-school children; and bonded workers. In addition, in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts others may be added, such as certain denotified and nomadic tribes¹ in one place, some specially disadvantaged *dalit* groups like Musahars or Madigas in another, weavers, artisans and particularly disadvantaged minority groups in yet another, all designated as 'primitive tribal groups', survivors of conflict and internal displacement, and many other diverse forgotten people. Many of them are of contested citizenship.

On the bridge between the rural and the urban destitute are the distress migrants, at the bottom of the heap, both where they move for work and from where they come. In urban contexts are street children, with or without responsible adult caregivers, urban homeless people, slum-dwellers and a wide range of unorganised workers, both seasonal migrants and settlers, such as rickshaw pullers, porters, loaders, construction workers and small vendors, and people dependent on begging.

Government programmes are woefully inadequate to address destitution; in fact, they tend to be blind to or in denial of the fact that large numbers of people lack even the elementary means and power to survive with dignity. It is stressed that this is a duty of the state, not to the dead but to the precariously living. It requires public vigilance about individuals, communities and several categories living with starvation and absolute hunger. It requires the state to act, not after there is an emergency like a drought or flood, not even after people die of starvation, but proactively, before people slip into destitution and fail to access, in an assured and reliable manner, with dignity, the nutritious and culturally appropriate food they require to lead healthy lives.

Gandhi offered us a 'talisman' to use in moments of doubt and confusion. He asked us to recall the face of

¹ *These are communities who were notified by colonial rulers as 'criminal tribes' and often continue to suffer from this stigma, even though they have been officially 'denotified' by the government of free India.*





the poorest, most defenceless, most powerless man we have encountered. (Today he would have recognised that she would probably have been a woman!) We must ask ourselves whether what we are attempting has meaning for this person: does it touch her life with dignity and worth? Does it augment her power and self-reliance? If it does, it must surely be the right thing to do. It is this talisman that we need to hold up to public policy.

TRIBES AND POVERTY DISCOURSE

Virginus Xaxa

Indigenous peoples throughout the world are among the poorest, most excluded and most marginalised sections of the population. Not only do they suffer disproportionately from loss of their customary resource base and various diseases, but they are also disproportionately represented among the poor. The tribal population in India is no exception to this universal trend and feature. In fact, the share of the tribal population falling below the poverty line has been much greater than that of the general population of the country. It is fairly high even in comparison with the other marginalised section of India society, namely, the Scheduled Castes (the erstwhile 'untouchables'). In 1993–94, the proportion of the tribal population falling below the poverty line was 51.14 per cent, as compared with 35.97 per cent for the country as whole. By 2004–05 the share of the tribal population living below the poverty line had declined to 46.5 per cent, as compared with 27.6 per cent for the population as a whole (Mathur 2008). Thus, although there has been a decline, the level of poverty in the tribal population is still much higher than the national average, and the gap between the two continues to be one of the major issues of concern in poverty discourse in India.

The disproportionate scale of the poverty and other forms of deprivation of the tribal population has attracted the attention of both the state and civil society. The state has from time to time drawn up special programmes and schemes to deal with the issue. Civil society, too, has no longer been lagging in addressing tribal issues, including poverty. A large number of NGOs have been working with tribes on various issues confronting them; some of them are directly involved in the poverty alleviation programme. Of course, not all the NGOs working with them could be said strictly to belong to civil society. Other civil society organisations have been addressing issues that make for the impoverishment of

the tribal population. The issue of poverty among tribes has been the subject not only of policy formulation and programmes but also of an ongoing discourse among development practitioners, activists and academics.

India has a large population that is designated as tribal. It is also popularly described as the *adivasis*, meaning the original or indigenous peoples. Even tribal people refer to themselves as such and have been making claims for official recognition at international fora. The Indian state finds these claims problematic and refuses to extend *adivasi* status to tribal people, though their overall economic, political, social and cultural situations are similar to those of other peoples described and identified as indigenous elsewhere in the world. It sees, however, no problem in describing and addressing them as tribes. An important point to note is that, since tribes in India are listed in the schedule of the Indian Constitution for purposes of receiving administrative and political benefits, they are more specifically delineated as the Scheduled Tribes. Of the 300 million indigenous peoples spread across more than 70 countries, India accounts for as many as 88.8 million. Although they constitute only 8.6 per cent of the total population of the country, they represent an enormous diversity in terms of internal features, such as the mode of livelihood, stage of development, extent of acculturation, and external features like physical features, size of population, language and linguistic traits and ecological settings. Thus, tribes represent an amorphous group of communities at different stages of social development. The only commonality they seem to share is that, at the point of delineation as a tribe, they have all been more or less excluded from Indian civilisation (Béteille 1986).

