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This digest features important articles on development and social transformation in order to reach those working in the field and not having knowledge of these documents. It is aimed at promoting further reading of the originals, and generation public debate and action on public issues. The articles are compiled and edited for easy reading and comprehension of the concepts, and not so much to reproduce the academic accuracy of the original texts.

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# NGOs, Disasters, and Advocacy: Caught between the Prophet and the Shepherd Boy

by Alan Whaites

## Introduction

Conflict and disasters haunted the 1990s, challenging the complacency of a world which, official development assistance figures suggest, is increasingly bereft of any kind of internationalist ideal. Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs), famines, and civil strife have forced themselves onto the media agenda, and to that of the politicians, thus creating a more dangerous and unstable environment for NGOs. From Bosnia to Rwanda and beyond, those same NGOs have been successively wrong-footed by the policy analysis and advocacy implications of each emergency. Too often, aid agencies are essentially responding to the last emergency, and so fall short of the mark.

The implications of the increase in internal conflicts have not been lost on the relief capability of the NGOs involved, or on theoretical thinking—which, thanks to writers such as Hugo Slim and Mark Duffield, has largely been transformed. The flowering of work designed to research conflict, and new methodologies in reconciliation, have also seen some aspects of NGO adaptability at its best. But, in the field of advocacy, NGOs have failed to reconcile the implications of CHEs with the underlying obligations of humanitarianism.

NGOs have become trapped by conflicting fears, each apparently equally valid and historically real. There is the spectre of Rwanda and the failure to

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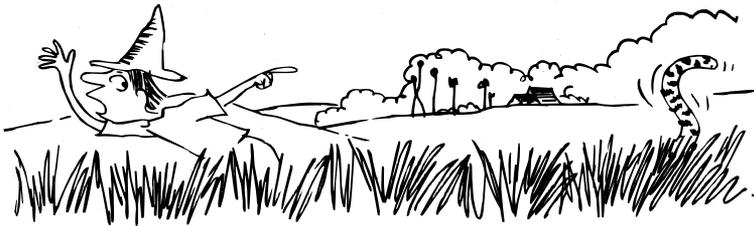
**NGOs, Disasters, and Advocacy: Caught between the Prophet and the Shepherd Boy**, Alan Whaites

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raise the alarm over a situation that resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people. After Rwanda, a new concern for early warning led aid agencies to enter a field of policy analysis designed to create the potential for early action. This became known as preventive advocacy: the articulation of a potential or imminent disaster with the intention that policy-makers, whether local or international, will act to avert a crisis. This was the NGO community seeking to act as Old Testament Prophet, standing up to proclaim the potential for disaster should the world fail to change its ways.

This new approach was given its first real test in 1996. That year some agencies, notably Oxfam GB and World Vision, were already predicting a serious escalation in the conflict in eastern Zaire—with potentially serious humanitarian consequences. Large numbers of Hutu refugees within reach of the Rwandan border, plus the deteriorating situation within Africa's largest state, seemed to suggest that preventive advocacy was justified. In the weeks that followed, these organizations and others called for the world to intervene to secure safe access for humanitarian workers to these refugees. The international community, its new-found interventionist tendencies tested by Bosnia and Somalia, seemed reluctant to concur. In the heat of the advocacy drive, NGO opinion split—with the Save the Children Fund (SCF) in the UK declaring intervention unfeasible and unwise.

The charge that NGOs had exaggerated in order to fuel public appeals was inevitably difficult to refute—stories of impending genocide had failed to materialise (though massacres did occur later), leading to a sense that the public had been misled. Some in the NGO community began to point to the dangers of preventive advocacy; fears were raised which were also ultimately disproved, i.e. that NGO credibility would be lost, which would make advocacy of any kind more difficult. By 1998, when the famine in



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Sudan was coming to light, this concern was being given full voice. NGOs were warned not to be the Shepherd Boy, crying wolf too often until finally unable to raise any alarm at all.

This is the continuing dilemma for all advocacy-oriented NGOs. Is it preferable for aid agencies to listen to their prophetic calling and risk their hard-earned credibility, or should NGOs instead be wary of calling wolf too often?

