

Up Against Poverty

The economic growth story of India is enthralling for business communities and investors of the world. The count of Indian billionaires is a matter of pride for the well-off Indians. But, we should remember that, in spite of our indifference, the world knows pretty well about the poverty situation of this country. The World Bank says, 'The fact that poverty reduction in India has not been commensurate with its spectacular growth of recent years is not news. The government recognizes that its main development challenge rests on reducing inequalities and making sure that all its people, living in all its regions, are able to share the fruits of that growth equally.'

The government indeed recognizes the problem and runs, though inefficiently, several schemes like the public distribution system and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to give some relief. But, these are not enough. They are still confused over the process of determining who is poor and, hence, how many are in poverty. Recently there has been a raging controversy over the issue. According to the latest census, our population size is 1.21 billion. Nobody knows, even approximately, how many of them get the minimum needed for a decent life. A few years back the Arjun Sengupta Report claimed that 77% Indians lived on Rs. 20 a day. Later, the NC Saxena Committee was of the opinion that 50% Indians were poor. The 2004-2005 estimates of the Planning Commission show that 28.3% of the population was below the poverty line, which has traditionally been defined by the requirement of food alone. However, the recent report of the Suresh Tendulkar Committee considers the basket of necessary items required by a poor family. And it concludes that 37.2% of Indians are poor, with 41.8% in the rural areas and 25.7% in the urban. The Planning Commission has accepted these figures. According to the National Council of Applied Economic Research, about 15.6% of Indian households are in absolute poverty.

These measures are not comparable, as they are based on different yardsticks. Other countries have their own national standards. There is much debate on the proper yardstick to be used, as the numbers are important for determining policies and allocation of funds. To get out of this confusion, the World Bank uses 'an average of the national poverty lines of the world's 15 poorest countries to determine the international poverty line at \$ 1.25 per day at 2005 PPP prices'. Going by this standard, 60% Indians were poor in 1981, whereas in 2005 the figure came down to 42%, against a global poverty rate of 26% for the same year. 'However, the number of poor below \$ 1.25 a day has increased from 421 million in 1981 to 456 million in 2005', says the World Bank. Not only that, 'India's poverty declined by 19% between 1990 and 2005 as against 38% globally.'

There are other international indicators too. According to the Global Hunger Index Report 2011, India is the 15th poorest country, where the situation is 'alarming'. The study had to exclude countries like Afghanistan, where it is still difficult to get dependable data. The Human Development Report of the UNDP, which considers the living standard of the common people in respect of nutrition, medical care, education, gender equality, etc., placed India at 119 among 169 countries studied in 2010. Last year the Oxford Poverty and Human

Development Initiative and UNDP used a new measure, called Multi-dimensional Poverty Index. to find that there were 645 million poor people in India.

Figures are tiresome, but important, because they show the extent of the problem. But they are dumb; they do not tell us the real stories of real human lives. They are dry; they cannot give us the capacity to feel for others. Through experience and empathy we learn to feel others' troubles. When we see poverty from a distance, we do not understand it. When we experience it ourselves, we come to know it actually. Empathy can give us indirect experience. Empathy empowers us to stand in place of another person, as it were, and realize his feelings in his way. It seems our policy-makers and administrators have the figures, but not the feelings that make one move.

Narendranath (Swamiji) experienced dire poverty at home in his early youth, after the passing away of his father. He had just passed the BA Examination. The family had no means to make both ends meet. Sometimes, realizing that there is very little rice at home, not enough for his mother and two brothers, Narendra would tell mother, 'I have an invitation for lunch at my friend's house.' He would go out and roam around without food for the whole day. Later, as an itinerant monk, he was face to face with the terrible poverty of the country, which he could feel with deep empathy. He himself used to go without food for days, but he did not care. He was going mad with feeling for others. This intense feeling burnt his heart all his life. And he left for posterity this fire of feeling, which must now engulf the whole land, if we are to help the deprived masses.

He wrote to his young Indian followers after reaching America in 1893: 'Feel for the miserable and look up for help – it shall come. I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help.... I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed.... Vow, then, to devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down every day.' (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 5, p. 16-17*)

Young men of India, will you not come forward to take the vow?