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IMPOVERISHING TRENDS THAT DEPRIVE HUMAN DIGNITY: DERIVATIVES FROM LISTENING TO PEOPLE IN POVERTY

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Abstract

The neo-liberal economic project has fundamentally altered the living conditions of millions of people across the globe. Its relentless profit-seeking progress has destroyed commons and natural resource-based livelihoods, alienating communities from their habitats and stripping people of dignity. In this worsening context, there is a crying need to reflect on the purpose of people's institutions and their actions and intervene to ensure universal human rights, equity and justice. These people's institutions must not only act proactively to enable self-determination but also act as critical determinants of standards of public and civic governance. The various institutions of the State, market, family and community must remain responsible for securing and honouring the rights, livelihoods and dignity of human beings. In this essay, we explore the current context of human existence and sketch the transformative potential of peoples' organisations and networks at the local, national and global levels.

The Deteriorating Human Condition

In the development literature, human existence and relating (being) - has been given poor priority when compared to task-based delivery of outputs (becoming). This has entailed a fragmented, instrumentalised and result-oriented understanding of human lives, further resulting in increasing isolation and exclusion of people from processes that govern their lives. These processes have acquired virulent intensity particularly in past 60 years, since 1949 when the era of development is said to have begun (Sachs 1992). It is during this time, that many modern institutions with their authoring power on people's lives have consolidated their tremendous power in the hands of a small section of the elite for achieving their self-serving purpose (Parasuraman, et.al. 2004).

This consolidation and rising power of modern institutions has coincided with intensification of processes that have radically transformed the very nature of people's traditional institutions that were proximal to their lives such as families and communities. In many instances, these traditional institutions have been torn apart, progressively discredited or rendered irrelevant. This has in turn ruptured the inter-relatedness between people and their environment. On their part , traditional institutions, in reaction to the challenge to survive, have mostly reacted by polarising rank and privilege within, and strengthening their exploitative and discriminatory functions.

The role of modern institutions in exacerbating the deterioration of the lives of the vast sections of the population has to be elaborated. Indeed the reason for the deteriorating human condition is that increasingly powerful modern institutions [state and market] are becoming indifferent to the human well-being. These

institutions based as they are on rational western science and its Cartesian dualistic philosophy, characterise human experience as mechanised systems and reduce people to machines. They often aim at short-sighted economic gain and are fuelled by vast advances in technology. In their single – minded quest for profit and efficiency, these institutions have reduced more and more people across the globe to their labouring bodies and have excluded them from decisions that determine their lives.

Hence in the last few decades, the intensity of exploitative and exclusionary processes encoded within human institutions has been aggravated. For most part, both kinds of these institutions [traditional and modern] have disempowered people and communities and failed to meet their self-actualisation needs and collective well-being goals of their members.

Fragmentation of Traditional Institutions

The most proximal institutions historically for people have been traditional ones such as family, clan and community. Individual belonging and collective well-being are critical concerns of these institutions. Many of these traditional institutions are built on holistic perspectives that recognise the inter-relatedness of human existence with each other and their environment.

Historically, traditional institutions played several roles based on this holistic perspective: governance of people's commons; grievance redressal, conflict resolution and justice; nurturance and social security of members, particularly the very young and the very old; economic production, such as caste-based guilds that had patronage and apprenticed members for training; indigenous medicinal and engineering practices; spirituality, philosophy and religion.

However, it is equally true that in more instances, traditional institutions allot hierarchical rank and privilege and rigid roles to their members; and are authoritarian and discriminatory [along gender, age, ethnicity, ability, caste and race lines]. Their very emphasis on relatedness often resulted in pervasive exploitative behaviours in all the aspects of individual experience. Because many of these traditional institutions valued collective well-being, they often accord individual self-actualisation needs secondary status, particularly for those with lower rank and privilege. The repercussions on those who did not adhere to their prescribed rank and roles within these hierarchies or transgressed institutional norms are severe.

The second core element in these institutions is the relationship that these communities share with their environment. Communities, traditionally, have been often defined by geographical proximity, embedded in their natural eco-systems. Since the beginning of civilization, local communities have claimed adjacent ecological resources, both land and sea. Communities understand their role as stewards of these eco-systems; and often institute a relationship based on respect in their governance of these resources. Their relations were, for most part, in keeping with naturally occurring historical patterns and in alignment with the other parts of the systems. These were based on sustainable and equitable usufractory rights.

