

THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY

Synopsis: the poverty in India is on increase, especially in the villages and countryside. In spite of 50 years of independence there is no perceptible improvement in the quality of life and living standards. Millions and millions suffer from starvation and malnutrition. Official figures about the people living below poverty line are not reliable as they are often manipulated. An objective and scientific methodology in this respect is the need of the hour. Poverty cannot be defined in absolute terms, but those without even basic minimum needs of life are really poor and their number in the country is shocking. Political independence is meaningless without freedom from hunger. Rapidly increasing population has aggravated the situation. India remains one of the top countries where children are malnourished and ill-fed. The green revolution has benefited only the rich farmer and affluent people in the society. The poor have been further marginalized here too. Poverty is a curse and root cause of many evils and crimes. Poverty alleviation has been a mere voting-catching device with the political leaders. Poverty amidst plenty is the main problem. A proper balance should be maintained between industrial and agricultural growth and expansion. Many of the Directive Principles enshrined in our Constitution need to be made fundamental rights. Fair distribution of national wealth among its citizens is another factor that should be taken care of.

The incidence of poverty in India is on increase in spite of recent opening up of the Indian economy, globalization and market oriented economy. The rich are becoming richer and the poor, poorer and deprived. The rural poverty has increased from 32 per cent to 42 per cent as nothing effective has been done to alleviate poverty and to bridge the gap between the well off and the needy and poor in the villages. Poverty can be seen at its worst in some of the Indian States like Bihar, Orissa, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh etc. where millions and millions of people suffer from hunger, poverty, malnutrition, ill-health and destitution. Hundreds of them are dying regularly for want of basic minimum needs. There cannot be a more appalling and agonising scene than this. In spite of our 50 years of independence, we have not been able to provide millions and millions of Indians with barest minimum food to keep their body and soul together, let alone the improvement in the quality of life.

It is estimated that about half of the Indian population has been living below poverty line. However, official figures show that poverty in India has declined from 36 per cent in 1984-85 to 29.9 percent during 1987-88. These figures cannot be relied upon because they are prepared on the dictate of the political bosses.

For example, till March 1997, it was estimated that 18.1 per cent of people in India were living below poverty line against 29.9 per cent, during 1987-88. Then this figure was doubled to 39.57 per cent at the full meeting of the Planning Commission held on 10 March, 1997 and presided over by the Prime Minister to suit and serve the ends of the political leaders and masters. Every now and then poverty statistics are manipulated and new methodologies are evolved to calculate the number of poor in the country. It is high time that such practices are stopped and a sound, foolproof and objective methodology, based on facts and technical data, is adopted.

Poverty cannot be defined exactly and in absolute terms. It may differ from country to country and even from one province to another in the same country. Similarly, a rural poor and an urban poor cannot be measured with the same yardstick because the cost of living in respect of these two are different. But all people whose calorie intake is very low or modest, those who do not have basic minimum needs of living are below poverty line. They are victims of hunger, starvation, ill health and malnutrition because their means of subsistence are abysmally low and negligible. They have been living in famine no money to buy it. Political freedom and independence is meaningless unless people are free from hunger and abject poverty. These people just exist and life has no joy, no significance for them.

The rural poor spent over 75 per cent of their meager income on food. In urban areas too, the very poor spend almost the same percentage of their wages on food items. Then there is hardly left anything for clothing, housing, education or health. These people have been victims and endemic hunger, poverty and destitution. Even the food-grains sold through the network of ration and fair price shops at subsidized rates have been beyond their purchasing power. The imbalance between the population and food-production is hardly keeping pace with the rapidly increasing number of mouths in the country. According to a report India is one of the three countries where 50 per cent of the world's malnourished children are found. The other two countries are Pakistan and Bangladesh. About 53 per cent of under-five children are malnourished in the country. Infants here are worse off than in any country of the world. Thus, the per capita availability of

foodgrains was 15.2 ounces per day in 1956 which increased marginally to 15.8 ounces in 1974.

There has been green revolution and food-grains production has definitely increased but this has been in respect of fine and superior foodgrains like wheat and rice only. As far as the coarse foodgrains like bazra, jowar, barley etc. are concerned, the growth has been served the interests of relatively rich and prosperous sections of the society and the weaker and vulnerable sections have been left in the lurch. The marginal farmers have been further marginalized and it is the rich peasants and farmers who have benefited the most from this agricultural revolution. There has been improvement in the quality of life and living-standards of the upper middle class but as far as the poor classes are concerned, they are just managing to survive and exist. For them radio, electronic gadgets etc. are still a luxury. They cannot dream of consumer durables. The small farmers, daily wage-earners, labourers, artisans etc. In the villages and small towns are still being exploited by the middle men and money-landers. They are the worst victims of hoarders, black marketers and price-manipulators. The traders and shopkeepers fleece them as and when they will because they are poor, illiterate, superstitious and fatalistic.

Poverty is not a sin but is definitely a curse which in its turn generates such social evils and crimes as theft, dacoity, kidnapping, murder, drug-trafficking, violence, prostitution, extremism, terrorism etc. A poor person, driven to extreme and desperation can stoop too low to commit any crime. Poor and unemployed young men in Jammu and Kashmir easily become an unwilling instrument of foreign sponsored terrorism. Insurgency and terrorism in our North-eastern States and directly linked with poverty, unemployment and industrial backwardness prevailing there. The poor masses there feel alienated, isolated and discriminated against and easily become tools in the hands of war-lords and terrorists Naxalite and People's War Ground movements thrive well in the regions where there is extreme poverty, illiteracy and economic backwardness. Many times extreme poverty pushes the people to suicide. For example, three brothers in Ludhiana (Punjab), all daily wage labourers and dalits committed suicide by consuming alphas poison on April 4, 1997. They could not afford the proper treatment for their ailing father because of extreme poverty who ultimately died for want of medication and care. Many unmarried girls hand, immolate or drink poison to commit suicide because their parents cannot afford dowry or decent marriage.

No sincere and determined efforts have been made to remove and check poverty. There is a clear lack of social and political will to have alleviated poverty. With the political leaders "poverty alleviation" has been a mere voting-catching slogan. In spite of the 50 years of independence and political freedom the masses in India are living below the poverty line. They are not only poor but also illiterate, hungry person is the most frustrated person. For him morality, conscience, social order, religion, patriotism etc. have no sense, no availability of employment, land, water, foodgrains is further shrinking in the country. The natural resources are already under pressure resulting in adverse environmental consequences.

India is rich both in man and materials, but they have not been exploited. Poverty amidst plenty seems to be a major problem. Availability in plenty of cheap and skilled labour and natural resources is a great advantage; which can be very favourably utilized for rapid industrial growth and agricultural expansion. Actually there is no contradiction between industrialization, growth, globalization and opening up of the economy on the one hand and eradication of poverty and social justice on the other. Industrial and agricultural growth and development will go a long way in removing poverty, unemployment and in improving living standards of the people. For the empowerment of the weaker and vulnerable sections of the society it is imperative that a proper balance is struck between the development of agriculture and industry. India means villages, agriculture and cottage industries. At the same time it also means globally competitive industrial growth and development. Both should go hand in hand to make India a strong, poverty-free and a major economic power in the world.

India is a welfare State, and it is the duty of the government to see that all its citizens lead a good, meaningful, satisfying and qualitative life. Some of the directive Principles like "the right to adequate means to livelihood," right to work", protection against "unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement," "free and universal education up to the age of 14 years" should now become part of our fundamental rights and, therefore, justiciable. The concentration of wealth in the hands of few should be prevented and there should be fair distribution of national wealth among all its citizens.