

Poverty, Market Fundamentalism and the Media

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In the '90s, as poverty and distress deepened, the media turned away. A decade later, only two newspapers bothered to report that India's so-called reform programs caused another 70 million Indians to fall below the poverty line, bringing the total to nearly 400 million.

For the first time since independence in 1947, India is experiencing large-scale hunger-related deaths in some of the richest states of the country. When 37 children died of hunger just outside of the wealthy city of Bombay, the country's leading magazine gave it a measly two pages. In the same issue, nine pages were given to the wedding of cricket superstar Imran Khan.

Each year half a million Indians die of tuberculosis, and more than 1.5 million Indian infants die of diarrhea. Yet you will not find two columns on these deaths because those who die are the wrong sort of people, not deserving of media attention.

India may boast of its young chief executives, new jobs, new technologies and new opportunities. But it is also home to 40 million registered jobless, the total population of the Republic of South Africa. No one's done a cover story or a TV program on that because they're the wrong kind of people.

What happens when the media actually covers poverty? Worldwide, the media tends to succumb to certain stereotypes of the poor as unending victims or romantic heroes. The coverage is always completely lacking in humor, belying the fact that humor is an essential survival mechanism among the poor.

Poverty is generally depicted with a tragic drama that focuses on the shock and agony of witnessing poverty rather than on the poor themselves. Much of the coverage of poverty in the Indian press consists of rhetoric and overstatement. Any journalist visiting a poor village will write: "Here, time has stood still." Time hasn't stood still anywhere except in the writer's brain.

Most importantly, the media treats disparity, distress and poverty as natural calamities -- the rich/poor divide has always been there. Poverty is particularly inherent to the Third World. The poor in the rich countries -- all those guys -- they're basically slackers and welfare cheats and single mothers feeding their alcoholism habit on welfare funds.

According to the media, poverty is not even remotely related to exploitation. If exploitation exists, it's somebody else's exploitation, not ours, because we are the good guys. You see, it's those feudal landlords in the Third World and a few bad people who smuggle illegal immigrants, or it's the outcome of unending tribal conflict in Africa.

A career in the media is conditional on one's acceptance of the notion that poverty is in no way the result of free market capitalism. Insinuate anything else and you don't have space as a journalist. Take my word for it. If the link between poverty and free

market exists, it's because we aren't free market enough, or the reforms have not moved fast enough. In short, you may have some space for poverty, but in no way can you question the prevailing ethos of market fundamentalism.

Poverty coverage is also based on the view that the poor need us, the elite. They are useless themselves. They cannot do a damned thing themselves. This myth has mandated 50 years of project development -- at the end of which there are more poor people in the world than ever before. Project development has, however, benefited the rich enormously. You just have to pick up the United Nations Bulletin that comes out 26 times a year -- it's called Development Business -- and count how many billions of dollars worth of contracts there are.

Right now the World Bank and the World Health Organization are behind a wonderful anti-malaria program in India: it's making millions. The program consists of distributing millions of mosquito nets impregnated with anti-mosquito repellent to people who don't have beds. But the Bank and the WHO have said it's a good thing. What do I know?

The media, like these development moguls, can't understand the causal link between extraordinary affluence and miserable poverty. For instance, India Today reported on a district in the state of Madhya Pradesh called Tikamgarh, calling it the "most barren, infertile, hostile, unproductive land and a whole population has no alternative but to contemplate suicide." I have visited the same district many times over the years and it does have extreme poverty, however it also produces more food than any of the other 44 districts in Madhya Pradesh.

These fantastic productivity levels and immeasurable poverty exist side by side because of an old-fashioned word that many of us have forgotten -- exploitation. Exploitation is the basic source of poverty. It consists of inequality and disparity in both the ownership and control of basic human resources. The media's fake sensationalism and breathless horror actually hide the truly sensational degradation that human beings knowingly impose on other human beings through their policies.

Of course, there is some skillful coverage, some stories that vividly describe the lives of the poor -- exceptions that go on to win Pulitzer prizes. It's almost as if the papers save a space for some moving story on inner city Chicago, then spend the rest of the year expounding policies that drive the people of inner city Chicago to absolute devastation.