The use of the category 'tribe' has greatly shaped discourse on tribes in India. It places the onus of locating poverty and other related issues squarely on the tribes and the social, cultural and economic characteristics of their societies. In contrast, the 'indigenous peoples' category focuses the poverty discourse not on the distinctive features of the tribal society but on the larger issue of colonisation and expropriation of tribal lands, forests and other resources. In the case of India it is the category 'tribe' and the ideas associated with it that has coloured the whole discourse on tribes since Independence.

There were two dominant discourses on tribes in colonial India. One was the construction of tribes as isolated from the rest of Indian society. Colonial





administrators and scholars represented this view. The implication was that tribes were to be kept separate from the rest of Indian society. The other construction, which Indian scholars and nationalists represented, was that tribes and the wider Indian society lived in close interaction with each other; that through a gradual process of acculturation and change tribes became part of Indian society as a whole. This construction challenged the view of separateness that the British advocated. In this discourse, the overall condition of tribal people, including their poverty, was attributed to their social and geographical isolation and social and economic backwardness. Often their social and economic backwardness was couched in terms of their primitiveness. Correspondingly, the whole thrust of tribal policy in independent India came to be centred on the agenda of drawing them out of their primitive condition and integrating them into the wider Indian society, which was seen as representing a dimension of civilisation. In fact, their integration into Indian society was seen as panacea for tribal problems in post-Independence India.

There had, of course, been a dramatically contrasting view on poverty and the condition of tribal people in India. Although it was not a dominant view, it did make an impression and the nationalists did take note of it. Verrier Elwin (1944), the main architect of this view, attributed the deplorable and impoverished condition of the tribals to their contact with the outside world, which had led them to become increasingly indebted and to lose control over their land and forests. Such impoverishment, Elwin argued, also had unprecedented effects on their social and cultural life as well. This is a line of argument which has been at work across countries and continents. Indeed the category 'indigenous peoples' is largely constructed around this theme. Tribals, of course, were never mute spectators of the process they encountered. They rose in open revolt from time to time against the British and the people from the plains. In fact, tribal history is interspersed with such revolts and rebellions; among the most prominent are the Kol Insurrection of 1831–32, the Santal Insurrection of 1855–57, the Sardar Movement of 1858–95, and the Birsā Munda Movement of 1895–1900. Taking note of the adverse effects on tribes of their contact and encounter with the larger world, Elwin advocated a policy of isolation for the tribals, which the nationalists vehemently attacked. The matter led to heated debate between on the one

hand Elwin and on the other G.S. Ghurye (1963), who advocated a policy of assimilation of tribes into the wider Indian society. This is a line of discourse which to a greater or lesser extent can be discerned in all countries with an indigenous population.

Post-Independence India followed a path which was neither isolationist nor assimilationist. Rather, it aimed at both integrating tribes into Indian society and at the same time protecting and safeguarding their distinct social and cultural identity. The nature and type of provisions enshrined for them in the Indian Constitution point to it. With this, the discourse has moved away from one of isolation versus assimilation to one of integration – midway between isolation and assimilation. Indeed, the state describes its policy towards tribes as one of integration. Provisions in the Indian Constitution have been of broadly three kinds: protective (constitutional and legal), reservation of seats (in parliament and state legislatures, institutions of higher learning and state employment) and developmental. On close inspection one finds that these provisions point to a policy and programme of affirmative action for tribes. And yet the policies and programmes pursued over the last five decades have not led to much tangible improvement in the quality of life of the great majority of the tribal population. The scale and magnitude of their poverty, referred to above, is one indicator; others include a high rate of illiteracy and a deplorable health status.

Accordingly, the discourse on poverty among tribes in India has centred primarily on the extent of their poverty. Moving beyond the scale and magnitude of the poverty, the discourse has also addressed the reasons for it and the factors producing it. In this discourse, the critical issue is their isolation, both geographical and social. Development programmes meant for tribes, it is argued, fail to reach them, as they live in geographical isolation. They have thus remained excluded from the fruits of development. This in a sense is a continuation of the discourse that had been the guiding spirit of tribal policy in India. This argument is often linked with the argument of inadequate resource allocation for tribal development. However, even with an increase in resource allocations since the fifth five-year plan beginning in 1974, the material conditions of tribals has failed to improve proportionally. One of the reasons for this state of affairs has been the use of the resources for infrastructure and other purposes rather than for tribal development. The ineffective implementation of the programmes is seen as another line of argument





by which the issue of poverty among tribals could be meaningfully explained. In this discourse, the thrust of the solution lies in accelerated and effective implementation of state-sponsored development programmes and schemes, whether these pertain to livelihood/income-generation activities, or education or health or communication facilities.