### **Advocacy and disasters**

We are increasingly told that advocacy and awareness-raising are the future of NGOs (particularly Northern NGOs), although precise definitions are rarely offered. The rising numbers of NGOs that are adopting advocacy as an approach, coupled with the diversity of views within the development community, have created considerable room for divergence. It is not surprising, therefore, that any reference to advocacy automatically raises numerous—perfectly appropriate—questions along the lines of: what is the aim of advocacy, on whose behalf is it undertaken, and with what legitimacy?

Advocacy is in theory related to one of the higher ideals of the NGO world—the search for justice. At a more prosaic level, advocacy is simply a tool or set of tools—mechanisms through which NGOs try to push their own agenda onto that of others. Most NGOs would state that this tool is used to support Southern communities whether through specific requests for action at the local level, or through the call for changes to the macro-context which shapes the lives of the poor. Like all tools, advocacy can be dangerous as well as useful, both for an NGO's own staff and for the poor whom it is trying to help. This is especially so in a disaster setting, where background analysis can be rushed and the agency may be completely unfamiliar with the context.

Indeed, for much of the 1990s, pressures on NGOs to be seen to be involved as well as informed (not least the pressures of fundraising) led to a considerable increase in NGO comment on each new geopolitical problem which arose.

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De Waal neatly summarised the situation: *In recent years, international relief organisations . . . have become increasingly significant political actors, both in the African countries where they work, and in western countries where they undertake publicity, lobbying and advocacy. They have expanded their mandate to encompass human rights and conflict resolution. The call for foreign military intervention is perhaps the most striking example of 'humanitarianism unbound:' liberated from the Cold War straightjacket, international relief organisations in strategically unimportant countries like Somalia and Rwanda can make an extraordinarily bold call, apparently unimpeded by limits on their mandate and expertise, or by accountability. In an ever wider arena, relief agencies are now empowered to make important political judgements, implicit and explicit, which go far beyond their traditional role.*

Hugo Slim has also written of the crisis in values affecting NGOs. Slim notes that: In their choice of position, more and more NGOs and UN forces are adopting a robust form of impartiality which allows them not just to dish out relief in proportion to needs, but also to dish out criticism (advocacy) or military bombardment in proportion to human rights wrong-doing. This hardened impartiality may be the NGO posture of choice in the future, but it will have operational implications and no doubt be met by an equally hard response on occasion.

### **The retreat from advocacy**

The current crisis of confidence among NGOs regarding this more 'robust' position has been largely a result of their attempt to rein in the excesses. Valid criticism has also arisen from the temptation for each agency to comment on every conflict regardless of experience, qualifications, or sometimes even presence. The negative reactions to these dynamics, both internal and external, are healthy, but create their own dangers if they are pressed too far.

The primary concern here is that the current loss of confidence may cause a retreat from preventive advocacy (i.e. those actions taken to raise awareness in time to avert the fulfilment of the worst-case scenario). CHEs are not static; they are in reality a sequence of events forming an often lengthy process. With in this context, external action usually arrives late in the day. It is this

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problem which early warning and preventive advocacy have the potential to change.

### **Accountability and credibility**

Support for risk taking and a prophetic function in advocacy should not be read as *carte blanche* for the well-meaning mistake. Without a balance of responsibilities, such an argument can degenerate into the simplistic perspective that we 'have to do our best and make the most informed judgement possible'. It is in the interest of NGOs to go beyond such thinking and to establish a broader understanding of advocacy and its risks. Partly this is a question of protecting our credibility. More importantly, however, it is an extension of that critical obligation to donors and the poor alike—the need for accountability, transparency, and impact.

Advocacy has sometimes been less scrutinised in relation to these standards than have other NGO efforts. Yet advocacy, like any area of NGO activity, should live or die by its usefulness to the poor. An emphasis on clear and measurable objectives must be complemented by a willingness to monitor and evaluate results. The infrequency with which NGOs tend to consult either donors, policy makers, or partners on the effectiveness of their advocacy work raises questions of its own, questions which the rapidly developing nature of CHEs often allow to be quietly left behind. It is, however, precisely during CHEs and concomitant public appeals that transparency and accountability should become an acute NGO concern.

