TOWARDS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

DRAFT CHAPTER ON

SOCIAL POLICY

IN THE 8TH PLAN

Preamble

In 1990, the planning commission of India started the process of formulating the approach paper for the 8th five year plan. Among other things, they decided that from the 8th plan they would introduce a chapter on social policy as a part of the approach document, and work towards setting up a division on social policy in the planning commission, that would have the function of ensuring that all investment approvals given by the commission were in conformity with the principles of social policy enumerated in the approach paper.

I was commissioned to draft this chapter and it was finalised after incorporating the inputs of Rajni Kothari and Lakshmi Jain who, as members of the planning commission, were closely associated with the process.

Unfortunately, the incumbent national government of Prime Minister V.P. Singh resigned in November 1990, and so did the incumbent planning commission. Though a new planning commission took charge soon after, they only survived a few months, before national elections were declared and a new government elected to power. Eventually, the chapter on social policy was never incorporated into the final approach paper.

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January 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. INTRODUCTION

Despite forty three years of democracy and development, India has not been able to resolve the major contradictions inherent in its society. Though this period has seen enormous economic growth, the benefits of this growth have not significantly touched the poorest and most needy sections of society, and have not brought about the social transformation that was anticipated.

After four decades of independence, much of India still lives in poverty. Though official statistics show a decline in the percentage of population "below the poverty line", the absolute number of poor people today has not significantly changed from what it was in the early fifties. Development and economic growth have helped many families to move above the poverty line, but many others have been dislocated by development projects and activities, or by a deterioration of their environment, and have slid below the poverty line. According to a recent report of the working group on development and welfare of scheduled tribes during eighth plan, 16.94 lakh persons were displaced by 110 projects studied, and of these 8.14 lakh (54%) were tribals.

Economic growth, apart from being inequitable, has not resolved the various social issues, some historical and others of recent origin, that plague the Indian society. Individuals and communities continue to be oppressed because of their religion, race, caste or sex. Violence is increasingly becoming the universal language of protest and dissent, brutalising

individuals and communities. Social, political and professional institutions are being eroded, and many benign social differences are progressively becoming antagonistic. Our present lifestyle has been proved to be economically and ecologically unsustainable, and is threatening the very basis of survival. Corruption in government and public life is increasing and the State continues to encroach upon the rights of individuals and communities.

The persistence of these social and economic contradictions is a failure of planning. It is a failure to understand the real nature of the State and society and to set in motion social and political processes that alone could have channelised the creative energies of a nation, emerging from centuries of colonialism, towards a path of genuine development.

The Experience Since Independence

In the first fifteen or twenty years after independence, the dream of economic security and self-reliance, and of creating a just social system, energised the nation. The country moved towards self-sufficiency in foodgrains production and in a large array of consumer goods, and built up its infrastructure and industrial base. But then the dream began to turn sour. The efforts at enhancing production and productivity were showing results but the socio-political measures, required to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits, lagged far behind. The state played a major role in achieving self-reliance for the nation but not for its people, having failed to use its

2

leverage for redistributive measures. India achieved self-sufficiency in food production, and even started producing surpluses yet large sections of society suffered from malnutrition arising out of lack of adequate food intakes. Indian industry grew at a rapid rate, but so did unemployment, especially as industrial technology became increasingly capital intensive. The number of hospitals and schools increased, but sickness and illiteracy remained. Various social amenities became available, progressive laws were enacted, benign policies were formulated, yet social tensions grew and society progressively became more turbulent and violent.

By the early eighties, there was a general sense of despair among many about the process of social transformation. The late 60s and 70s had seen an unprecendented rise in social conflicts and tensions, and of political turmoil. Rejection of efforts to "discipline the nation" through the authoritarian regime imposed during the national emergency, followed by the failure of the alternate, liberal government to effectively address the main social issues, presented the nation with seemingly few alternatives. Political thinkers were by and large found silent, the few who spoke out were slow in making themselves heard, while politicians and administrators either continued with a further application of earlier tried, unsuccessful, remedies, or resorted to even more regressive methods in dealing with problems.

The hopelessness of the decade polarised perceptions. There were those who blamed everything on the rapidly expanding population, as if that was a cause rather than a symptom of the

malaise that affected the society. There were others who totally capitulated to the "growth fiends", and put their faith in the trickle down effect and the path and model of "developed" nations. Some even admitted that in taking India to the 21st century, many would have to be sacrificed, but that such a price was worth paying.

We enter the 90s with 15 years of turmoil, of failed and abandoned experiments, with a people who are getting more cynical and impatient while waiting for the government to renew their sense of hope. The recent change in government has set in motion yet another new effort at resuming the course of social transformation, an effort which can only succeed if we learn from our past mistakes. We are struggling to emerge from an era where the strength of a democracy came to be measured by its ability to suppress dissent. We are attempting to reverse the process whereby the path of development allowed only one view of how things must be done for all times, in all places. We have affirmed the need to adopt and encourage alternative paths, but how are we to do this through a system that continues to be structured around the old 'model' of the Indian State and its institutional interstices?

B.   The Planning Process

But   assuming that we are willing to restructure the nature of the State (a bold assumption but an urgent necessity), what is the role and responsibility of the State in transforming society?

Clearly the State is not identical to the society, and therefore has only a limited role in tackling social problems. However, the extent of its role depends on the extent of control it exercises over social processes, directly or indirectly. In India, the State has intervened over the years into almost all aspects of social interactions, often taking over functions that are rightfully not the State's domain. Consequently, its role and responsibility in tackling social issues, and promoting social transformation, is very significant. It has the responsibility for planning for almost all aspects of the Indian society.

Planning, in so far as it is an intervention in processes of nature and the social order, can only be justified where the existing spontaneous social processes cannot, on their own, achieve the desired objectives. Through planning, then, efforts are made to supplement creative social energies, and to curb the undesirable ones. Planning also becomes a means of harmonising distinct social processes which, by working together, can achieve far more than the sum total of their individual achievements.

Planning in India was started soon after independence to channelise economic, social and political processes towards a focussed strategy for development. At the time of independence, India not only faced very serious social and economic problems but was emerging from a period of colonial repression. The socio-political processes and institutions, that form the fabric of a healthy society, had been badly eroded and corrupted, leaving the newly born nation bereft of a dynamic peoples' process.

5

A sectoral model of planning was adopted in India, with a clear bias towards economic planning. This was due perhaps to the assumption that what India mainly needed was economic growth, and that once this was achieved all other problems, like those of equity, social transformation and modernisation, could be tackled. Unfortunately, despite impressive economic growth in the last forty years, the resolution of other problems has not occured.

It is obvious that economic growth is an inherent part of social development, perhaps even the most important part. But, being a necessary condition, it is clearly not a sufficient condition, for development means more than growth. Development is growth which is equitable and sustainable. Therefore, economic growth, especially through industry and agriculture, is essential, but its method must promote equity and be sustainable, even if in doing so short term "growth" and "efficiency" have to be sacrificed (though this may not necessarily follow). Growth and equity could go together provided the "model" of growth has built into it the normative goals of equity, justice and sustainability as inherent features of such a model. To ensure that economic growth is promoting equity and is sustainable, a co-ordinated approach to development is required. However, the Indian approach continues to be sectoral.

There is an industrial policy, an education policy, a forest policy, a water policy, even a policy for scheduled tribes and castes. Unfortunately, these policies, in statement and implementation, are independent of each other. They do not refer

to each other, do not interface, and are often mutually contradictory. Besides, they each aim at objectives internal to their respective sectors, without any clear reference to the ultimate social objectives. The industrial policy strives for industrial growth and productivity; the education policy aims at having more schools and higher enrolments; the health policy specifies proposed targets for hospital beds per person. But nowhere are these policies realistically linked to fundamental social objectives. There is nothing to explain how the sectoral objectives of these various policies would lead to the tackling of the predominant social problems or to the much awaited social transformation.

Over the years, not only have the sectors got delinked from the overall social objectives, they have also got delinked from each other. Therefore, today each of the major sectors seem to be pulling in different directions, dissipating national energy and resources, and making a mockery of all planning.