Others, however, problematise the issue not so much in relation to inadequate resource allocation, misappropriation of resources or ineffective implementation but in relation to the larger question of national and regional development. After Independence India embarked on a path of rapid economic development and national reconstruction. However, this invariably assumed the form of large-scale projects, whether it concerned infrastructure (dams, irrigation, power plants, roads, railways) or industry or mineral exploitation. Since tribal-inhabited regions are rich in mineral, forest and water resources, such large-scale projects invariably came to be located in tribal areas. No states in India illustrate this better than Jharkhand and Orissa in the east. And yet the two states have the highest percentages of tribal people living below the poverty line. In 1993–94 in the state of Orissa 71.26 per cent of tribals lived below the poverty line. In Jharkhand, which was then part of Bihar, the share of tribal people living below the poverty line was 69.75 per cent; in 1999–2000, the proportion of tribal people below the poverty line had declined to 59.68 per cent and in 2004–05 to 54.2 per cent. But in Orissa there has been steady increase in the proportion of tribal people living below the poverty line. In 1999–2000 it rose to 73.93 per cent and in 2004–05 it was 75.6 per cent (Government of India 2001; 2007). In contrast, where such development has been relatively absent, such as in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh in mainland India or north-eastern India, the share of tribal people living below the poverty line is significantly small.

The question is whether this outcome is a result of integration or development per se or a result of certain *types* of integration or development. Development pursued in tribal areas, as in the case of Jharkhand and Orissa, has taken place at the cost of tribal people. That is, development proceeded by expropriating tribals of their land, forests and other resources in the name of national and regional development. The benefits of development projects, which Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, described as the temples of modern India, did not accrue to the tribal people. Rather, tribal people were deprived of their

livelihoods and left without any alternative avenues of employment and food security. This has been so even though India pursued a socialist pattern of development and also enacted special constitutional and legal provisions which protected tribes from exploitation by economically and socially advanced sections of the society. It was a different matter when the state itself became a perpetrator of exploitation and oppression through its large-scale national development projects.

Economic reform since the 1990s has brought further change. The twin processes of liberalisation and globalisation that the economic reform ushered in have opened up space for the appropriation of tribal land and its exploitation at the hands of private capital – national and multinational – from which it was previously protected. Not only that, but the state, rather than discharging its constitutional and legal obligation towards tribals, has forged a nexus with private capital, including multinational corporations, to facilitate the appropriation and expropriation of tribal land. An accelerated pace of marginalisation and impoverishment of the tribals is at work. The response of the tribal people has been twofold. One is to resist; the other is to press for development that takes note of their needs and requirements.

There is serious apprehension, especially among indigenous peoples, their organisations and activists working with them, about the impact of globalisation. Development under the Indian state, despite various constitutional and legal provisions and well-meaning programmes, has not led to any substantive improvement for tribal people, as illustrated by the extent of poverty among them. Economic liberalisation and the freeing of private capital, both national and multinational, for the exploitation of existing resources in tribal areas have rekindled the need to resist such moves by the state and private players. The whole issue of deprivation is now articulated in terms of resource-rich tribal regions but poor tribal people. It is feared that with the coming of private players the situation of tribals will be worsened. The discourse on poverty in the context of globalisation among the tribal people has been more in terms of its negative dimensions than in terms of its positive dimensions. Indeed, globalisation assumes a place of negativity in the whole discourse of globalisation and tribal peoples.

MAPPING GENDER AND POVERTY DISCOURSES IN INDIA

Lakshmi Lingam

Poverty discourses in India have not adequately unpacked the question 'who are the poor?', though both macro and micro evidence points to lower-caste groups (Scheduled Castes), dispossessed tribes (Scheduled Tribes), religious minorities (particularly Muslims) and women within each of these groups. Governmental definitions of the poverty line continue to utilise single indicators, like income, calorie intake, asset holdings or annual wage workdays, to capture the real 'poor'. Interventions similarly focus on the provision of a critical minimum to offer reprieve from any one of these deprivations, so as to ensure that the 'real' poor survive. Research writings that attempt to broaden the contours of our understanding of poverty highlight the seasonality of poverty and hunger; the poor functioning of the public distribution system (M. Swaminathan 2004); the poor accountability of public institutions in the planning and delivery of programmes (Yugandhar and Raju 1992); and higher levels of indebtedness linked to household illness (Krishna 2003).

Micro studies suggest that the physical experience of poverty is gendered. High levels of maternal mortality,² morbidities, aches and pains and vulnerability to death and disease are the price women pay with their bodies and lives for belonging to poor families in disadvantaged communities (Madhiwalla and Jesani 1997; P. Swaminathan 1997). Psychological distress and poor mental health are closely associated with poverty and lack of social support (Pereira et al. 2007). However, both development politics and civil society discourses have not adequately recognised the need to bring all forms of discrimination and marginalisation on the basis of caste, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity on to the same plane so as to synthesise the 'politics of recognition' and the 'politics of redistribution', to use Nancy Fraser's (2007) terms. While the *dalit*³ groups do bring redistribution and recognition together, they often

2 A recent UNICEF (2008) study across several states in India suggests that, among women dying during pregnancy or delivery or from post-partum complications, a large proportion – about 50% – are from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

3 '*Dalit*' is a term used to refer to individuals belonging to lower castes. It is a political identity or label that is preserved as a reminder of the centuries of discrimination and marginalisation that *dalits* have faced.

do not take cognisance of gender-based differentiation within *dalit* castes. *Dalit* feminist writings are slowly opening for inspection the arena of caste-based and gender-based differentiation faced by women.