The media treats poverty as an event, but poverty is a process.

The media also enjoys touting technology as the great solution to poverty. It is true that that Telugu and Tamil are spoken more widely than English in IT hubs like the headquarters of Microsoft in Seattle. But that is not the whole story.

The state of Andhra Pradesh has generated so many software engineers that the capital, Hyderabad, is now facetiously called Cyberabad. Yet it continues to have the lowest human development indicators and the highest infant mortality rates in southern India. The chief minister of the area, who is known as a visionary, has installed computers at various block headquarters so that villagers now have access to email. The joke I heard when I went round the villages was "It's absolutely wonderful, now we can email our chief minister that there's no water, no housing and no food, but we can only do it when there's electricity!"

I'm a Net buff myself but let's not get into this romantic bullshit about the Internet. It's a very traditional medium in many ways, just look at the ratio and gender

profiles of net users. It may be the fastest growing medium among the young people of the world, but two-thirds of the world's children have never even had access to a telephone line, let alone computers and the net. Tokyo and Osaka have more telephone lines than the entire continent of Africa. The Internet is subject to the same built-in inequality evident in every other sphere of human activity.

While I think India's achievements in computers are fantastic in many respects, let me balance that by pointing out that there are more PCs in New York than there are in all of India. The IT race is actually deepening an already existing divide. Why? In India, 100 million children don't get to go to school.

While newspapers and magazines write stories about the top ten schools in India -- the schools where Microsoft and Oracle do their "body-shopping" -- there is no mention of the 30 out of 100 children that never receive any schooling at all. Out of the 70 who enter first grade, another 35 drop out by the fifth because of economic pressures. Of the remaining 35, only 10 make it through junior high, and a mere five actually graduate from high school. The system manages to get rid of all the undesirables before they come to college and lead demonstrations.

So, although new technologies offer tremendous possibilities in the fight against poverty, it's not going to happen without addressing inequality in resources and decision-making. If we just keep chanting the mantra of new technology without addressing human inequality, we're going to make things a lot worse than they already are.

We are now living in a political era of market fundamentalism. It is the most vicious fundamentalism of our times because it cuts across all religions, cultures and geographical barriers. It can be compared to any other religious fundamentalism in that it has its temples and churches, its popes and pundits, its higher and lower clergy, its conflicting denominations in IMF and the World Bank. It even has its televangelists; just turn on the TV to any channel to hear them preach their gospel of growth and greed. It is fundamentalism of the most devastating kind and it has done more damage to human life than any other fundamentalism in the preceding decade.

There is space in the media for another viewpoint, but we must fight for it. The media must become public property, a public forum for ordinary people and people's movements. Civil rights include media rights and a right to the public forums that influence opinion and policy in the world.

We're going to have to challenge and confront the mindset of market fundamentalism: the idea that market is God and growth is gospel. I read a very beautiful saying by an American environmentalist which sums up my feeling on this: "Growth for growth's sake is the ideology of the cancer cell."

We're going to have to fight against monopoly. We're going to have to fight for more diversity in the media and fight for the small voices to be heard in the press. A whole slew of legislation goes through every year in more and more countries allowing the media to become increasingly concentrated. You can't fight poverty without fighting monopoly or change the media without fighting concentration of ownership.

Changing poverty in the media also means redefining human rights. I find that a lot of human rights groups are much more comfortable with prisons, barbed wire, jails and disappearances, all of which are very important issues that we must support. However, I think the biggest violation of human rights is poverty. We must redefine human rights to include poverty as a violation of human life and dignity. There are

four clauses in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that have remained invisible because the media never mention them. Articles 23-26 describe economic and social human rights. These articles, if enforced, would help billions of people.

The system itself is being challenged, and different kinds of people are protesting everywhere. From Seattle to the French truckers and farmers' strikes, people are protesting. Wherever I go I see people resisting. Let's draw inspiration from the ordinary people who want to change their lives.

We must intervene in the policy debates of our societies to fight monopoly in the media and in general, particularly in the realm of ideas. It's never been easy, it won't be easy, but it can be done.

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