Finally, threatened by the rapid pace of change and the ethical requirements to manage it, traditional institutions resort to rigid adherence of the most "literal" traditional values and meanings usually encoded in scripture or through orthodox practices to determine their values. These values often emphasise hierarchical rank and privilege within these institutions. Members who are historically powerful within these institutions managed to buffer and utilise modern processes for self-serving purposes and often augment their positions of power. Traditional institutions are also no longer able or are unwilling to provide the relatedness and care that they did previously. Those that have been historically

disempowered in these institutions - women, children, old people, the differently abled, ethnic, race and castes hierarchies – have been further exploited or completely excluded.

Dehumanisation of People

"The history that affects every man is world history.[6]" In the last few decades, Modern Technology and Institutions have engineered foundational changes in human lives; rapidly and relentlessly restructuring them, their purpose and how they relate to each other and their environment. Simultaneously, a vast array of institutional formations that span the globe have emerged; ranging from global governance bodies, particularly economic governance, to the nation-state to common interest groups. Often this restructuring of people's lives has dehumanised vast majority among, them, reducing them to their labouring bodies, machine like and dispensable.

Modern science, upon which the edifice of modern institutions is built, reduces human collectivity and institutions to engineering models and characterizes human processes as goal-directed endeavours to enhance material well-being in any one single direction in logical, linear, repeatable and planned order based on a distinctly identifiable set of cause and effect variables. In this reduction, modern science systemically denies the intelligent, self organising and emergent nature of living systems. It also reductively characterises human beings as machines engaged in mechanical action repeatedly; homogenised and deployed inter-changeably through the use of conceptual devices such as consumers, social capital, vote banks, labour pools.

This simplified conception of collectivism based on enumeration denies the human endeavour to seek balance between individual aspirations and accountability for collective human well-being (Dreze and Sen 1999). Hence, modern institutions have stopped moulding their members into critical citizens; instead emphasising uniformity and conformity. In their conception of resource sharing and justice, modern institutions apparently emphasise objectivity, fraternity and equality. In their claim of equality; they do not acknowledge differences of individual rank and privilege. Self-determination [survival and success] is attributed to personal competence; and failure to succeed is a result of personal inadequacy.

It must be stated clearly that modern institutions themselves do not articulate an exploitative position overtly, and indeed might publicly claim to be participative and empowering. They do not take cognisance of the fact that, their very prioritizing of objectivity and rationality over ethics and human experience and their lack of compassion for human well-being creates a "value" vacuum. This vacuum is rapidly occupied by the most powerful and often oppressive forces currently under play (Hannerz Ulf 1991). These forces tap into vast, emotional and repressed reservoirs of power and reintroduce truth for their self serving purposes. For instance, in modern India, there was a public denial of the importance diverse mythology in people's lives to understand their reality. This social denial has resulted in the homogenisation and manipulation of these powerful latent symbols by fundamentalist forces to incite violence and religious hatred across the nation.

These institutions also deny deeper issues of historical discrimination and inequity in which self-determination is embedded. They deny that the playing field on which people live their lives out is actually not a level one, but deeply contoured by history and experience. They refuse to also address it proactively, and tacitly permit, and even exacerbate exploitation and exclusion of many of its members. For instance, a Dalit

[6] Mills, page 4

child who is a first generation learner and a Brahmin child who is supported by educated parents to study are tested on the same parameters in modern school examinations; in spite of the historically powerful social institution of caste, that creates vastly different, inequitable life contexts for both children.

Modern institutions have conferred new forms of rank and privilege by confining their membership only to those who meet certain elitist entry criteria [education, task proficiency, urbanisation, networks] and are enumerated for entitlement. For instance, not only do modern institutions invalidate indigenous knowledge systems, they have created new entry criteria that require its members to acquire expertise in their own science and technology. Accessing this expertise requires power and resources, for instance, time and money to be educated or trained in modern, educational institutions. Those who can access these entitlements in modern institutions are often traditional elite with historical rank and privilege, who leverage power to compete in the new contexts. Hence they have increased and consolidated resources of a few elite, increasing the gap between resource rich and poor.