This section of chapter 1 attempts to broadly map the discourses on poverty and the insertion of gender perspectives into these discourses over the past two decades. The contributions from women's movements, women's studies, scholars and researchers have been considered together to represent civil society responses.

Mapping the official insertion of women into poverty discourses

Policy discourses on poverty and the insertion of women as active agents in managing poverty are more than two decades old. The movement of policy perspectives from viewing poverty as deprivation of material resources alone, with a focus on the household so as to mitigate poverty within a 'trickle down' approach, to viewing 'investment' in women, especially poor women, as a priority has the backing of several micro and macro studies and the global financial architecture. Understandings of poverty have gained new dimensions from global data that have revealed women's extraordinary work burdens, poor access to land, property and social resources, and overall high incidence of poverty (Buvinić 1997).

Macro data from several demographic surveys demonstrate that gender indicators bring benefits to several social indicators. Women's reproductive rights, education, employment and empowerment have come to be seen as important prerequisites for attaining several other societal goals like reducing infant mortality and increasing the rates of immunisation and use of contraception. Micro studies demonstrate that poor women devote a larger proportion of their income than do men to household food security and child survival. Households headed by women form a special category that experiences greater poverty than households headed by men; that structural adjustment coupled with globalisation leads to the feminisation of the labour force and the feminisation of poverty is part of the development orthodoxy. Various UN conferences during the 1990s provided greater space for the location of women's perspectives within the discourses. The Millennium Development Goals have set global targets for eliminating poverty and achieving gender equality.

In order to mitigate, alleviate or eliminate poverty,



the official rhetoric has gone beyond the provision of credit, training and access to resources to help women overcome poverty, to a greater emphasis on enabling women to access power, decision making and control over resources in order to secure long-term sustainable social change. However, in reality most countries are still dealing with women's 'gender practical needs' and not their 'gender strategic needs', to use Caroline Moser's (1993) terms.

In the Indian context, women's studies research, supported initially by the Indian Council for Social Sciences Research and thereafter by the University Grants Commission, began in the late 1970s. In the early years the focus was on the missing women workers in census data and the inherent problems with definitions of 'work' and 'worker' in census enumeration. Researchers also lobbied the Registrar General of Census Operations to engender census enumeration. Both macro data and micro studies reveal the presence of women in the urban informal economy and the agricultural sector. A series of studies in the 'women, work and poverty' genre attempted to critically unveil the 'invisible' women as wage workers, home-based workers and unpaid household workers, and the enormous workload they endure within a context of non-existent social security and development policy support.

Research and publications on women's poverty not only brought out the invisible, low-paid, drudgery-oriented and monotonous labour that women undertake, but also the gendered nature of the experience of poverty, with women's poorer access to credit, training, food, health care and power. Persistent pressure from women's studies researchers and women activists formed the groundwork for setting up a national commission to examine, and make recommendations on, the situation of women in the unorganised sector. This saw the release of a report titled *Shram Shakti* (meaning labour power) and thereafter a National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988–2000. Meanwhile, the initiatives of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Gujarat, the Working Women's Forum in Tamil Nadu and Annapurna Mahila Mandal in Mumbai, to name a few, brought in the dimension of providing formal-sector lending, and more generally legitimacy, to informal-sector workers; and this persistent advocacy led to the recognition of 'home work' by the International Labour Organization.

India's entry into the era of globalisation with its acceptance of the World Bank's and the IMF's

structural adjustment prescriptions during the early 1990s has also seen an increase in mobilisation by NGOs and civil society groups against several state policies which provide a fresh fillip to private and market interests. Protests against increased poverty as well as growing violence against women have often been articulated as part of the International Women's Day campaigns over several years. One of the most vocal civil society mobilisations has been on the issue of the public distribution system (PDS) which provides subsidised food grains, edible oil and kerosene. Poverty lines based on incomes have been established, and a policy of universal targeting of the poor has given way to targeting households below the poverty line (BPL). Campaigns for food security carried out by civil society network groups like 'Rationing *Kruti Sangharsh Samiti*' had several women participating in creating community-based watchdog groups to oversee the effective functioning of ration shops. Women's groups also are active participants in other campaigns and struggles to do with the 'right to health care', the 'right to education', the 'right to information' and housing rights, all of which are important for poor women.

Identity-based politics and multiple voices

Women's movement interventions in discourses, especially those concerning public policies, legislation and knowledge building, happened without disturbing the understanding of 'women' as a category. The articulations of the women's movements on the issues of violence against women, access to health care, political participation, or gender-sensitive policies have never led to major differences between women's groups because it was implicitly understood that these matters concern all women, particularly poor women. Voicing or advocating on behalf of 'poor women' was seen as legitimate and justified by activists (since most came from leftist or Gandhian backgrounds), by academics (who come from upper-caste, middle-class, urban-educated backgrounds) and by the NGOs (since a normative approach governs their existence). Various campaigns in the 1990s assumed an advocacy format of strategising to affect global discourses and participation in UN conferences.