The unfortunate dominance of sectoral objectives, which have acquired a sanctity of their own, has effectively delinked these sectoral objectives from social objectives. For many years this has meant that investments and achievements in such sectoral programmes have contributed little towards the fulfilment of the broader social objectives. However, today it means that further investments in these sectors, without linking sectoral objectives to the broader social objectives, through a social policy, would actually militate against the realisation of social objectives.

Social Policy

Conventionally, social policy has been seen as "non-economic" policy, dealing with "soft" areas like social welfare, health, education, culture, etc. Social policy has, therefore, been accorded only residual attention and resources, after the demands of economic policy, which is the preoccupation of most governments, have been satisfied. The need today is for a social policy which cuts across sectors and levels in the government and encompasses all aspects, economic and non-economic, of governance. The need is for a social policy which clearly posits, before the nation, the social objectives which must guide all governmental action and must take predominance over all sectoral interests.

Such a social policy must not restrict itself to a statement of values, for these are changing with time and context. A policy which seeks to postulate universal values, apart from the basic ones like justice, equity and humanity, tends to homogenise and thereby ignore the rich cultural diversities of all nations, especially of one like India. Therefore, a social policy must seek to promote governmental and social processes which are aimed at identifying appropriate social values and strategies for diverse situations. Further, such processes must be institutionalised so that changing social perceptions and situations can, on a continuing basis, be adequately reflected in changes in social values and strategies.

A social policy must necessarily humanise governance,

and be guided by concern for communities and individuals, however small and weak. It must be based on an understanding of past and present social reality, and must seek to build upon historical forces, diverting them from violence and destruction and channelising them into constructive social processes. In doing this, it must respect the diverse histories and situations of various geographical areas and communities in the country. It must seek to strengthen this diversity, and thereby strengthen the unity, rather than to universalise, homogenise, and thereby weaken.

A social policy only stops short of becoming a social philosophy by restricting itself to areas of governmental and state action, and not of social action as a whole. However, given the very extensive tantacles of the State in India, not much is really excluded.

C.   REVIEW OF PLAN PERFORMANCE

1.   Whereas India has had record foodgrain production more
     or less every year since the early seventies, and an
     increasing surplus, according to reports of the
     National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau, in 1982 41.1% of
     rural children (aged 1-5 years) suffered from moderate
     to severe malnutrition (83.3%, if mild malnutrition was
     also included). The corresponding figures for 1980 and
     1981 were 37.3% (85.2%) and 39.2% (84.7%).

     For the period 1975-79, the figures were 45%
     (86.9%) for rural children, and were comparable to
     those for children of urban slum dwellers during the
     same period, urban slum dwellers during the same period
     who had a malnutrition rate of 41.6% (82.3%).

2.   After forty years of independence, 232.4 million people
     continue to live below the poverty line. Though this is
     a smaller proportion of the population than at
     independence, it is a huge mass of humanity whose
     suffering cannot be quantified or captured in
     statistics and percentages.

3.   In 1981, only 36.27% of India's population was
     literate. Though this was an improvement over 16.67%
     in 1951, the number of illiterates had risen from 300
     million in 1951 to 437 million in 1981.

     In 1981, the literacy rate among scheduled castes
     was 21.38%, and among scheduled tribes 16.35%, as

compared to literacy rate among non SC/ST of 41.20%.

Literacy rate among women was only 24.82%, as compared to 46.89% for males. Further, only 10.93% of SC and 8.04% of ST women were literate, as opposed to 29.43% of other women.

4.   In the twenty nine years between 1958-59 and 1987-88, there has been very little change in the distribution of household consumer expenditure between the bottom 30% and the top 30%. (See table below).

Distribution of Household Consumer Expenditure

S.No.	Category	1958-59	1961-62	1965-66	1970-71	1972-73	1977-78	1983-84	1987-88
Rural									
	Bottom 30%	13.1	14.7	15.1	15.4	14.31	15.24	15.51	15.51
	Middle 40%	34.3	33.2	34.3	35.1	33.7	31.85	33.92	33.27
	Top 30%	52.6	52.1	50.6	49.5	50.9	53.84	50.84	51.22
Urban									
	Bottom 30%	13.2	12.9	13.6	13.7	13.8	13.53	13.9	12.99
	Middle 40%	31.7	31.4	31.9	31.8	31.9	31.61	32.83	30.69
	Top 30%	55.1	55.7	54.5	54.5	54.3	54.86	53.27	56.32

[Source : PP Division of the Planning Commission, based on Consumer Expenditure Survey of the NSSO]

Similarly, in the ten years between 1977-78 and 1987-88, there has again been little change in the share of consumption expenditure between the bottom 10% and the top 10% (See table below).

Decile-wise Share of Consumption Expenditure for 1977-7

Decile	Rural			Urban		
	Share (%)			Share (%)		
	1977-78	1983-84	1987-88	1977-78	1983-84	1987-88
Ist Decile	3.47	3.79	3.98	3.3	3.49	3.26
2nd Decile	4.92	5.23	5.3	4.66	4.77	4.47
3rd Decile	5.92	6.22	6.23	5.58	5.64	5.26
4th Decile	6.52	6.88	6.93	6.38	6.81	6.04
5th Decile	7.54	8.03	7.75	7.27	7.24	6.99
6th Decile	8.27	9.07	8.77	8.55	8.36	8.14
7th Decile	9.5	9.92	9.81	9.54	10.39	9.51
8th Decile	11.38	11.71	11.62	12.54	11.49	11.46
9th Decile	14.13	14.62	14.21	14.17	14.96	14.94
10th Decile	28.35	24.53	25.39	28.1	26.85	29.92

[Source : PP Division of Planning Commission, based on Consumer Expenditure Survey of the NSSO]

D. PLANNING PRIORITIES FOR INDIA

The first prescription of a social policy for India must be to minimise the social and economic oppression which is currently a part of our social structure. All policies and plans must be measured against this yardstick, and those alternatives which contribute the most to a reduction of inequities must be invariably preferred. Closely related to this first prescription, is the need to defuse social tension and violence and to arrest ecological degradation. These three emerge as the planning priorities for India today.

1. Reducing Social and Economic Oppression

We live in a society where communities, groups and individuals are oppressed and discriminated against because of their caste, religion, race, sex or age. Though much of this is a historical legacy, consumerism, ecological degradation and inappropriate industrialisation and urbanisation have added new, horrific dimensions to historical patterns of oppression. Women are tortured and burnt to death for bringing insufficient dowry, children are forced to work 18 hours a day in factories and mines, in a work environment which is disastrous for their health, or gassed in their sleep because of industrial disasters. Tribals and other rural communities are uprooted from their traditional homes to accommodate development projects and urban and industrial requirements. Much of humanity faces a threat of

13

war and nuclear extermination. A majority of village women spend most of their waking life gathering fuel, fodder and water, while their sisters in urban areas increasingly bear the brunt of sexist oppression and molestation.

Indian society is being polarised through injustice. The divide is growing between the oppressor and the oppressed. There is, increasingly, an antagonistic divide between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the male and the female, the adult and the child, the non-tribal and the tribal, the upper castes and the harijans, the educated and the illiterate, the employer and the employee, the majority and the minority, and the government and the people.

The Great Indian Poverty

Among the most painful manifestations of social injustice in India is the abject poverty of a large number of its people. A significant proportion of our citizens do not get enough to eat, do not have a secure roof over their heads or enough clothes to cover their bodies with. They have no access to potable water, to education, to economic security or even to an assured prospect of survival. Men, women and children (from the day they can walk) toil from morning to night. Their self-respect, their dignity, their rights - all become subservient to the predominant need for survival. These millions are living out a legacy of misery and malnutrition, a lifetime of semi-starved stupor.