CHEs happen within a context of global policy. Ongoing work in partnership with organisations such as the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to create a better context for assistance should not be limited to policy-makers alone. NGOs will have a critical role if the constituency for timely interventions is to stretch beyond Washington, London, and the UN Security Council to the wider public in both the North and South.

### **Credibility for whom?**

Those who argue that accuracy must be the predominant factor in any advocacy or awareness raising work during emergencies do so for a number of reasons. For some it is a question of jealously protecting the power of the

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NGO message, power which rests on the credibility of the commentator. There can be no doubt that we ignore the need for credibility at our peril—NGOs have no divine right to the ear of the public or of policy makers. Our right to be heard has to be earned. We must also, however, be conscious that credibility can become an end in itself—rather like money it can be permanently hoarded and never put to good use.

Inevitably there are those who will be quick to point to what they perceive to be scaremongering and inaccuracy on the part of NGOs. Potential criticism is inevitable but should not silence those NGOs who believe that their own credibility can be used to draw attention to humanitarian crisis. It is for NGOs to make a commitment never to seek to raise international concern regarding humanitarian crises in any context in which accurate statistics remain more a hope than expectation.

Credibility is simply a resource—something to be marshalled for future use. The protection of NGOs' credibility becomes an offensive luxury when it is placed above the inherent obligation which rests on all humanitarian NGOs to save lives. Credibility is a prerequisite for our right to be heard, but we must accept that advocacy inherently means risking reputations—they are usually, after all, our only collateral.

### **Preventive advocacy and motives for raising the alarm**

The newly reorganised Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK, which combines NGOs and the media, faced its first significant test with the conflict-induced crisis in the Sudan in early summer 1998. The DEC prevaricated for weeks before eventually being pushed into an appeal by the pointed criticism of television journalists filming in feeding centres. The lasting impression for many was a degree of inter-agency competitiveness that was strange in a group intended to coordinate efforts during crisis. Accusations of agencies briefing the press both against other agencies and against the DEC itself were followed by suggestions from the British Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short that the motives of the agencies concerned were to a large degree financial.

There is nothing new about the issue of motives and competitiveness in situations in which the public are known to give generously. Nor the idea

that fundraising drives organizational agendas — but it remains an oversimplification of the internal dynamics involved; particularly the relationships between fundraisers and desk officers. In reality, the drive to raise funds during emergencies is both market and field driven; responding to emergencies is expensive, as is the rehabilitation phase which follows—for which funds are far harder to raise.

NGOs have their own agendas and suffer from many faults. Even so, the pronouncements of NGOs during disasters, and the partnerships with the media which they forge, may also be the only way to press for the issue of saving lives to be added to the policy agenda. The recommendations may be flawed—and unfortunately there are no easy ways to guarantee NGOs' wisdom. Nevertheless, pressure for action to prevent avoidable fatalities creates a concern which is both invaluable and life-saving.

### **Conclusion—the impetus to advocacy**

In the field of NGO advocacy and awareness-raising, the humanitarian ethic is not entirely without meaning—even during disasters. Aid agencies do not exist to raise money—though cynics can easily believe otherwise and will find support for their view in every appeal and all home-country expenditure. But in reality, few Northern aid agencies do not connect their ultimate purpose to the improvement of lives in the South. In emergency relief contexts, the humanitarian ethic increasingly means a willingness to deal with complex external demands, rigorous monitoring, and physical danger. The deaths of ICRC workers in Chechnya served to underline the altered reality of relief assistance in a world in which NGOs are no longer considered to be neutrals. It is important to recognise inherent problems and dangers. This is a complex area and a major contributory factor to the unrealistic expectations facing today's relief workers, who must now provide policy analysis as well as managing interventions on the ground. Recognition of the dangers, however, does not diminish the usefulness of the tool—advocacy does have the potential to bring the attention of policy makers to bear on an issue, and ultimately to secure action. It is, therefore, not a tool to be given up easily.

The importance of recognising the place of the humanitarian ethic within aid

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agency responses to disaster is partly therefore, a need to reflect the real linkages between headquarters staff and people on the ground. Equally, the humanitarian ethic, and the impetus from the field, should be the driving force behind the advocacy work (including media awareness-raising) which may be essential if early warning is to be made real. As an industry, NGOs should safeguard (even if for some it is a question of 'tolerating') preventive advocacy whenever such advocacy is based both on the best information available and on a genuine desire to save lives.