The introduction of New Economic Policies in the early 1990s (India's structural adjustment package) led to serious opposition from labour unions and women's groups, for very different reasons. The downsizing

of the public sector, the introduction of technologies, and the mechanisation and outsourcing of jobs were seen as an imminent threat by the labour unions. In a context where a majority of women hold positions in the informal sector, the opposition from women's groups sprang from concerns about deepening disparities, impoverishment, the reduction of social welfare and the privatisation of services, all of which burden poor women more than in earlier times. The terms 'feminisation of the labour force' and 'feminisation of poverty' have been coined, with new evidence of static growth in male employment and increases in women's labour in the services sector (John 2005).

However, NGOs and social movements were guilty of serious shortcomings in not recognising multiple inequalities and in viewing the poor as an undifferentiated mass. Rising fundamentalism, communalism and caste-based reservations consolidated identity politics in contemporary India, which in turn actively contributed to defining the poor as '*dalit*' '*adivasi*', 'Muslim', 'bahujan' or 'Christian' apart from being men and women. Contemporary democratic vote-bank politics recognise and reiterate multiple inequalities and simultaneously render ineffective, purely class-based or gender-based analysis of poverty or marginalisation. The fallout of identity politics is the deep division among the poor, communally volatile communities, ghettoisation of minority communities and increasing restrictions on women. These shifts in politics in the 1990s outside and within the women's movement on the basis of difference, positionality, voice and representation have challenged the complacency of speaking for the 'other'. The secular framework of autonomous women's movement and the lack of engagement with caste and religious questions – in other words, the presumption that gender lines can be drawn across caste, class and religious barriers – was questioned by activists from minority communities and by *dalit* feminists (Agnes 1994; Manorama 1992; Namala 2008). Equally troubled has been the disengagement from the question of religion, religious beliefs, identity and faith, a subject that further challenged feminist conceptualisations (Dietrich 1988).

Poor women, development politics and empowerment

In the realm of sectoral development projects, poor women have been significantly incorporated as active agents of change. Poverty alleviation and rural development projects have embarked on building poor women's collectives for micro-credit and 'empowerment'. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), a Government of India programme, aims to strengthen the socio-economic base of rural women through a group approach, awareness generation and provision of support services. The Mahila Samakhyas Programme of the Ministry of Education, with NGO and government organisation intermediaries, prioritises building women's agency as citizens. However, the major policy thrust across various states has been to build and strengthen women's micro-credit groups in the name of 'empowerment'. Several development initiatives are mediated through these grassroots groups, thereby generating new pathways of delivering development initiatives for poor women and creating spaces for women's articulation of their priorities. Critiques of mobilising women thus point to the building of cadres of poor women responsible for dealing with poverty in efficient ways and simultaneously imbibing values of 'governmentality', thus circumscribing the political discontent and bargaining power of the poor (Lingam 2008; Devika and Thampi 2007).

The trouble with the separation of 'cultural' and 'material'

Although the term 'women's movement' refers to 'women' in the plural, and there is a steady acceptance of intersectionality, the most contentious tensions arise from the issues of prostitution and sex work, which for me puts issues of the material and the cultural on the same plane. Several feminists are more likely to believe that women working in prostitution are 'victims'. It is poverty that drives women into prostitution. Therefore, solutions to remove women from prostitution are often sought through a moralistic perspective of providing women with alternative livelihoods in sewing and tailoring or entry into monogamous marital relationships, or punishing the clients who visit sex workers, or 'rescuing' women. While several poor women are trafficked or are forced into sex work or voluntarily opt for sex work, they do exercise agency in their relationships and negotiations. Sex workers' groups like Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha in



Sangli, Maharashtra (SANGRAM) and Darbar Mahila Samanvay Samiti (DMSS) (Calcutta) question middle-class activists and government officials who dictate what is good for them. Women in sex work question the double standards of society, and suggest the removal of the stigma attached to their work and the 'decriminalisation' of their profession. Ironically, HIV/AIDS-related advocacy work is providing them with legitimate spaces to articulate their voices, albeit in limited ways.

Women who work in 'dance bars' confound these discourses even further. The controversy in 2006–07 about prohibiting women from working in dance bars in the state of Maharashtra not only magnified the double standards of society but also introduced a confluence of discourses on livelihoods and sexuality – the material and the cultural. The 1990s was also the period when the state and families facilitated the movement of young women into work in the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector (that is, call centres). Markets and families continuously strive to characterise the 'call centre girls' as respectable women participating in 'globalising India', in clear contrast to the 'call girls' or 'bar girls', who are characterised as threatening the moral fabric of society – even though all these women inhabit the same night. Safe transportation for women who work in call centres is mandated by the government, but no such requirement exists for women who work in various other sectors at night, whether in hospitals or in bars. Government officials within the executive cadres and in the police service, along with many members of the women's movement, share a common value framework in their diagnoses of the issue and in deploying possible solutions. There are more groups working on the control of trafficking in women and girls than there are working on the rights of sex workers. The 'rescue and rehabilitation' perspective motivates the intervention of several groups despite the evidence of the limited impact of such initiatives.