But this great Indian poverty is not a poverty among

14

shortages, it is a poverty among plenty. While millions of children go to sleep hungry every-day, India every year produces record breaking surpluses in foodgrains and the markets are full of luxury and junk food. While millions of people have no roof over their heads, there is enough cement and building material to make thousands of five-star hotels and high rise luxury flats. While millions of women do not have enough clothes to cover their bodies, India has among the fastest growing textile industries, with the latest in synthetic "suiting and shirting" overflowing the urban markets. While millions of girl-children fritter away their childhood, and womanhood, walking longer and longer distances to gather fuel for the hearth, air-conditioners run non-stop in much of urban India, and the latest models of cars join the older ones in an endless guzzle of petrol.

The great Indian poverty is, therefore, not a poverty of resources. It is a poverty of justice.

The Phenomenon of Two Indias

But underlying these multiple splits in the society, there is a fundamental split : a divide between the oppresser and the oppressed, which has been described as the phenomenon of two Indias.

There is the one India which is rapidly progressing towards the 21st century, with access to technology, information and resources. This India comprises of the urban and rural elite, the big farmers, the industrialists, the bureaucrats, the

15

executives and professionals, and the intelligentsia. Though a small percentage of the population, they consume a majority of its resources and own, control and allocate the remaining according to their own priorities and interests.

Then there is the other India, impoverished, malnutritioned, toiling day and night for survival. They populate much of the country and are an overwhelming majority, but have little say in the manner in which their country, their resources and even their lives are governed. They have little access to technology, information or resources, and are rarely consulted, or even informed, about matters that affect their well-being and survival.

From the perspective of the elite India, the sacrifices of these inhabitants of poor India are presumed to be in "national interest", their demands for justice are often dubbed as being "anti-national", their views on matters that concern them viewed as "unscientific and based on ignorance", and their very existence seen as an acute embarrassment.

Government Initiatives

Poverty alleviation and "Garibi Hatao" have been government slogans for a long time. Whatever be the economic ideology in fashion, employment generation has always been the key to poverty alleviation, with industry and agriculture being the predominant sources of employment. The Government's efforts to blur the divide between the two Indias has broadly been :

16

1. Through Legislative and policy measures

2. Through reservations for the weaker sections of society

3. Through direct fiscal measures.

In the last 40 years or so, a large number of <u>laws</u> have been enacted, and <u>policies</u> framed, to protect the interests and rights of minorities and weaker and poorer sections of the society. Some of these, like those protecting the personal laws of religious communities or making tribal lands inalienable, are aimed at maintaining a status quo. Others, like those related to land reforms, child labour, minimum marriageable age, etc., are designed to change historical processes of oppression and injustice. Special commissions and administrative structures have also been set-up to safeguard the rights and interests of minorities and the weaker segments of society.

<u>Reservations</u> for members of minorities and weaker sections of the society have been ensured in the Parliament, the government, educational institutions, and the panchayats.

Various <u>fiscal measures</u> have also been taken to economically strengthen minorities and weaker sections of the society. Apart from special dispensations to tribal states, and through schemes and programmes for the minorities and economically weaker segments of the society (IRDP, NREP, TDP etc.), financial concessions have also been given, for example by exempting tribals from income-tax. Quotas have been set up to protect the interests of the poor, and co-operatives have been seen, along with the panchayat system, as major instruments for bringing about social and economic justice.

17

But despite these, the divide between the two Indias grows. This is partly because the efforts made by the government have been by and large ineffective. Laws have been enacted but rarely implemented. Policies have remained on paper, as a collection of pious intentions, without workable action plans. The few programmes that have been implemented have rarely reached the intended beneficiaries, especially in the manner required. Reservations, representations and various fiscal benefits have either been fraudulently diverted to ineligible individuals, or have been restricted to very narrow elites of the economically weaker and minority communities. These elites, even as they benefit from the power and dispensation meant for their communities, are alienated from the latter and co-opted into the first India, the India of the rich and the powerful.

In fact, if anything, much of these efforts have served to polarise the society further. There have been anti-reservation riots across the country and great resentment at what has been perceived as a pampering of the minorities. All this would not matter if the measures had actually reached the poor, the weak and the minorities, and strengthened them. As this has not happened, the resultant polarisation has left them even more vulnerable than before.

Clearly, a new strategy is required.

2.   Defusing Social Tension and Violence

In the last two decades, India has been rocked by social upheavels based not only on the historical communal issue, but around various other issues of social and economic justice. To list just a few : terrorism in Punjab, Assam and various North-Eastern States; the Gorkhaland agitation; social unrest in Kashmir; violence in many other parts of the country on questions of reservation for backward classes, language, environmental destruction, political corruption and regional disparities; and, above all, violence between social classes, between the landed and the landless, the upper castes and the dalits, the "developers" and the displaced tribals. Though these social turmoils can be seen as a manifestation of the growing awareness among the people of their rights, the tragedy is that our social and political institutions and the government seem incapable of handling this growing awareness and of channelising the energy that it releases into constructive rather than restive social processes.

The Genesis of Social Protests

Social & economic oppression has always invoked social protest, and hopefully will always continue to do so.

Social protests are, therefore, an inherent part of any society and history has shown that the absence of social protest in a society can at best be a temporary phenomenon, usually as a result of extreme oppression. Before the advent of democracy, and

19

of the press and mass media, social protests were perhaps the only way in which the rulers of a state could be made to understand the true feelings of the people. Such social protests were reflected, initially, in the writings of poets and writers. Even in conditions of extreme oppression, when the mere verbalising of protests was prohibited, human ingenuity discovered ways of expressing protest. The underground "gutter poets" of pre-revolution France, the curfew songs of the military controlled Mizoram of the late sixties, or the blank news-columns during the days of the Emergency and censorship, all bear testimony to this. Gandhiji, through his "Satyagraha" and the civil disobedience movement, gave greater conceptual clarity to the notion of social protest, and also established its moral legitimacy and effectivity as a means of social change.

Any history of social transformation would show that it is not bureaucracies, plans, committees or seminars that have brought about social change, it has always been people's protests and movements, led and supported by those who refused to accept things as they were, always aspiring for a better world. In recent years, both in the USSR and Eastern Europe and in a large number of Thrid World societies, some of these movements have been spearheaded from within the system, no doubt as a reflection of the feelings of a people too terrorised to speak out openly.

Social Turmoil in India

Therefore, the fact that the Indian people are, collectively and individually, protesting about something or the

20

other all the time is not the worrying thing. What is worrying is that we, as a society, are not responding to the protests within, are not able to learn from them, and are not allowing the energies inherent in them to facilitate the process of social transformation and are in fact very often allowing the vested interests to either exterminate on co-opt and corrupt them.

The most deeprooted protests in any society are those born out of a threat to the cultural and social identity of a people. History has shown that even the most timid of communities, who might only mildly protest economic oppression, rise up in arms if their cultural identity is threatened, for this identity is primordial and the basis of their own sense of belonging.

Much of the social trensions in India arise from a forceful application of false notions of secularism, or "Indianism". The State, along with dominant cultural influences, has attempted to homogenise the Indian people, in total disregard of the very rich, almost unique, cultural diversity that has been the hallmark and strength of India.

The tendency to impose centralised, insensitive and inappropriate decisions on the people of India in "public interest", has been another source of social tension. The protests of groups and communities, of tribals, the rural and urban poor, and women, have been increasingly ignored on the plea that their sacrifices are required in "national interest", or the interest of the majority. Millions of people have been displaced by various government activities, on the justification that their

displacement would benefit the nation. Rural communities are being deprived of their forests, their grazing lands, even their water, on the plea that the majority, "the nation", needs it. Whole strata of society are being denied even the basic resources for survival, for these resources are required by the "nation", "in public interest", to build cities, and hotels, and cars, and luxury houses.