Those people who are not able to meet these entry criteria are considered useless and excluded by modern institutions. In traditional institutions, though deeply ridden by rank and privilege, human belonging is an important purpose. Hence these institutions were deeply concerned with inclusion and considered nurturance as an important function. For instance, the traditional Panchayats in India would only excommunicate a village member if all other forms of punishment (asking forgivance, fines) failed; and then too only progressively, first excluded from being a member of immediate collective in the village and then excluded from social interaction. The latter was considered to be an extreme measure. Modern institutions instead value instrumentality and efficiency. They are not concerned with inclusion; ruthlessly excluding and ignoring large numbers of people, if they are not useful. Between the rupturing fabrics of traditional institutions and the indifference of modern institutions, more and more people fall through the social security net.

In sum, modern institutions have increased the vulnerability that many people, who have been structurally disempowered, (Smith 2000) experience. Most people forced to be part of modern process feel increasingly unheard, alienated, used and lonely (Mehta 1990, Srinivasan TN 1998, Gilpin 2000).

The Emergent Consumption Bias of the State

The progressive exclusion of many by decreeing them as 'useless' is very much the characteristic of the modern society, but it has acquired more salience in the contemporary times. The society we live in can be characterized as one that is making a swift transition from *production-centered* citizenship to *consumption-centered* citizenship. The heightened obsession with consumption has deleterious consequences for large section of the population among the non-poor, with the aged, infirm, HIV-Infected and disabled among them being affected the most. This obsession has received further fillip in the globalization times with the state going all out to promote growth without distributive justice.

Producer to Consumer

This is precisely nothing but echoing of what is happening at the global arena. At the global level the celebration of the untrammeled consumer has triggered off a process of elision of the poor from the moral horizon of the society. At the national level the consumerist bias in constructing the notion of an ideal citizen has compelled the members of the society to seek their personal significance and private salvation in being able to consume the goods available in the market place in an unrestrained and uninterrupted manner, with

an immediacy not associated with the productivist bias of the previous era. (In contrast, the State with the productivist orientation enjoined its citizens to defer gratification and free themselves from the immediacy of need for indulgence by saving their surplus income. The citizen of the foregone era was a supreme producer). The immediacy of indulgence and consumption is possible only for those who have vantage position in the frontline of economy and perfect fitness to receive and enjoy the good and services. Since that which is enjoyable today may become obsolete tomorrow, one has no room for deferring gratification. One has to consume in the here and now as doing so *only* constitutes the essence of a good citizen and significant person with a control over his/her destiny simultaneously. The fitness to consume with a sense of urgency and a compulsion of immediacy has become a global obsession among the non-poor. One should be fit enough to receive the sensations given off by the market forces.

Contrarily, the ones who do not possess the 'fitness' have to lose visibility and cannot lay claim to all the privileges available with the State for its desirable citizens. What is more, the ones without fitness are pathologised, marginalized, rendered incomplete and made to feel unwanted. Converting this institutional image to a self-image of each citizen is successfully completed by the cosmetic and entertainment industries. The continual and compulsive foregrounding and privileging of citizen who is shown only in the capacity of a *consumer* with least references to his/her worklife, is an expression of the transition from production-centred economy to consumption-centred economy.

Destruction of the Environment and the Commons

Just as modern science reduces human systems to engineering models; it also reduces nature into mechanistic models. Rational, western science sees nature as something to be captured, exploited and commoditised. Hence modern institutions rationalise the exploitation of natural eco-systems by reducing them to measurable, material resources in their imagination of growth and development. Human development is reduced systemically to economic development, and nature to natural resources. These natural resources then can be governed centrally, extracted and used for short term monetary gains. This greed has destroyed non-renewable global natural resources and degraded eco-systems drastically across the globe.

In this process, modern institutions alienated local communities from their traditional habitats, and ignored their wisdom in husbanding these eco-systems. A pivotal factor in this alienation process of local communities is the shift in the notion of property in the governance of these habitats. To achieve this shift, modern institutions, particularly the State, raise the question "who governs the land and water?" Answering this question, they originally conceived nature as being a great wild void[7] that no one owned or governed: trees and fish in the water and land. They assumed an ownership vacuum, resulting in "null" ownership. Since no one owned these resources, they could be accessed by all and the law of competition and capture prevailed.