Dominant long-standing perspectives in the women's movement that view prostitution or women in dance bars as evidence of exploitation and as the commodification of women's bodies often miss the potential of these activities for the subversion of patriarchal values by virtue of their presence and resilience. Similar feminist positions on the representation of women in the media as objectification and commodification often sound familiarly close to the 'traditional values' argument of right-wing groups. Ghosh argues, 'the conflation of

discrimination and desire, coercion and consent have resulted in all representations that denote and connote sex to be labeled "bad" and consequently damned. The immediate loss here is the crucial difference between sexual explicitness and sexism' (Ghosh 2008: 570).

The manifesto of the DMSS (2008: 559–60) states:

We think our movement has two principal aspects. The first one is to debate, define and redefine the whole host of issues about gender poverty, sexuality that are being thrown up within the process of the struggle itself.... Secondly, the daily oppression that is practiced on us with the support of the dominant ideologies has to be urgently and consistently confronted and resisted....We believe that the questions about sexuality that we are raising are relevant not only to us sex workers but to every man and woman who questions subordination of all kinds – within the society at large and also within themselves....Sexual inequality and control of sexuality engender and perpetuate many other inequalities and exploitations too.

Conclusion

This section of chapter 1 has attempted to map the trajectory of gender and poverty discourses in India, and has highlighted the contentious issues around bringing in concerns of poverty as a material as well as a cultural experience. It may be observed that the insertion of gender into poverty discourses within an equity or distributional framework has acceptance and legitimacy, while discourses on sexuality that are embedded in the 'cultural' become embroiled in normative and moralistic positions. Issues of sexuality are either considered as a private matter or seen from a normative perspective (in other words, hetero-normative), or at best as a public health issue linked to morbidities and HIV. Women's 'victimhood' is more acceptable than their 'agency'. Articulations on the 'politics of recognition' challenge prevailing assumptions about institutions, norms and beliefs more fundamentally than the 'politics of distribution', which, with no major revamping of the structures, reiterate the status quo. Taking off from Fraser, it would be useful not to posit these questions as oppositional categories of a *redistribution–recognition dilemma*; rather, civil society groups can take on the challenge by approaching both recognition and redistribution as embedded in



each other with the possibility of 'affirmation' and 'transformation' (Fraser 2007). This could provide an opportunity to factor in difference and diversity as the basis of building progressive transformational politics rather than searching for commonalities alone.

EVOLVING DISCOURSES ON SLUMS AND POVERTY IN GLOBALISING MUMBAI

Amita Bhide

Mumbai at the current juncture epitomises the classical dilemma and contradiction of urbanisation in the twenty-first century. This dilemma is one of urbanisation under a neo-liberal regime that is supportive of capital accumulation amidst dispossession and large proportions of poor population. The sheer scale of this contradiction is formidable; it is a phenomenon that disciplines and knowledge sets are still grappling with. All this is occurring in a period that has witnessed tremendously enhanced flows of capital, ideas, and communications across national boundaries with a locus on the urban. The opportunities and aspirations of Mumbai to become a world-class city following the model of Shanghai's rapid transformation thus have to confront the reality of over half the city's population living in conditions of indignity and squalor. Contesting discourses abound in this context, with public action emerging as flows and counter-flows of them.

There is a tremendous heterogeneity in the 1959 slum settlements in Mumbai (Montgomery Watson Consultants India and YUVA 2001). Of the slums, 1,822 (93 per cent) are notified (that is, officially declared to be slums by government order), while 137 pockets are not notified, for reasons of unsustainability or year of formation of the settlements. The majority of the notified slums have *pucca* (brick or concrete) housing structures; about 16 per cent of settlements have a mix of *kutcha* (using makeshift housing materials) and *pukka* structures. The settlements differ in terms of their socio-economic characteristics, size and availability of amenities, nature of housing and infrastructure and aspirations. This heterogeneity is very real; the differences are sharp. For example, there are groups of hutments that are subjected to demolition 18–20 times a year, and there are others that are so secure in their tenures that residents have invested generously in the improvement of their houses and habitats. In similar vein, there are slums where the ratio of persons per toilet seat is 56:1, while there are those where this

ratio reaches 273:1, a difference of more than five times (Montgomery Watson Consultants India and YUVA 2001). Koliwada in Dharavi – one of the largest slum settlements in the world – has the character of a village, while the transit camp area in Dharavi is largely commercial and has the character of an industrial township; it is estimated to produce turnovers of over Rs 40 billion (USD 800 million) a year.