The ability of the State to appropriate resources and suspend rights of communities, "in public interest", is dependent on its credibility with the people. If the State is genuinely seen as just, using national resources most efficiently and equitably, then the communities might be willing to put up with their own deprivations. After all, they have been putting up with them for so many years. But the State is progressively being seen as an agent of the powerful, of the oppressors, of rich India. Forests, to which villagers with traditional rights are denied access, because they are required in national interest to preserve the ecological balance, are overnight cut for contractors who transform them into veneer and furniture for the rich. Water, which is denied to parched agricultural fields, or to rural areas for drinking or sanitation, is diverted to cities in "public interest", and then flushed down toilets at the rate of 12 litres per flushing. A poor farmer is denied a loan to replace his old, almost useless, plough, for the money is required, in "public interest", to give loans to buy cars in the city. The irony of the situation was brought out very aptly in a court case some years back, when a state government tried to justify its order to clear a city of pavement and _jhuggi jhonpri_

22

dwellers by arguing that this was necessary in the interests of
the "citizens of that city". However, it turned out that these
jhuggi jhonpri and pavement dewllers constituted more than 50% of
the city's population. Who, then, were the real citizens of that
city, and what was in their interest?

A State which becomes deaf to the individual and
collective voices of its thousands of "minority" communities,
groups and social segments, who collectively form an overwhelming
majority of the people, is forcing these voices to become
increasingly strident, and to replace protest with aggression,
and agression with violence. A State which no longer listens to
what its poets, its writers, its film-makers are saying, has lost
its sensitivity and thereby its moral right to govern.

The Criminalisation and Erosion of Social Institutions

Though the predominant antagonistic culture in India
today is dominated by the divide between the oppressed and the
oppressors, irrespective of caste and religion, this has not
resulted in the dismantling of casteist and religious divides.
In fact, where the State and progressive social elements have
failed to channelise positive historical energies for social
construction, the oppressors have missed no opportunity to
channelise destructive historical forces for furthering their own
designs. Therefore, apart from communalism and casteism having a
life of its own despite over 40 years of independence, they have
increasingly become an instrument in the hands of those who want
to control the destiny of the country to serve their own

23

interests.

Among the greatest failures of the Indian political system has been its inability to project a leadership, especially at local, panchayat and state levels, which consistently cuts across caste and communal lines. Even liberal thinkers continue to believe that, upto the highest levels, interests of specific communities can only be safeguarded by members of those communities. The policy of caste and communal representation has inherently the admission that you cannot find in India men and women who can think beyond their own caste and religion and, therefore, if justice is to be done by any group, it can only be done by a member of that group.

But such a strategy only polarises. It forces even a secular person to think in terms of his or her own religion or group, as it is made very clear that that is their constituency. This has resulted in throwing up, under the guise of secularism, a host of leaders whose sense of identity and prospects of political survival are based on the sentiments of their own communities, rather than on the sentiments of the people of India. The principles of self interest that have dominated much of our political process allows such leaders to neither represent the country nor their community, but only themselves. Populist stances which polarise the social processes and further isolate their communities from the mainstream, serve to make these leaders secure in their constituencies and keep alive the forces of communalism and ignorance, which are destroying the nation.

What is required is a cadre of genuinely secular leaders, from Panchayat to Parliament, who are under no pressure

to take up populist stances vis-a-vis their own castes or religions and who can, therefore, work in a culture of consensus. They must be the most selfless among the men and women, irrespective of where they come from. They must be those most willing and able to serve the interests of their constituencies, and thereby of the nation.

Ethnic Security

The tendency of individuals and groups to close ranks and identify themselves with their most immediate fraternities is aggravated when these individuals and groups feel threatened. Isolated communities and ideologies always end up being more fundamentalist.

If minority (or, for that matter, the majority) groups in this country have to be weaned away from the influence of fundamentalism, they must be made to feel socially and economically secure. Their culture and religion must be protected from external violence and from unnecessary moralising. It must be recognised that social transformation can only legitimately come from within a society or community. This is as true for India as a whole, where we must resist international pressures to conform to their perceptions of propriety, as it is for specific communities and sub groups. External threat to the identity of such communities only strengthens the traditionalists and fundamentalists within them, and marginalises the progressive forces. While supporting those objective conditions which are progressive, external pressures and threats must never be used to

try and achieve social transformation. These are invariably counter productive and, in the long run, much more time is saved if the internal processes of change, which exist within all social groups, are allowed to blossom and strengthen without being snuffed out by inappropriate external interventions.

Government Initiatives

A contrast with earlier decades shows the marked increase in levels of violence that social protests have begun to manifest. The time lag between the beginning of protest and its becoming violent has also shrunk to a point where many of these "movements" are violent almost from the start.

The violence manifested in such movements often comes out of a growing belief that the State only responds and takes notice when protests become violent, that it only listens to big bangs, hardly ever to institutionally routed ventilation of grievances. Unfortunately, recent history supports this belief. There have been few cases where the government has shown sensitivity to popular, non-violent movements, while it has bent over backwards to accommodate even the unjustified demands of strident and violent movements, even when they have little popular base. There could hardly be a better way of promoting social violence in the country, and of brutalising a society to a point where historical traditions of debate and consensus are lost for ever.

The weakening of social and political institutions, and

the brutalisation of the state agencies and the society, have left the government with very few options. The government's inability to contain social and economic oppression, and the tendency for religious and cultural hegemony, is matched by its inability to anticipate social discontent and unrest and to defuse it. The progressive elements in any community, who would ordinarily have internally contained the discontent, and spoken on behalf of the community to the government and to elected representatives, have long been marginalised. Their past inabilities to make the government see reason, and in some cases even their betrayal by the government, have made them ineffective. Politicians, administrators and community leaders have mostly lost their public credibility, or have become disillusioned and therefore unwilling to act as social mediators. In such a situation there is nothing to stand between the people and violence.

When violence breaks out, the State has an obligation to protect public life and property. But the only agencies availed of by the State for doing so are the police and the military and para-military forces. These forces are already brutalised and the consequent state-sponsored violence breeds social resentment and aggression, aggravating and prolonging the problem. This has been the experience with almost all the social movements which have turned violent. State intervention has been very late, clumsy and inappropriate. The State has been caught in its own trap, bereft of processes, mechanisms and agencies which can sensitively and intelligently handle social unrest.

Clearly, a new strategy is required.

3.   Protecting and Regenerating the Natural Environment

Perhaps the most disastrous implication of our uncoordinated and sectoral planning process is the rapid deterioration and destruction of our natural environment. The urgency to reverse this process is very great, for current statistics show that we are very near the point of no return. If we do not begin to reverse the processes of environmental destruction very soon, our life support systems will collapse, causing not only widespread starvation but changing our lifestyles for the worse, for generations to come, and severely restricting our future options.

The rapid rate at which our forests and soils are being lost, is the the first cause of worry. According to current estimates, we have less than 12% good forest cover left in the country and even this is rapidly declining. We are also loosing 6000 tonnes of top soil every year. This top-soil is virtually irreplaceable and its social and economic value incalculable. Apart from this, the levels of water and air pollution in our country are increasing and, in some areas, have already reached such proportions that human life and health are seriously endangered. All our efforts at improving the nutrition levels of our children, of educating them and providing them with health care, would come to nothing if the very basis of their well-being is under-mined because they do not get clean water to drink or fresh air to breath. If we do not reverse this process of pullution, we would soon become a nation of sick people who can neither support themselves nor plan and work for the future.

Both the depletion of our forests and soil and the pollution of our water and air affects the poorer segments of our population much more than it affects the rich. Whereas the rich are not directly dependent on the land and forests for their daily requirements, it is the poor people, especially in the rural areas, who get most of their food, livelihood, raw-materials, fuel and fodder from nature. Degradation and destruction of nature therefore affects them first.

Even among the poor people and the rural populations, it is the poorest, the landless and those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, that are most dependent on common property resources. Whereas land owning farmers can always look after their own land and ensure that enough fertilizers and other inputs are provided to make the land productive, the landless people who depend on the grasslands, forests, ponds, lakes and rivers for their daily subsistence, have no way of protecting themselves against environmental degradation. It is, therefore, obvious that if the government wants to strengthen the weakest segments of our society and to break down the divide between the two Indias, an important first step is to protect these common property resources that form the bedrock of the poor person's economy.