At this point, the nation-state stepped into this "vacuum" and converted "null property" into public property by drawing administrative boundaries. This public property could then be governed and regulated in a "rational" and 'efficient' way. What this rationalisation process had completely overlooked was that all natural eco-systems did not have null ownership. Local communities had already claimed and governed the eco-systems as commons.

[7] Philip Steinberg's 2001 book *The Social Construction of the Ocean*

These administrative boundaries cut through community commons and converted them into public property. Once converted into public property, the State began to make available natural eco-systems for extraction, often in an attempt to "rationalise" their use for national development. In the process, often public property became equivalent to private property; and these eco-systems were made available to fuel economic globalisation, that in turn consolidated global resources in the hands of a few. Even as it is clearly evident that this process of consolidation only benefits a few at the cost of many, it has been justified using the economic "trickle down" theory, the belief that it would eventually trickle down to everyone.

In reality, this rationalisation process rapidly reduces natural environment to a resource base; expropriates communities' rights to govern their commons and habitats and hands it over to a few individuals for self-serving purposes. In the process, it has fragmented individual meaning making and maps, discredited people's lived wisdoms and rendered their fierce intelligence irrelevant.

In many instances, these extractive processes has left natural eco-systems ravaged, with communities no longer able to eke out a living from them. In other instances, communities have been displaced by powerful, competitive interests from their environments; or else they have been denied their rights of access and governance of these eco-systems. Since these local communities no longer have governance (tenure, usufractory) rights in managing these eco-systems; they have begun to invest less energy, time and money to manage these resources. In order to survive in an increasingly competitive world, they often adopt the same extractive tools that other competitors used, going against their traditional wisdom and disregarding the damage to their environment.

More people have been forced to migrate into alien and often urban habitats, resulting in communities now transiting into neighbourhoods (more impersonal and unconcerned). Geographical markers based on inter-relatedness with each other and with their environment are no irrelevant. The wisdom about their habitats is dismissed as unworthy, superstitious, wasteful, unscientific and/or irrational and is no longer useful in their new contexts based on cash economies. Historical, traditional knowledge systems - very different from western science and often more holistic have been erased or irrevocably damaged.

Failure of the Nation-State

For most part, the nation-state has failed in its governance and welfare functions; particularly for those who have been historically discriminated. Though the modern nation-state entered with promises of equality and prosperity for all its citizens, its actual performance on the ground has been disappointing in many instances. Fundamental to this failure is the narrowing of its purpose from citizen's welfare and justice to economic development.

Hence, it has not been able to address existing inequities, allowing traditional elite to retain their positions of authority and control for their personal benefit; while absolving them of their responsibilities.

The poor performance of the nation-state in fulfilling many of its citizen's aspirations has left a vacuum in governance; not just at the national levels but also at the international levels; resulting in adverse consequences such as weakening of international democratic efforts such as SAARC. This vacuum has been quickly filled by private capital forces and global credit groups– centrally the World Bank and the IMF whose central purpose is economic growth and profit, without any ethical responsibility towards human welfare.

This unhealthy confluence of interests between the modern democratic state and capital is driven by underlying western philosophical commonalities that reduce human well-being to economic development. This confluence of interests has resulted in the permeability of national boundaries; in consolidating capitals, opening markets and pooling labour. One, national boundaries, particularly of developing countries have allowed the extraction of natural resources, and movement and consolidation of economic resources into the hands of a global elite network spanning the world. These elite are also often the maximum consumers of a global economic and natural resources and therefore are seen as favourable to the well-being of the nation (Bauman 1998). Second, national boundaries have been made permeable so that local markets have been opened, pitching them against powerful global forces in unhealthy competition, often affecting local sustainability. Third, the permeability of national boundaries has allowed private capital to predatorily shift their operations across national boundaries in search of "cheap" labour and consolidation of labour pools, unprotected by state regulation and machinery (Jaeger 1994, Nayar 2000). The people in these labour pools are usually unorganised, work under exploitative conditions, with poor life and livelihood security, and vulnerable to distant forces over which they have little knowledge and no authority. This created unbridled commoditisation and commercialisation of human lives, beginning with the body and extending to all relations that people have.