A pressing burden of responsibility on NGOs that are involved in relief work is, therefore, to view advocacy as going beyond the immediate and local. Advocacy strategies should be coherent and medium term, and so based on a fuller appreciation of successive international responses to emergencies than can be provided by a single incident.

NGOs remain a central voice in the battle to seriously address the world's response to CHEs. New foreign policy initiatives and any willingness to take rapid action to avert humanitarian disaster remains dependent both on the work of the media and on NGOs' ability to interpret events. The potential not only to save lives in the immediate term, but also to affect long-term thinking on how best to respond in other situations, makes the contribution of NGOs to the discussion a critical part of our humanitarian work. We cannot, therefore, shun the risks involved in such preventive interventions; but neither can we afford to avoid the responsibilities entailed in such engagement. ▶

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## Community Based Preparedness, Prevention and Mitigation: Sustainable Approaches

*by Dr. Dipankar Das Gupta*

Nations across the globe are now committed to minimize the effects of the natural disasters on communities - to reduce injuries and loss of lives, property and environmental damages and the social, economical disruption caused by extreme natural events. The ultimate goal is to keep hazards from becoming disasters.

There are a number of ways to achieve, or rather work towards this goal, but there is one that is the most important and the foundation for all others - it is through the creation of disaster-resilient communities. Recent approaches in disaster management in different countries is based on a shift in the prevailing emergency management framework to disaster risk management, which calls for proactive disaster management activities with the local communities having a key role.

There is a gradual but slow acceptance of the need to reduce the over-emphasis on relief and reconstruction and have an increasing focus on prevention, preparedness, early response and mitigation. Total risk management also incorporates the involvement of multiple stakeholders instead of the earlier approach where the government was the only responder to emergencies.

Involvement and participation of the local communities in disaster reduction programmes receives the highest priority in the present approach as they are affected by the disaster, and more importantly, they are the first responders to the event. Irrespective of the scale of the event, it is the community, which

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### **Community Based Preparedness, Prevention and Mitigation: Sustainable Approaches** *by Dr. Dipankar Das Gupta*

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[http://www.tntrc.org/news\\_letter/images\\_09/article.php?ref=s](http://www.tntrc.org/news_letter/images_09/article.php?ref=s)

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suffers its adverse effects. In absence of any specialized skills, they rely on traditional coping and survival mechanisms to face and respond to the event before they start receiving any outside help.

Community Based Disaster Management (CBDM) covers a broad range of interventions, that includes measures, activities, projects, and necessary policy changes that focuses on disaster risk reduction that is designed by the communities at risk and is based on their needs and capacities. It is a unique approach because: (i) it ensures people's participation. The people are the main actors/ motivators/propellers and direct beneficiaries with outsiders having only a supportive and facilitating role. (ii) Its priority is for the most vulnerable groups, families and people in the community. (iii) Community itself identifies specific risk reduction measures through risk analysis. (iv) It recognizes its own existing capacities and coping mechanisms (v) It strives towards resilience with concerted attempt to reduce its vulnerabilities and increase its capacities with linkage between disaster mitigation and local developmental planning.

With the paradigm shift from reactive emergency management to disaster risk reduction, there is an increasing emphasis on proactive pre-disaster intervention - prevention, mitigation and preparedness.

While natural hazards cannot be prevented, measures can be initiated from preventing hazards becoming disasters by making the communities more resilient.

There is an integral relationship between the way we plan and develop our communities-the form, configuration, function, and use-and the ability of these communities to resist the forces of extreme natural events. To make the community resilient, this relationship requires more attention and the support systems are to be developed accordingly. Poverty reduces a household's ability to mitigate and recover from disasters. To implement equitable and sustainable mitigation, vulnerability and poverty have to be jointly addressed through vertical and horizontal integration of development activities and disaster mitigation approaches. All damages - loss of life, and socioeconomic disruption caused by disasters mainly occur due to the failure of the built environment. What is of paramount importance is to

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design the support systems in a manner so that affected communities can more effectively resist the physical forces of disasters and bounce back to normalcy in the shortest time.