Government Initiatives

Over the last ten years there has been much talk about environmental protection. The Government of India set up, in 1980, a Department of Environment which was subsequently upgraded

and expanded into a Ministry of Environment & Forests. Through this Ministry and through departments in state governments, various schemes and programmes have been launched with varying success. The major thrust of the Government has been to restrict the use of natural resources and prevent and control environmental pollution, by enacting laws and setting up regulatory mechanism. These efforts have met with limited success, at least partly because the interests and forces pushing for environmental destruction and degradation are very powerful. Also, there is not enough ground support for environmental issues, especially as the linkages between the health of the environment and the health of the economy, especially the poor person's economy, is still not clearly recognised. The pattern of development that we have adopted is essentially unsustainable and involves a rapid depletion of our natural resources to support an irrational march towards short-term economic growth, to be achieved at any cost.

Before we can hope to protect our environment, we must review our model of development and make those changes that are essential to achieve both equity and sustainability. We must also involve the local communities in managing their own natural resources. These communities are perhaps the only ones directly dependent on these natural resources and, therefore, have the most at stake. We must also understand that there is no future for this country if our natural resources are not conserved and regenerated. Promises of industrial progress and of an entry into the 21st century are all hollow, if our life support systems are destroyed.

THE MAJOR TASKS

1.   To strengthen the weakest segments of our society

History has shown very clearly that one cannot constructively transform a society from outside. All genunine social transformations have been initiated from within the society, even though in many cases the genesis for such transformation lay in the cross-fertilisation of ideas and experiences from different societies.

The ability of a society or community to transform itself from within is dependent on various factors, some of which can be significantly influenced from outside. For one, a social group or community which does not have basic economic security is not likely to have the strength to fight for social change. Also, the economic vulnerability of members of the weaker communities makes it more difficult for them to fight the powerful vested interests blocking social change, for invariably the very same vested interests also control their immediate economic destinies. Therefore, a first precondition is an assured right to economic security, through an unconditional right to work. The requirement for a home, a livable natural environment and basic physical security are also fundamental to economic security. Therefore, along with a right to work these people must also be provided a right to housing, a right to a liveable environment and a right to basic protection under the law. Job reservations in the government or for political office at higher levels, while important in altering the power structure

in the long term, by and large benefit urban metropolitan populations or those who can move to urban areas. However, most of those requiring help live in the rural areas. Therefore some other strategy has to be adopted for them. Appropriate jobs have to be created in rural areas. These jobs must draw upon the traditional skills of the rural people and must be self-sustaining after a while, for otherwise they would soon be diverted to the stronger sections of society. The two obvious answers are to generate employment by strengthening traditional artisanal and handicraft activities, and by involving the people in the protection and regeneration of the environment. Very little investment would be required for implementing this strategy, as opposed to any other.

But in order to ensure that such rights, once given, actually benefit those for whom they are designed, it is essential that economically backward communities be provided universal basic education. In some ways this is far more important than mere reservation for government jobs (for which too educational attainments are a prerequisite). It seems that almost the only way of empowering these communities and social groups to transform themselves and their position in the larger social structure, is by enhancing their abilities to comprehend the prevailing social and economic processes, to articulate their own perceptions, experiences and demands, and to maneouvre effectively in the prevailing political ethos. An important, perhaps the most important, instrumentality for this is literacy and education. The government must, therefore, not only ensure that an adequate number of (functional) schools are provided for

32

children belonging to the economically weaker communities, but based on an assessment of the actual situation, provide the required economic incentives to ensure that these children actually go to school.

As a start, for economically weaker sections of the society, the state should provide a scholarship to every girl-child attending school, so that it becomes economically advantageous for parents to send girls to school rather than to keep them at home or make them work. A justification for providing special allocations for educating the economically backward segments of society, and among them giving incentives to the girl-child, is provided by statistics on national literacy which establish that literacy rates of the SC/ST are less than half those of other sections of the society. Similarly, literacy rates among women is about a half of that of males, and of SC/ST women a third of other women. On the other hand, more literacy among girls can act as a spur to greater literacy among boys too, whereas the opposite is not true.

The education imparted in the schools must be supplemented by a basic nutrition package, through schemes like the mid-day meal scheme started in Tamil Nadu. This would not only be an added incentive for the children to go to school but would also ensure that they have at least the basic nutritional level required to assimilate the learning that the school will provide them.

2.   To Restore and Strengthen Socio-Political Processes

One major reason for the non-resolution and even strengthening of the major social contradictions in India has been the increasing techno-managerial nature of state intervention and of governance. Social and political problems have been repeatedly perceived as techno-managerial ones and therefore unsucessfully sought to be tackled through technological and managerial initiatives. Poverty and hunger have been treated as problems arising primarily out of low productivity, rather than from distortions in our social structure. Social oppression and injustice have been addressed by setting up various bureaucratic institutions, commissions, commitees, and through the enactment of laws and the appointment of judges, rather than through a process of mass socialisation and education. At the same time even acknowledged socio-economic issues have been reduced only to economic issues, when solutions are being prescribed. We therefore have a situation today where economic growth and productivity are unable to ensure a corresponding decrease in poverty and hunger, and where a collection of progressive laws and benign policies are unable to ensure equity and justice. The "social delivery system" is not able to meet the challenge of distributive justice.

Much of this is due to the overshadowing of socio-political processes by the techno-managerial ones. The techno-managerial culture has grown phenomenally since independence, cornering much of the available human talents and even prevailing over the historically dominant administrative culture of the

government (on which more later).

To become technologists, managers or techno-managerial adminstrators has become the primary ambition of the Indian educated classes. Very few want to be school teachers, or social workers, or to join the "dirty world" of politics, let alone joining the inherently long term battles waged by environmentalists or feminists or by those interested in structural change. And the social system dominated by these techno-managers has ensured that these preferred professions become the most lucrative and among the most powerful.

Most worrying is the infiltration of techno-managerial influences into the portals of administration. The modern adminstrator is increasingly seeing himself or herself as "managing" a district or a department, which has been depopulated of human beings and human issues and problems, and converted into a "corporation" comprising of data-bases and a collection of statistics, preferably computerised and subjected to modern systems analysis. The choice of solutions are dictated by the "softwares" available and problems are identified and "solved" on computer screens.

Historically, the major strength of the administrators has been their ability to keep in touch with the people and to understand the objective reality better and more richly by drawing general principles from a host of individual interactions, through intuitive induction. Some of the most perceptive accounts of societies and social processes in India have come from administrators who had honed in their abilities for grass roots understanding and spent much of their time and

35

energy in going around and seeing and understanding for themselves the ground reality. In this process they had also developed the ability to directly intervene in social processes in a sensitive yet effective manner. Unfortunately, much of this is being lost today not, as is sometimes believed, because the workload of administrators has increased but because the priorities of the administrators have changed and their method of functioning become increasingly managerial.

Inherent to a techno-managerial culture are the concepts of centralisation, of mega-projects and of "hi-tech". These are seen as efficient, utilising "economies of scale" and subject to easier monitoring and control. But efficiency and benefits are measured purely in economic terms, without any reference to the values of equity or of human welfare. Monitoring and control is done solely with economic objectives in mind. Forests, water, soil, housing, education, and health are all understood in purely financial terms, the social, cultural, human and even ecological "costs and benfeits" being labelled "intangible" and therefore beyond comprehension of the techno-managers. Planning and development emanating from such basis can never serve human welfare, which itself would be labelled intangible and therefore incalculable and irrelevant.

In the non-economic areas of governance, social movements and protests, and criticism of the government are seen as deviant behaviour of the maladjusted social elements. There is a contempt for social and political processes which are seen as impediments to "economic growth". National objectives are tautologically defined to be identical to what is the prevalent

36

fashion among the the techno managers, whether it be moving to the 21st century or emerging as a regional and even a world power. Strategies of development are also accordingly formulated, whether they be through technology missions or through government sponsored and well behaved voluntary bodies. There is no scope for dissent, no possible difference of opinion and certainly no other acknowledged way of dealing with any problem any where, apart from the one prescribed from the top.