The most common characteristic in official discourses around slums and poverty is their denial of the voice and agency of the slum dwellers. The urban poor are not resource-poor. There is tremendous ingenuity and grit involved in the way in which they make uninhabitable areas habitable and manage to establish a foothold in the city. Several slum settlements began as fragile structures on pavements, hilltops, pipelines or marshes; and residents have created functional settlements over the years. Every basic amenity available in a slum area carries with it stories of struggles – formal or informal (Bhide 2006). Participation in the political process and the use of networks is palpable here. Thus, a community leader in Ganpat Patil Nagar says candidly: 'We are a large settlement of 15,000 households. We elected Ms. X on the assurance that we will get recognition and amenities. We also incurred the cost of the survey for the same in 2003.' There are others who are similarly aware of their vulnerable position. As Leelabai from Sunderbag said, 'Why will the councillors care for us? After all, we are only 150 households. See all these slums around. We settled before them, but they possess all amenities, we don't.' Slum residents are active contributors to and managers of the facilities in their localities. However, there is a constant attempt to denigrate their ability to contribute. All amenities given to them are thus done so on 'humanitarian' grounds, mostly free, and are inadequate and of a secondary standard.

The past few years have seen several changes. On one hand the policy discourse on poverty has become more accommodating and tolerant. There are several programmes, such as the Mission on Basic Services for Urban Poor, which celebrates participation and also empowerment. On the other hand these very attempts to 'mainstream' the poor are emerging as more sophisticated ways of actually silencing or even displacing the poor. The poor are kept out of the purview of city 'governance' even though it has a tremendous influence on them. Their politics is prevented from assuming the character of 'citizen' politics. The impact of such programmes is seen in their practice and the





processes of implementation. The following is an attempt to outline some of these practices and to tease out the discourses within as they unfold in Mumbai.

Are slum dwellers poor?

A recurrent theme underlying currently evolving discourses is the attempt to delink poverty from slum living. The resources available to residents among slums differ, but all of them share several vulnerabilities. Steady incomes and livelihoods are a rarity for a significant section. An economic status-based central sample of the 49th round of the National Sample Survey in 1993 among slum dwellers and non-slum dwellers indicates that about 46.5 per cent of slum dwellers belonged to the lower economic class (with a monthly per capita expenditure of less than Rs 385); a similar percentage was reported to be in the middle economic group (with a monthly per capita expenditure of Rs 385–700); while only 7.4 per cent belonged to a higher economic class (with a monthly per capita expenditure of more than Rs 700) (Singh 2006). In spite of this, while the slum-dwelling population in Mumbai is more than 6 million, only about 23,000 households are identified as living below the poverty line, while about 40,000 households benefit from the subsidised grain-distribution system. Large numbers of slum dwellers are thus seen to be non-poor. Poverty is being made invisible.

The proportion of malnourished children in the slums of Mumbai is fairly high; according to the report of Integrated Child Development Scheme (2008) it is 49 per cent. Other studies have shown that the greatest number of school dropouts is concentrated in wards where the slum-dwelling population is highest, and particularly in non-notified slums (Pratham 1998). Yet these linkages are increasingly being ignored by policy makers. Thus, programmes for nutrition and education have not kept pace with the increase in the slum population; in fact, there is a trend to significantly restrict the extension of benefits and to reduce the budget allocation for these programmes. A recent circular of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation sought to restrict the use of municipal health facilities to those who possessed a ration card (issued by the food supplies department, ration cards are used as an unofficial residency document). Large numbers of the poor thus have to depend on private solutions for educational and health needs as well as for food grains. This in turn is taken as a justification for reducing public spending in these sectors.

The slum-dwelling population is a vital part of the

urban workforce. Those who are engaged in low-end white-collar occupations or are in regular employment in industrial, commercial and, especially, public enterprises are considered to stand on the upper rungs of a ladder of occupations prevalent among slum dwellers. In the recent past, however, opportunities for employment in the public services, too, such as solid waste management, have taken the form of informal contract-based services in which terms of payment and working conditions are extremely poor. This has also meant that the state has increasingly distanced itself from obligations to its workforce, such as ensuring safe working conditions, payment of minimum wages and provision of benefits to women workers. Given that the minimum wage scale is itself on a par with the poverty line, a tremendous paradox has emerged of the state generating poverty on the one hand and trying to redress it on the other. Discourses on addressing poverty are largely silent on these dimensions, which contribute to impoverishment.

The processes and experiences described above demonstrate how the realities of the livelihoods of slum dwellers are being fragmented in the eyes of policy makers, with no facet of life having any bearing on the others. Slums are reduced to unauthorised housing colonies, when discussed in isolation from these linkages. In the discourses that emerge as a result of this isolation, there is no sense of historicity in why and how a slum emerges, how it is tolerated, the function that it performs vis-à-vis the political economy of the city, and who its residents are. The only dominant realities are the land on which the slum exists and the length of time it has been there. Slum development and poverty redressal thus operate in distinct spheres whereby policy action focuses on the compensation of the slum residents for their nuisance value or the value of the land occupied by them. The discourse of redevelopment with which public action in the city has been obsessed throughout the last decade has emerged in this context.