Sustainability of this programme is dependant on convergence of various elements and principles and the presence of an organizational mechanism. The disaster management committees or grass root disaster response organizations will have to be involved to oversee the risk reduction process. It is not of much relevance whether the CBOs or communities take the initiative for sustainability. Community participation can be sustained if the risk reduction measures respond to their immediate needs and they are involved in the vulnerability analysis and decision-making process to identify relevant, realistic and do-able mitigation and preparedness solutions. Relevance and community participation then create ownership, and with even small success achieved, sustainability of the CBDM can be ensured.

Community based organizations, groups, volunteers; people's representatives at the village/GP level are the key to mobilize the communities. These groups are the focal point for local leadership and responsibility in this CBDM approach. The importance of these grass root leaders lies in the pains they take to educate and motivate the members of the community to prepare for and mitigate the disaster risks. The community volunteers, disaster management committees, and disaster response organizations are the necessary interface or the channel for outsiders such as NGOs or government agencies to assist /support the community. Training programmes, formation and development of volunteers, leadership training, exposure tours, technical assistance and support in fund raising and net working with other stakeholders will increase the capacities of the communities. Information made available to strengthen the process of capacity building will be a source of empowerment of the communities.

Devolution of power to Panchayat acts as a catalyst in sustaining the programme. Sustainable disaster mitigation is possible only with the support of the local governments by facilitating institutionalization and mainstreaming through incorporation of CBDM in the agenda, plans and

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programmes of local government units-Panchayat Samitis, Gram Panchayats and Municipalities.

It will not be possible to sustain this process unless the approach leads to more partnerships, mobilization and self reliance, control and access to power, resources, basic services and local decision making to solve the problems faced by the community. It must be ensured by the stakeholders that this approach is based firmly on functional participation, a strong interactive process and community mobilisation.

To replicate, the sustainability, success stories and benefits of one community have to be publicized within and beyond the initially adopted areas. Initial and even small success stories provide the springboard to sustain disaster preparedness and mitigation. The results of the community-based approaches to disaster mitigation are vulnerability reduction solutions, which are more relevant and in tune with what people need and want. Since the community is involved in the whole process of problem identification, their ranking/prioritization, solutions, they feel a sense of ownership in this process. Only when they feel a sense of ownership will they manage, maintain and sustain the process for their own interests. Community participation and ownership builds their confidence, skills and ability to cooperate and to face the challenges posed by the natural hazards.▶

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## Farce follows Disaster

by Max Martin

Disaster Management is fast emerging as a key concern in India's academic, bureaucratic, scientific, technical and humanitarian circles. India enacted the Disaster Management Act in 2005 which became a law almost at the will of the bureaucrats who framed it.

The drafting period of the Disaster Bill was a missed opportunity for NGOs working in the field of disasters to make it more people-friendly and grassroots-oriented like the Right to Information Act is to a large extent. Some of them did debate it, but the hectic schedules of tsunami relief, the hurry to burn foreign funds and concerns about proposed changes to the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act somehow overshadowed any talk about the relevance of the Act and the possibilities it offered.

Now a draft national Disaster Management Policy is to be released for consultations. It is time for humanitarian workers, legal experts, academics and media professionals to come together and ensure that the policy-makers walk the talk till the last mile.

### One Act, half a policy

Let us first examine the Disaster Management Act 2005. It has put in place a three-tier administrative framework to deal with disasters and integrate it with the activities of various government departments and other organisations. It envisages management and mitigation plans, a coordinated and quick response and penal action against those who do not comply with its provisions. The Act has led to the setting up of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the National Disaster Management

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[http://combatlaw.org/information.php?issue\\_id=32&article\\_id=852](http://combatlaw.org/information.php?issue_id=32&article_id=852)

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Institute and the National Disaster Response Force of about 10,000 trained and equipped personnel stationed across the country.

It is a top-down Act, in the classic command-and-control mode. It gives sweeping powers to National and State governments and district collectors and an almost ornamental role for elected local representatives and local communities. Lower courts, cannot entertain any suit against action taken under the provisions of this Act. The Act takes precedence over other laws. It can get further sharpened as it allows the government to iron out difficulties through Gazette notifications in a two-year interval period.