Admittedly, technological and managerial excellence are crucial to the process of development, especially in a country like India which has such vast problems and cannot, therefore, afford any inefficiencies. However, for India to actually resolve the basic social contradictions, the objectives and methodology of development, and all the detailed strategies, must be determined not by methods to be employed but by keeping in mind the broad social objectives. The predominant culture of the State and the government has to be socio-political, and technology and management must subserve this culture. Economic development, unless it subserves the objective of equity, would only worsen the divide between the rich and the poor. Technology which is not appropriate to our society and environment, would only impoverish the nation. An administration which has forgotten the individual and the community, will only exacerbate social tensions. A polity which denies its basic political identity would be doomed to failure.

In short, the major task before the government is to reassert the dominance of the socio-political culture of governance and to ensure that governmental decisions are

37

basically political, in the positive sense. This can be done by delimiting the role of the bureaucracy, the tecnologists and the professional managers to those areas which are rightfully theirs, and to hand over the central arena of decision making to the people and their elected representatives. There must be a concerted and sustaind effort to involve different social institutions, voluntary and activist groups, and formal and non-formal leaders of communities in the process of decision making, at all levels. No major policy, law, project or other decision should be taken by the government at any level before it has been meaningfully discussed with a cross section of concerned social organisations and the affected communities.

Along with the process of decentralisation, this process of consultation, with a prior assured access to required information, would not only help the government to function more efficiently and humanely, it would also strenghten the socio-political processes in the country. Men and women of ability who want to contribute to the future of the nation and to the building of a better world will have options, other than joining the government, to learn and contribute to the process of governance. The resulting cross fertilisation of ideas would bring people from different segments of society closer together and set in motion the process of building a society where governance can be through genuine consensus.

3. To Decentralise Power and Control

We see, in India today, a large divide between the privileged and the oppressed, what has earlier been called the phenomenon of two Indias. This divide manifests itself along urban and rural lines, but also within urban and rural areas. There are the few who, because of historical reasons, have positions of power and influence. They control much of India's resources and use them in perpetuation of their interest.

Efforts since independence to either narrow or diffuse this divide have had little success. This is perhaps due to the strategy adopted, which assumed that this divide, at least at the time of independence, was based on caste lines and along the urban-rural dimension. Efforts were, therefore, made to involve the historically oppressed castes and other rural people into processes of representation and governance. It was also recognised that various other groups like women, tribals and minority communities had also been neglected, and efforts were made to include them into the mainstream of decision making. The Community Development Programme and its subsequent incarnation, the Panchayati Raj, was one manifestation of this. Reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in panchayat bodies and in the government and educational institutions, was another manifestation. Efforts were made to ensure the representation of various historically neglected segments of society in the Parliament, state legislatures and other institutions of government. Social and economic incentives were given, laws were

framed and efforts were made to educate and socialise the people of India.

Despite these efforts, the ground reality did not change much. Representatives of historically oppressed communities, as already described, were either co-opted into the system, or remained ineffective due to their inability to manoeuvre among powerful vested interests.

As a reaction to the ineffectiveness of the community development and panchayati raj experiments and partly to the rise of "Vernacular" elites that had emerged from lower tier of the polity, there started a process of centralisation by which decision making powers were once again taken over by a small group of policy makers and intellectuals at the Centre. The arguments offered were that the people of India, especially the oppressed and minority communities, were too weak, ignorant, steeped in unscientific traditionality, and stratified and divided among themselves, to plan for their own future and ensure social justice and progress. Such centralisation resulted in a perpetuation of the phenomenon of two Indias, though different in its superficial manifestations from traditionally divided societies but identical to them in the inherent and fundamental oppression and injustice.

The present divide between those who oppress and those who are oppressed transcends caste structures and the rural-urban divide, and is rooted in a socio-economic order which allows a few to reap the benefits of oppressing the many. Efforts at tackling this divide at any other level, or through other structures, would at best result in a realignment of forces,

keeping intact the antagonistic relations between the oppressed and the oppressor.

But then, what is the solution? If during the last forty years, both decentralised and centralised governance has failed, what options remain?

The new commitment to decentralisation of a more comprehensive kind stems from the conviction that it is the only way in which social justice can be achieved. However, the lessons of history are not ignored. History establishes that for decentralisation to succeed certain objective conditions are required. Local communities have to be strengthened and socio-political processes regenerated. The fact that centralisation is worse than decentralisation, whatever its weaknesses, needs to be recognised and the commitment to make decentralisation work, however long it takes, needs to be reaffirmed.

The Broad Approach

What is new is the broad approach of the government that decision making and control must be decentralised, that decentralisation is not to be merely seen as involving local people but of restructuring the very system of governance so that they are not just to be accomodated through some cooptative moves but themselves made to run the show. The process of decentralisation is to be made relevant to all aspects of decision - making : to the setting of objectives, the identification of methodologies, to actual implementation, and

41

above all to the determination of needs and of development priorities. Similarly, decentralised control implies the control of local communities, within broad natural parameters, over their physical and natural resources and over the financial resources allocated to them. It also implies administrative control over local level functionaries.

In terms of development objectives, it is recognised that there are certain fundamental objectives which have been accepted by all and are, at least at the present time, unquestionable. These are based on what are seen as absolute social values and include equity and social justice; empathy towards living creatures; access to a minimum standard of living, health, environment and shelter; access to information and education; and a reasonable freedom to pursue preferred social and economic activities. These objectives are taken as given and what a decentralised process does is to effectively work them out—which was not possible to do under a centralised system of governance—as well as to attend to subsidiary objectives that follow from these—without which the primary objectives remain on paper—and to adopt methodologies and processes through which both sets of objectives are in practice realised.

The way in which some of these objectives are to be understood, and the processes of their implementation, have to be determined at the lowest appropriate level, be it individual, the family, the village or the community. This is a departure from the current practice where the tendency is to determine these things at the highest possible level, usually at the national or state level.

42

There are other social objectives which are not based on absolute values and are therefore not necessarily universal to the whole country. These objectives must be determined at the lowest appropriate level, as earlier specified, and not at a national or state level. Furthermore, these are objectives that are better realised by social organisations of the people than by government. In essence, then, decentralisation is to be conceived as not merely devolution of government authority within an existing order known as the State, but also a shift of power from State and government institutions to those of civil society.

Arguments against decentralisation

Whenever the question of decentralisation is raised, at least three major objections seem to be posed.

Problems of false consciousness : It is argued that many people, especially the "uneducated", function out of a false consciousness on various issues. Caste consciousness, male chauvanism, superstition and fatalism are an inherent part, it is argued, of the Indian psyche, especially the rural psyche and if decision making is left to such people, the resultant decisions would be neither just nor progressive.

Unfortunately, what is not often recognised is that the planners and the educated elite have their own brand of false consciousness. Much of India's educated classes also believe in various myths, the most prominent among them being the belief that centralised planning, which demonstratively appropriates resources from the poor, for the rich, and from rural areas for

43

urban areas, is actually in the interest of the nation. There is also a belief among these educated classes that modern scientific "knowledge", as we understand it today, cannot be wrong and has all the answers, while traditional "knowledge" is unscientific and full of superstition. Finally, there is the false consciousness that the prevailing models of development and technology are sustainable and just.

Between the two areas of false consciousness, it is preferable to have decisions made at local levels. At least here the wrong decisions that might get made would harm only the one village, or the specific community and, even while doing so, lay the ground for future decisions being correct. Considering the results of all wrong decisions would adversely affect the community taking these decisions, there would be the inevitable effort to correct past mistakes. However, the wrong decisions made at the Central level harm, at one go, the whole nation, but least of all those few who make these decisions. The process of correctives is, therefore, rarely activated.

Further, the process of centralised decision making also increasingly "infects" the country with the value systems and false consciousness of the elite. When inappropriate life-styles, technologies and development models are imposed upon the country, the values inherent in them are also given legitimacy. This process has to be urgently reversed before the whole country is infected with such values, and basic cultural diversity and good-sense is lost for ever.