This prioritisation of economic development has also resulted in the erosion of social security and social welfare function of the state. In a "free market", where success is determined by competition, social welfare measures [education, health, public distribution systems] are seen as barriers for development. These social security measures are instead reduced from citizenship entitlements to commodities that people have to pay for. The welfare state is gradually receding or forced to recede from the public sphere shrinking its range of responsibilities to merely those related to militarisation and autocratic control (Sheila Pelizzon & John Casparis 1996). With time, these repressive powers of the state also became increasingly evident; with the nation-state showing increasing intolerance for dissenting voices (Khor M 2000, Madeley J 1999, Strange S 1999).

The corrosion of traditional organizations and the receding welfare state has meant that the responsibility to ensuring human rights and social security is shifted from collective to the personal, individual and private realm. Often this is beyond the means of the individual. (Ritzer G 1993). As a result, more and more people are exploited and excluded. This calls for a critical inquiry into the highly individualised Human Rights Framework.

Failure to Eliminate Poverty

Increasing number of people is being impoverished at a rapid pace, hastened by economic globalisation processes. Human economic well-being or well-becoming is being pulled in two directions (Baulch and McCulloc, 1998). A vast majority of people in the globe only 'become' poorer from 'being' poor over time. Simultaneously, there is a significant minority 'becoming' richer from being rich on an everyday basis (Narayan et al, 2000a & 2000b). The gap between those who were powerful and those who were exploited or excluded has increased. But ignoring these dynamics, poverty discourses often focus only on economic poverty, without conveniently questioning the constructed nature of poverty.

Eradication of the Poor

Economic globalisation has concentrated power and resources in the hands of a few global elite. It has reduced many other people to their labouring bodies, interchangeable with machines. This reduction, along

with heightened competition for existing natural and man-made resources, has resulted in rendering large numbers of people irrelevant and dispensable to the resourceful population. When these people, who are the poorest, are no longer able to generate enough resources for their own survival, they become expendable. With this, the emphasis of society shifts from eradicating poverty to eliminating the poor.

Underlying this shift in perspective is indifference, and the death of compassion and responsibility in the repertoire of emotions in the resourceful population towards the poor. Writing about the banishing and death of the poor but not that of the poverty, Bauman writes, "The rich who happen to be at the same time the resourceful and the powerful among the actors of the political scene do not need the poor either for the salvation of their souls or for staying rich and getting richer. The poor are not god's children on which to practice the redemption of charity. They are not the reserve army of labourer, which need to be groomed back into wealth production. They are not the consumers who would be tempted and cajoled into giving the lead to recovery [of the economy]. Whichever way you look at them the poor are not of use. (Bauman, 2002)

Nevertheless, hunger and poverty raise morally embarrassing questions and demand ethically redeemable positions from society. Many of these elite rich who reap the benefits of these impoverishing processes escape their responsibility by living in insulated enclaves, and cleansing their imagination and geography of the presence of the poor.

First, in response to the challenge raised by hunger and poverty, the resourceful population rationalize poverty by individualizing it; by making entitlements a consequence of individual choice and merit rather than systemic causes. Sometimes this merit is accumulated in previous birth through karma, sometimes it is acquired by hard work, and sometimes by being intelligent. The poor people deserve to be poor because they have committed sins in their previous lives, or are lazy or are stupid. By reducing poverty to a personal choice – 'the poor choose to be poor', they evade the embarrassing question about who benefits from impoverishing processes. Instead they objectify and stigmatise the poor person - blame the victim. Writing about poverty, Jones and Novak say "Poverty is a corrosive which acts not only through the effects of malnutrition and unhealthy living and working conditions, but also through those social relationships which depict poor as worthless. Surviving poverty is thus not only a matter of trying to balance an inadequate budget. It is also having to deal with the social and psychological stress, with insecurity, social isolation and the often thinly disguised contempt of the more powerful." (Jones, D and Novak, 1999. pp 29,30).

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