A command-and-control system has its own merits especially in times of an emergency. In fact, the powers vested with the Indian bureaucracy even before the Act made tsunami relief highly efficient here unlike in the free-for-all scenarios in Sri Lanka or Indonesia, where para-dropped international agencies confounded the confusion and misery of people. The provisions of the Disaster Act can be used against discrimination in relief distribution, misappropriation of funds, negligent or dangerous work by companies, departments, agencies and so on. Scores of erring officials, NGO workers and others can be imprisoned under this Act.

However, except in cases of fund misappropriation, false claims and false alarms, the punitive provisions are for “not complying with official orders” or



“obstruction of officials”, not necessarily negligent and dangerous work.

To illustrate this point further, if an NGO builds unliveable temporary shelters as directed by the district collector as most of them did in the tsunami areas they are not really punishable. A large number of the temporary shelters were hot, humid, windowless, flood-prone, wind-blown, rodent-bitten but they are perfectly legal.

On the other hand, if the NGO defied the collector’s order and built comfortable thatch huts, technically its director could be penalised (even imprisoned) on counts of non-compliance, causing danger, neglect and so on. So a law that upholds the infallibility of the IAS is problematic. At least till a time when we have “officially-recognised” rehabilitation codes in the lines of our famous relief codes.

### **Window of opportunity**

The policy-framing period now offers a narrow window of opportunity for people’s groups and humanitarian agencies to work towards a pro-people disaster management regime in India. Discussions with NDMA members and experts reveal the underlying principle of the policy is respect and value for human lives saving the last possible life in effect. The draft policy talks about earthquake-safe building bylaws, disaster management as part of professional degree courses, medical preparedness, amalgamation of the traditional with the state-of-the-art and so on.

As for governance components, the 11th Plan envisages incorporation of a disaster management component in all ministries. Local communities are supposed to be at the centre-stage of disaster management activities. The task of those who uphold civic rights will be to ensure that the policy discourages local officials from imposing uncomfortable box shelters on people affected by disasters. And to see to it that a village chief gets the right to demand the disaster vulnerability map of his neighbourhood from the collectorate or the block office.

### **Reaching the last mile**

The test of a policy is in its implementation. Even if the notions expressed in the policy are noble, implementing them on ground will not be easy. Disaster

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managers will have to deal with a system that is red-tape-bound, lethargic, conservative and corrupt in parts; and citizens who tend to be hierarchical in social attitudes and generally indifferent to the safety of oneself and others, when not fatalistic altogether. Then there are conceptual limitations. The government has yet to deal with road accidents, communal clashes and the issue of forced migration as disaster/ humanitarian issues. But for those who want to push for a culture that values human lives there is a chance to influence the policy's final shape.

A key part of the policy will deal with technology in the context of India putting in place its own high-tech tsunami warning system and depending on its scientific institutions to take the lead in disaster early warning measures. The dissemination part is perfect till the district collectorate or the mandal village cluster level in cyclone-prone areas. The real question will be how to take the message from the district or block office onwards.

Dysfunctional telephones and unwired remote villages often make the last mile reach a nightmare. The answer will be in strengthening and sustaining the local systems that work. Community radio initiatives coming up along the coasts and their networking could be an answer. So also village information centres.

At the recent NDMA sponsored Disaster Congress held in New Delhi, Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal talked enthusiastically about such an SMS system with automatic translation of warning messages into scores of languages. His enthusiasm for technology raised many eyebrows. But in fact, cell phones were widely used soon after the tsunami when all other communications were cut to find missing relatives and later to spread alarms that turned out to be false.

The systems should involve not only dissemination of the warning, but also the next step safety measures, such as evacuation and rescue as needed. There are efforts to this end. The Government of India's UNDP National Disaster Risk Management Programme, formulated under the National Disaster Management Framework of the Ministry of Home Affairs, aims at reducing vulnerabilities of communities at risk to sudden disasters in 169 most multi-hazard prone districts, spread over 17 states of India. One of the

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key components of the programme is a community-based response system. But often the groups identified and trained under such programmes tend to go back to good-old lethargic ways once the disaster-rehabilitation-training phases are over. A few months after such training was done in the earthquake-torn villages of Kutch, one could find that most of the villagers were totally unaware of any such a trained group.