Stratification of the Indian society : It is also maintained that the Indian society, especially in the rural

areas, is so stratified along caste and economic classes that it is impossible to ensure any social justice if decision making is left to this group of people. From this it is fallaciously argued that, therefore, decision making should be centralised. In actual fact, the educated elite in India are themselves a part of this stratification and, forming the highest level of the stratification, greatly reinforce it at the bottom levels. They have found the divisions at the lower levels convenient to perpetuation of their dominance. The position is the same as when it is assumed that the upper caste or economic strata in the rural areas cannot and will not allow a process of development which is equitable, it is forgotten that the educated elite in urban areas not only cannot, and will not, allow such a process, but in fact perpetuate and indeed reinforce the structures of inequity and exploitation.

The advantage in decentralising decision making is that the conflict between the oppressed and the oppressors is reduced to a more manageable level. Where the oppressed have to fight with only their village elite in order to get justice, the chances of justice being done are much greater. However, where the oppressed have to take on the urban educated elite and the Government of India- and external forces that have penetrated these levels-the battle is too unequal and too far removed for there to be a desirable outcome, at least in the near future.

In any case, the people of India, who have repeatedly shown that they are not afraid to rise up against the collective and awesome strength of the state, would certainly be quite capable of rising up against decentralised, local, decision

making bodies which have got corrupted or have become inactive. Whatever be the initial distortions, the social protests that such distortions would invoke at the local levels would ensure, as long as the State did not intervene on behalf of the oppressors, that local social structures would be quickly transformed to meet the challenges of doing justice by themselves.

As long as these local processes are not opposed, by-passed, or marginalised by centralised bureaucracies, the social tensions, violence and brutalisation that might result from the resolution of local level conflicts would be much less than what we are witnessing today in a centralised model of planning. Besides, such local processes remain our only hope for a genuine social transformation.

Isolation from scientific information and education : It is often argued that even if the first two problems are overcome, the common person in India is illiterate, uneducated and innocent of scientific understanding. The ability of such a person to understand the complex reality and existing problems is very limited, as is his/her ability to find solutions to such problems.

In reality it is our centralised process of decision making, the failure of our education policy and the culture of secrecy that has led to a large proportion of our population being ignorant of the information that would be required to make proper, local level, decisions. If local communities had been involved in the process of decision making, then they would have demanded access to the information required, and this access

would have had to be given. They would have assimilated the knowledge required to operate under changing conditions, refined their own knowledge of productive processes which is by no means insignificant, and developed an ability to consult the scientists and experts in matters that were too specialised for general understanding.

In any case, the intention is not to allow the centralised institutions and the educated classes to abdicate their responsibilities to the society. After all, these institutions and classes have been nurtured on public cost. A system of decentralisation essentially involves a process whereby access to relevant expertise is assured to the local communities, in a manner that they understand. For example, advances in agricultural technology or implication of environmental destruction could easily be explained, as they must, to rural communities by taking their representatives to areas where such matters can be convincingly demonstrated.

It is erroneous to think that decisions involving technological questions are best taken by technologists. Decisions are taken by the Cabinet and the Parliament, and rightly so, which involve various technological aspects. Even our administrators are generalists who control technical departments. Why is it then assumed that the people of India cannot meaningfully participate in the process of deciding about their own life and destiny?

Today, centralised decisions are being made in ingnorance of traditional wisdom and of local level socio-

political reality, and many local level decisions are being made in ignorance of modern scientific knowledge and an understanding of macro processes. It is absolutely essential, if proper decision making is to result, that this gap be bridged and that the required information and knowledge be immediately disseminated to the common person, so that he or she can more fully participate in determining the course that their collective lives and the lives of their children would follow. Appropriate mechanisms should be set up to ensure that the various scientific and technical institutions in the country are able to support localised decision making, as required and called upon.

4. The Weeding out of Corruption

One of the major impediments in ensuring social justice has been the high and increasing levels of corruption in the government and in political and public institutions. Efforts to reach benefits to the poor, to give them a share of the economic fruits of development and to provide them basic educational and health facilities have been repeatedly frustrated by huge "leakages" in the system. Schemes designed for economic upliftment of weaker sections of the society, like IRDP, have given birth to legends of how the money earmarked for the poor was pocketed and how "the same cow has been distributed again and again" under these and similar schemes. Our public distribution system only reaches a part of those it has been designed for, many of our rural schools do not function, sub-health centres rarely have the medicines that the government has paid for, roads are built only on paper, or never maintained despite expenditure having been made on their maintenance, and many forests are planted without any evidence of the consequent trees. These are some of the well documented parameters of "leakages" in the process of reaching development benefits to the poor.

On the other hand, there are huge illegal processes of appropriation under way which are rapidly diverting and depleting common and public resources, especially those in rural areas. Illegal forest extraction is well known, as also is organised encroachment of government and public lands, often with the connivance of officials. Lesser known appropriations involve the rampant theft of electricity, which is officially recorded as

transmission losses and amounts to 25% of the country's power generation, illegal diversion of streams and rivers for industry at the cost of villages and local communities, illegal and ecologically destructive mining, shady land deals where public, common and forest land is sold to the rich for luxury housing or for elite recreational projects, and appropriation of scarce raw materials like cement, steel, cotton and fertilizers.

The third dimension of corruption involves the evasion of taxes, duties, tariffs and other dues to the government exchequer. This in itself is rampant, and is supported by a host of professionals who build their careers and fortunes by assisitng individuals and corporations in breaking and "getting around" the law. These three forms of corruption have given birth to a whole new economy often referred to as the "parallel" or "black" economy, which has sometimes been calculated to be as large as, if not larger than, the "white" economy.

We consequently have a state which is crippled by corruption, unable to protect common and scarce resources from illegal appropriation, unable to collect its dues from the rich and powerful and unable to deliver even the small percent of its remaining meagre resources to the poor, who desperately need them.

Unfortunately , corruption does not restrict itself to just these aspects. It contaminates almost all aspects of governance. Governmental agencies responsible for ensuring justice, peace, and law and order have also been corrupted. Justice can be bought and sold. Those with money and influence can endlessly harass those without, and can unleash a reign of

terror which is reminiscent of the Mafia. All sections of the society are breeding criminalised sub-cultures whose power is based on the strength of money and political patronage. Political and social institutions have themselves got corrupted and it has become more or less a truism that wherever there is power or money, there is bound to be corruption.

The State has, in its own manner, acknowledged and assimilated this culture of corruption. The elaborate structure of government and finacial rules and rules of conduct for government officials, the audit, anti-corruption and vigilance mechanisms, the creation of Lokayukts and Lokpals, some of the rationale for the anti-defection bill, and the stated difficulties in reliably identifying those segments of the society that are economically backward, are manifestations of the state's acknowledgement of the prevailing culture of corruption. The regrettable decision to liberalise controls and laws concerning the recovery of dues, the giving of frequent amnesties to tax evaders, and the unfortunate decision to reward officials, for example from the customs, with a percentage of the value of goods siezed by them, are the beginings of a process by which the culture of corruption is assimilated and given a legitimacy.

But just as there is a "parallell economy" emanating out of economic corruption, so is there a parallell culture of corruption interfacing with that of the government. To hoard essential commodities, to live opulent lifestyles much beyond legal means of income, to be a tax evader or a smuggler or blackmarketeer, are no longer considered by society to be reprehensible. Elaborate rationalisations have been formulated to

give social respectability to such activities, so much so, that having a tax raid is today considerd, in certain sections of the society, as a mark of having arrived into a select group of the economically successful.

Added to this, there is the inevitable corruption of our social institutions, even of the most sacrosanct of them, the nuclear family. Harrasment, dowry deaths and bride burning are some of the more horrific manifestations of a corrupted culture where even the most fundamental human relationships have been reduced to commercial transactions, and basic human empathy has been totally lost.

