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India: Structural Violence, Mass Poverty and Social Inequality

Capitalism's full-fledged Foucauldian nightmare

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In India, the ratio between the top and the bottom ten per cents of wage distribution has doubled since the early 1990s. According to the 2011 Organisation for Co-operation and Economic Development report 'Divided we stand', this doubling of income inequality over the past 20 years has made India one of the worst performers in the category of emerging economies. Some 42 per cent of 1.21 billion Indians live on less than \$1.25 a day, the highest number of poor in the world.

Although the Government of India's Planning Commission asserts the nation's poor make up 30 per cent of the population, whatever the true picture is, the fact remains that a staggering amount of people still live in devastating poverty.

Poverty is not benign. It encompasses a range of issues, including health, housing, education, nutrition and life expectancy. It is pervasive across all aspects of life and throughout the duration of life. If you look up a dictionary definition of violence, 'intense force' will be included somewhere. You may also find 'injurious physical force or treatment' and perhaps an 'unwarranted exertion of force or power' (all terms are found to describe violence on

Dictionary.com). If we take these terms as our starting point, we may justifiably claim poverty to be a form of violence.

But this type of violence often goes unnoticed and is so institutionalised that it is seldom regarded as actually constituting violence. The fact that many do not regard poverty as violence is thanks mainly to what philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault suggested is our taken for granted knowledge about the world in general and how we regard ourselves in it. This ‘common sense’ knowledge may seem benign and neutral, but must be viewed within the context of power: it is part of the discourse of the powerful.

Today, individualism, inequality and capitalism are an accepted form of ‘truth’, of reality, and of how many people view the world and evaluate others. Endless glossy commercials and TV shows that wallow in the veneration of money, fame and narcissism are conveying the message that greed is good, that material wealth represents the epitome of success and the individual is king.

This is, of course, based on a false assumption, on a lingering lie. And part of that lie is the joining of bogus notions of success and failure at the hip. Notions of failure are implicit in the messages surrounding individualism, money and wealth. If you are not on the Forbes rich list, or at least aspiring to be on it, you are somehow a failure. If you don’t buy this product or wear that item, you somehow don’t cut it.

In true Foucauldian style, the ideology of modern capitalism is a power play concerned with redefining who we are or what we should be. Consumerism, the worship of fame and a notion of ‘the self’ in terms of individualism, not the collective, dovetail neatly with the ‘free market’ ideology of the day. And poverty is regarded as a legitimate outcome, as a badge of failure, of having failed. This has been and continues to be part of mainstream ideology, particularly within Western countries.

India is congratulated by the West as capitalism’s poster boy, as indicated by the presence of Indians on the latest rich list, the steel and glass world of Gurgaon near Delhi or the cyber parks of Bangalore or Hyderabad. The message is that if the wealth hasn’t trickled down to the lower half of society just yet, wait 20 years and it will. The problem here is that it has already been over 20 years since India embraced neo-liberalism and the poverty alleviation rate is still stuck where it was back then. How long should people wait? How many generations are to be sacrificed?

As India opens its economy further to Western interests whose own economies have been devastated, it begs one to wonder why would the economic dogma and corporations responsible for that mess bring anything but a similar form of profiteering and chaos to the shores on India. The lie is sold nevertheless.

But the cracks are now there for all to see. Even people like Martin Sorrell, chief executive of media company WPP, has stated that inequality and the concentration of wealth is increasingly emerging as one of the underlying causes of the financial crisis and subsequent recession. Sorrell has argued that a more equal spread of wealth would mean more money is recycled back into the economy thereby creating stable demand. He is not alone. Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn was voicing similar concerns prior to his dethronement.

For supporters of neo-liberalism, however, it is convenient to forget about all those neighbourhoods in India with sweatbox dhabas, grimy hardware stores, world-weary faces and vegetable stalls, where children cling to their mothers' shoulders, perched side saddle on saree-covered hips. But that India is here and now; it is also 'modern India' – the version inhabited by the majority.

But it doesn't fit the fairytale. It doesn't fit the myth. It's not the much celebrated steel and glass modern India inhabited by the minority. A privileged minority, whose reservation quota is never questioned, is barely acknowledged. By accident of birth, whether through class or caste, or a combination of both, its members were always in prime position to take advantage of the privileges afforded by background in the brave new world of economic neo-liberalism.

In a heavily stratified society skewed either in your favour or against you long before you ever leave the womb.

Since 1991 in India, politicians and their corporate seducers have presided over a system that has shifted wealth from the real wealth producers – the labouring classes – to the rich and privileged. In doing so, we have been witnessing not only the robbing of people's income, but their life expectancy, their life chances, their access to food, their access to education, their access to health, decent housing and all other things that contribute towards people achieving their proper potential in life.

There is no shock and awe, not unless you have been invaded by the military or paramilitary forces, forcibly evicted from your land or village or subjected to the ongoing looting and pillaging of natural resources in Chhattisgarh, Orissa or elsewhere.

In the main, the process is slow and ongoing, yet is all pervasive. Its practical effects result in lives marked by hardship, struggle and blight. The malnourished children, whose food has been stolen from their bellies. The child who dies in the womb, whose life was robbed before it ever had a chance, if indeed it would have ever had a chance anyway. The preventable diseases, the lakhs of farmers who took their own lives as a result of corporate collusions with successive administrations, the lack of access to drinking water and the lack of basic human rights and dignity that financial security can so often bring.

Of course, no one is ever held to account for this form of structural violence. It's become a fact of life, it's become a fact of India and the world at large, which buckles under the perils of the imperialism and neocolonialism that we now witness.

I pose the following questions to the supporters of the current system.

If someone were to come along and steal the food from your plate, the livelihood from your hands, the health from your body, the years from your life and the water from your tap, how would you feel? And how would you feel if you then witnessed the appropriation of all that by a handful of people who try to convince you that it is all for your own good?

When corruption in places like India is mentioned, the phenomenon is described as 'illegal capital flow'. Yet when the functioning of India per se (or for that matter, many other countries) is mentioned, it is usually described as 'democracy'. Unfortunately in these times, 'democracy' all over the world is becoming stripped of its original meaning and becoming institutionalized violence and theft by any other name.