It is important to note there are community initiatives that work very well even without any formal training, programme or funds. Take the case of Pulicat in Tamil Nadu. When the tsunami waves rolled in people managed to summon boats from the mainland and evacuate their villages quickly. The casualties were minimal.

The lesson for disaster policy-makers is to evolve a judicious mix of traditional and technology-intensive systems.

Then there are aspects to be taken care of in the rehabilitation phase. The same absence of sensitivity often shows up in this phase as a one-size-fits-all Government Order.

The result will be structures like empty concrete malls and two-bedroom cattle-sheds in the earthquake-hit Latur, and cyclone shelters custom-made for illegal activities in coastal Andhra Pradesh. People do not live in imposed, alien structures. Villagers do not enjoy shopping from malls. All these brilliant urban ideas showed a singular lack of understanding of local tastes and concerns. It is such top-down approach that is still causing untold miseries to people still living in tight rows of temporary shelters in Tamil Nadu after the 2004 tsunami, many of them braving the second monsoon in knee-deep water. In Andaman and Nicobar, tsunami-affected people stuck in tin-box shelters asked for their rights to choose the kind of houses they would like to live in.

It is rebuilding of communities, not just shelters that the new policy is supposed to envisage. The million-dollar test will be in the last-mile reach of the policy or in bureaucratic parlance, its last-desk reach.▶

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## From Eco-tourism to Equitable-tourism

by Naren Karunakaran

Sun, sea and sand are not enough. Add sustainability to your holidays. The new trend of responsible tourism goes beyond eco-tourism. It looks at the triple bottom line: tourism's impact on the local economy, society and the environment.

Tourism is often described as the world's biggest industry thanks to its contribution to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), employment-generation and the number of clients served. According to the UN World Tourism Organisation (WTO), international tourism roughly accounts for 36% of trade in commercial services in advanced economies, and 66% in developing economies. It constitutes 3-10% of GDP in advanced economies and 4% in developing economies. And the numbers are continuing to rise.



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**From Eco-tourism to Equitable-tourism** by Naren Karunakaran

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<http://www.infochangeindia.org/features419.jsp>

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The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) pegged the travel and tourism business at \$ 6 trillion for the year 2006. The council indicates that it will be twice this figure within the next decade. But along with the rapid growth rate are growing concerns about the impact of tourism. Tourism has been considered an elite, insensitive industry, bringing with it a host of problems.

Although the initial concerns were largely environmental -- the impact on fragile ecosystems and biodiversity, the focus now for civil society, governments and change makers in the tourism industry is on the economic and social aspects. This trend is also symptomatic of changes taking place across the board, the corporate responsibility movement, and growing support for ethical consumption, organic food and fair trade.

### **Prodding from within**

One of the principal drivers of change has come from originating markets. Tourists are demanding richer engagements with destinations and communities, says Director, International Centre for Responsible Tourism, UK.

Several surveys have made this very clear. In the US, more than three-quarters of travellers feel it is important their visits not damage the environment. A 2003 study (Travel Industry Association of America and National Geographic Traveller) estimates that 17 million US travellers consider environmental factors when deciding which travel companies to patronise.

In Britain (the Tearfund study), 66% of travellers said they placed importance on the fact that their last trip had been specifically designed to cause as little damage as possible to the environment. While cost, weather and quality of facilities are important, 42% of British tourists look for the quality of local, social, economic and political information available. At least 37% identified opportunities to interact with local people as important.

### **Waning sun-sea-sand tourism**

It's not just a section of tourists who are waking up. Tour operators are also

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coming round to the view that an element of responsible tourism can often be the tie-breaker for a traveller to make his or her choice, all other things -- destination, quality and price -- being equal.

Perhaps there's also the niggling realisation that the usual sun-sea-sand tourism has matured as a market, and that the focus is shifting towards a form of tourism that celebrates nature, diversity, culture, heritage and individual contribution/volunteerism.

Enlightened tour operators are examining economic and social impacts seriously. A handful has embarked on a clean-up drive. Pressures are being applied on hotels and other facilities they patronise.

The Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development is a network of 25 operators hosted by UNEP, Paris. The mandate is to incorporate sustainability principles into all their business operations. The Tourism Partnership of the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum has also been driving the responsibility agenda (11,100 hotel properties and 1.8 million rooms). The Tour Operators for Tigers (TOFT), a British alliance of top 30 operators, is already making a difference in some of India's national parks by aligning the entire tourism supply chains in Indian reserves to certain norms.