There are many reasons for this growth in corruption. First, the government and the corporate sector have unleashed on the citizens a culture of consumerism, where new commodities are daily entering the markets and tempting the consumer to join the rat race and buy and consume far more than he or she needs and can afford. The consolidation of the consumerist culture has been ably supported by the mass media, printed and electronic, mostly at public expense. The consumption of commodities, in excess of rational needs, has been powerfully promoted through advertising, marketing and packaging, in recent times increasingly aimed at the children. Junk foods are being promoted, despite conclusive evidence from other countries of the disastrous impact these have on the eating habits and nutritional levels, especially of the young. Elaborate packaging, including tetrapaks, are being encouraged despite their being environmentally destructive. And much of this damage is being promoted through "official" electronic media and through newspapers and magazines which get

subsidised newsprint and other inputs. Scarce resources like power, petroleum products, steel, cement, chemicals and minerals, wood, paper, and water are being diverted to the production of these consumedr good, at the cost of basic sectors. Valuable foreign exchange is also being frittered away.

Acquisition of consumer goods, whether they be the latest model of cars, videos, TVs, stereos, or fancy suits and kitchenware, has become a national preoccupation. Even village communities are not immune to this and evidence exists to show that in many of the rural households where money is not available for basic necessities, an increasing proportion of the household expenditure is being diverted to the purchase of luxury items.

The internal and peergroup pressures to acquire commodities can never be fully satisfied, except perhaps by the very rich. However, for the various middle classes there is also not the prospect of rapid increases in income, especially in the sort of economy that operates in India. Perhaps the more fatalistic pin their hopes on various lotteries that have become the new opiate of the masses, but most turn to corruption for satisfying their increasing demands. It seems rational that a government wanting to curb the culture of corruption would first take steps to curb the culture of consumerism, or at least to withdraw the prevalent official sponsorship to it.

The second basis for the culture of corruption is provided by our education system which is increasingly producing what can be best described as "primarily economic creatures". Recent student demonstrations against reservations for backward classes manifested their contempt for "lower" jobs like pulling

rickshaws and selling vegetables, and revealed the growing elite perceptions about different occupations and the consciousness of a "hierarchy" among jobs. The most distressing aspect of the whole matter was that the student community, by and large, did not even realise the insulting implications of their method of protest on the majority of India's population, which is, mostly in vain, aspiring for those very occupations that the students dismissed with such great contempt.

With the erosion of traditional religious and social values, many of which were in any case outdated and inappropriate, the role of education and educational institutions in providing an alternate set of values has become paramount. These values must be inherent in the content and method of education but, considering children learn the most from example, they must be exemplified by the teacher. The teacher, therefore, has the crucial role to play in shaping the personality of the young student, even more so now than ever before, for the mind of today's student is relatively open to new ideas and values.

However, our educational system is among the most neglected aspects of state activity. Despite the multiple, perhaps paramount, demands being made on the system, our investment in it has never exceeded a meagre level. And whatever is being invested is diverted to either directly corrupt uses or in spreading crassly utilitarian values which end up in breeding vulgar economism-and anxiety on that count- among our young.

We have not been able to attract men and women of character to the teaching profession, and the few who have joined, despite the disincentives, have not been provided a

working environment conducive to their growth or even their proper functiong. The revamping of the educational system is, therefore, another priority.

Both a curbing of consumerism and a revamping of the educational system are essential if corruption has to be weeded out of the Indian society and has to be relegated to its historical position of being a deviant phenomenon rather than an all pervasive culture that it has become today. However, some immediate measures are also required to curb the further growth of the already very high levels of corruption, and to create the sort of objective conditions within which the prevailing trend of social legitimisation of corruption is checked. Such a trend, if it was to grow and consolidate, would undermine all future efforts at fighting this social menace, for the corrupt would support each other and their culture.

The first immediate step required for curbing the growing levels of corruption in our society is an assured access to information. At present, there is no implementable legal or constitutional right to information for the citizens of India. Just as the culture of secrecy makes it impossible to get even the most harmless piece of information out of a bureaucracy, so the plea of patents and trade secrets, along with no legal compulsions to divulge any information, makes even corporate information inaccessible. In this environment of secrecy all sorts of skulduggery flourishes.

To supplement the right to information, there has to be a strengthening of those processes by which government officials

and other functionaries are made answerable for their actions and inactions. The healthy administrative tradition of "fixing responsibility" must be revived and even committees must be made answerable, and if necessary prosecutable, for any dubious collective decisions. All functionaries must be persuaded out of the comfortable stance that as long as they are not personally corrupt, the responsibility of checking corruption among their subordinates and in their departments, is not theirs. Such an attitude should be treated as a "sin of ommission" and accordingly punished. Unless the government is willing to take a tough stand on this issue, and to open its own functioning and the functioning of all corporations and institutions in the country to a critical public scrutiny, the sceptre of corruption will only grow larger.

5.   To Revamp the Planning Process

From the diverse considerations and dimensions of social policy treated above, and from what was said in Section B, follow certain conclusions as regards restructuring the planning process itself.

The present process of planning which is sectoral, centralised and delinked from basic social objectives, needs to be urgently revamped.

The focus of planning, which is at present on sectoral schemes and projects, must shift to integrated area planning, with the village or locality as the basic unit. Within a village or locality, the first priority must be to the economically weaker communities and segments. The planning process must first ensure adequate resources to meet the basic needs of these people. Once the basic necessities have been assured to all the citizens of the country, the remaining resources can be allocated according to pre-determined social priorities, giving weightage to the requirements of the poorer over those of the richer. Resource contraints must, therefore, be reflected to a greater extent in allocations meant for the richer strata and regions than for the poorer. A simple index could confirm whether justice is being done.

Such a process of planning would go a long way in ensuring that development means first basic minima for everyone rather than maxima for a few. It would also reflect, in the overall Plan, the real priorities of the country and would change, in some cases drastically, the prevailing sectoral

allocations and even within sectors, the current priorities. In any case, the allocation of resources would no longer be sectoral, as at present, but area wise and according to the socio-economic strata of society. Plan performance would no longer be measured primarily through quantified targets of production, but by qualitative indicators of resource distribution, utilisation and the resultant human welfare.

Such a planning process can not by its nature be centralised. National and state plans must be based on village, locality and area plans, which must reflect the felt needs and priorities of the local communities, within the broad framework of social objectives determined in the approach. It is only then that the national plan, and the planning process, will have a relevance to the basic social objectives outlined in the social policy, and reflect the real needs of the nation.

In deciding plan and investment options, every scheme, project and outlay must be measured against a social benefits index to determine optimality in terms of reducing social and economic inequity and in making development more just and sustainable. Fundamental concerns, including the right to work, the lessening of imbalance between communities, economic strata and regions, the defusing of social tensions and the protection of the environment must be a part of every aspect of the plan and of governmental activity. Bureaucratic perceptions and institutions must be accordingly modified and, in appropriate sectors, bureaucratic control minimised. It must be stressed that decentralisation does not mean transferring control from one bureaucracy to another, but from the government to the people.

Decentralisation has sometimes been understood as merely a matter of electing local bodies and entrusting certain functions to them. There is need to understand that it is simultaneously decentralisation of administration and above all decentralisation of the planning process in each of which the people are to be brought at the centre of things.

The proposed modifications in the current process of planning, and of governance, are the minimum required to reverse the process of social and economic injustice, and to contain the damage to the social fabric and the environment. However, these by themselves would not be enough, especially over the long term, to establish a progressive, just and sustainable economic and social order in India. Even if distortions in the current model of development are minimised, the model itself is flawed. It is confused, outdated and certainly inappropriate for a country like India.

A major priority for the country is to assess and rethink its chosen path of development, especially in light of the experiences of the past forty three years. What is required is the setting up of a national process of consultation, which involves all political parties and operates at all levels of the society. This process of conultation must be aimed at evolving, for India, a more appropriate, and workable, model of development. The process should aim at a broad consensus so that political commitment to the newly evolved model is forthcoming from all major segments of the society. The very process of consulting the nation would create an environment where a greater involvement of the people of India, in the task of governance,

can be ensured. The call for "an alternative model of development" made at the start of the Approach Paper to the Eighth Plan implies such a wide-ranging process of consultation on both "what went wrong" and "how do we go from here". This chapter on Social Policy provides the broad parameters on which such a consultation can be structured.