The discourse on slum redevelopment

The slum redevelopment discourse perceives slum areas as settlements of inadequate housing which can be 'rehabilitated' by being replaced with more permanent buildings. Thus, by accommodating all the existing slum dwellers in such buildings, the city can be made slum-free and fit to be a world-class city.





The discourse on redevelopment is an extremely potent one, as it fits various bills. From the perspective of the bureaucracy, this prescription of a slum-free city is cost-free; it merely involves offering developers the incentive of development rights to give free houses to slum dwellers. There is a deep political consensus on this solution; debates are on the quantum of incentive and the eligibility criteria for slum dwellers to avail themselves of the benefits of redevelopment. For the developers it is a dream bonanza; the development rights made available through slum redevelopment are a source of huge profits from possible redevelopment in high-value real-estate areas. It is also a solution that fits the aesthetics of the world-class city that tries to be inclusive. The redevelopment option is thus a win-win option for all parties concerned. Unsurprisingly, it has become the bulwark of state policy in the last decade – a prescription to be applied to every housing problem, from dilapidated buildings to the need to accommodate project-affected people.

It is to be noted that the discourse of redevelopment has also undergone nuanced changes. The first such thinking in 1991 envisaged a partial monetary contribution from slum dwellers; it also gave limited development rights by imposing a limit on profits. However, current thinking on redevelopment has leapt ahead. For one thing, the incentive of the development right has been doubled. Second, redevelopment has come to mean bypassing several building bye-laws to generate congested, poorly serviced layouts. Third, the element of people's consent has been reduced to a tool of manipulation; it has also been done away with in cases of area-based redevelopment. Such programmes have bolstered the confidence of the state to undertake massive programmes of resettlement. The prospect of resettlement is no longer an effective deterrent to consideration of project costs and viability.

Rethinking redevelopment

The discourse of redevelopment is the single most hegemonising theme in the discourse around slums in globalising Mumbai. The previous discussion shows how this has been allowed to emerge as the most important facet of meeting the challenge of the slums. It needs to be noted that the competing discourse of 'integrating slums and accepting these as part of the city fabric' – an approach advocated by the National Slum Policy – has been allowed to fade in the clamour of redevelopment. In similar vein, programmes that

generate housing for the economically weaker sections and programmes for sanitation are being adapted to suit the contours of redevelopment programmes.

The impact of redevelopment on slum communities has been devastating. It has offered them permanent building solutions, but these solutions come at a cost. Enhanced costs of maintenance are a visible example. However, there is very little debate on the implications of redevelopment, such as the formalisation of fluid occupancies, which results in a denial of the rights of the vulnerable such as single women and the elderly, rendering unfeasible occupations such as waste recycling and animal rearing, and a reduction of interactive spaces. Similarly, the element of people's aspirations and agency is underplayed. What is the community's vision of development? Can the people be in the driver's seat in a redevelopment process? What are the implications for overall housing affordability of the state becoming a party to the speculation in land through redevelopment?

The scope for asking these questions and nuancing the agenda of redevelopment has emerged as an important challenge for the struggles of the urban poor. The nature of this challenge is significantly different from previous challenges that had more to do with the recognition of claims. These are struggles over stakes rather than values. It also needs to be noted that the forces in play are a combination of bureaucracy, political power and market power. This is then the challenge that the situation in Mumbai poses for international/global civil society.

Civil society engagement with the issues of slums and poverty

Mumbai has an extremely large, dynamic and vibrant civil society. It comprises a variety of actors – political, corporate, community, professional and citizen. These groups are involved in a range of extremely creative interventions in various dimensions of poverty. However, until very recently the engagement with issues of governance was fairly limited. Of late, several initiatives have attempted to grapple with these issues. Some hitherto strong actors such as trade unions have waned, while NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and citizen groups have proliferated. One of the most interesting developments in this regard is the emergence of alliances across different actors, with the form of engagement ranging from resistance to negotiated cooperation, advocacy and implementation. Examples





of such alliances include that between National Slum Dwellers Federation, the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), Mahila Milan, and the Dharavi Bachao Samiti (Save Dharavi), formed by various CBOs, political groups and NGOs in Dharavi, and Jansatta Abhiyan – a network of individuals, groups, political actors and NGOs formed to promote the democratic decentralised governance of cities. These alliances and networks have, however, resulted in sharp divisions and polarisation, a reflection of the sharp contestations in the city. These divisions and polarities are demonstrated in the civil society presence in issues of critical significance to the slum dwellers. The terrain of civil society and its relationship to the state is becoming increasingly slippery and complex, but it is in its sheer range that the possibilities of the city of Mumbai as a global but inclusive city are embedded.



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