### **Climate change and tourism**

Tourism is trying to look at the big challenges as well - global warming and climate change. According to global estimates, air traffic contributes around 10% to global warming. First Choice Holidays, a British charter operator, has promised to offer all customers the chance to make donation towards offsetting the carbon that will be used during its flights. To start with, it will make a contribution equal to that raised by customers. The proceeds will be invested in carbon-saving projects -- protecting rainforests, clean, alternative energy.

### **Part of a wider global movement**

It is encouraging that the tourism sector is responding to the demands of civil society and, in a way, the market too. It is actually a wider movement

sweeping across several other sectors as well. Some of the perceived villains of big business, for instance the mining and oil leviathans, now realise that ensuring business sustainability would necessarily mean adhering to corporate responsibility norms along what is called the triple bottom line: impacts of the business on the economy, society and the environment.

Tourism has borrowed the concept and now acknowledges the triple bottom line with its emphasis on equitable tourism that benefits local communities in multiple ways -- skills training and jobs for locals; encouraging partnerships; improving markets for local goods and services.

### **Trends to watch**

The urge to seriously place tourism in the development paradigm came about early this decade. In 2002, the WTO released a report "Tourism and Poverty Alleviation" in which it was argued that tourism was one of the few developmental opportunities for the poor.

The first International Conference on Responsible Tourism Destinations was held in Cape Town as a side event preceding the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in 2002. This led to the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism and called for efforts towards better places to live in, better places for people to visit.

The responsibility has been placed at the doorstep of all stakeholders -- government, national and local, NGOs, industry, conservationists, and communities. The focus has to be on partnerships and identifying and setting local priorities.

### **Step up**

The trend is apparently gathering steam and has also engendered a sharply focused pro-



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poor tourism agenda. It focuses on changing the very nature of tourism development so that it increases the flow of income to poor people, or increases their assets and participation. The WTO's Sustainable Tourism-Elimination of Poverty (ST-EP) initiative, launched in 2006, is already presiding over 44 projects around the globe.

The wake-up call for change in the conduct of tourism has been ringing for some time now in the form of people's movements and community campaigns. The pressure from civil society, and rising expectations of recent years, has seen the emergence of a number of good practices in India lately.

Kerala's Periyar Tiger Reserve is perhaps the finest example of how a mass tourism destination has been transformed into a high-value, low-impact zone through community-based initiatives. It revolves around Eco Development Committees (EDCs): 72 in all, covering 58,000 villagers. Scores of tribal families that once eked out a living by illegally stripping the bark of cinnamon trees, for instance, have been brought into the fold through the Thekkady Tiger Trail, a trekking and camping scheme.

In Khonoma village, in Nagaland, northeastern India, an alternative model of community-led tourism is making waves. The village council is at the core of this initiative. The Sunderbans Jungle Camp in West Bengal has made it to the list of 12 finalists for the WTTC's Tourism for Tomorrow Awards 2007, considered the Oscars of the travel and tourism industry.

The ball has been set rolling. What remains to be seen is whether the tenets of responsible tourism permeate deep and wide. Tokenism can be perilous.▶

Source: ICRT, UK; Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex; Conservation International, US; UNEP

About the Author: **Naren Karunakaran** is a *Delhi-based journalist*





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## Defining India's Identity: An Alternative Vision

by *Bhikhu Parekh*

NEHRU'S VISION of India, which dominated our political life for several decades, has come under considerable, often unmerited, criticism. The alternative Hindutva view of India has proved politically inept and culturally bankrupt. The resulting ideological vacuum is currently being filled by a new vision, canvassed by an influential body of opinion cutting across the usual political and ideological divide and enjoying the support of influential sections of the NRIs.

India has long felt that its size, civilization, long historical continuity, and successful secular democratic institutions entitle it to greater international recognition and role than it has received so far. This legitimate aspiration is



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**Defining India's Identity: An Alternative Vision** by *Bhikhu Parekh*

Hindu, November 20, 2006

<http://www.thehindu.com/2006/11/20/stories/2006112004071000.htm>

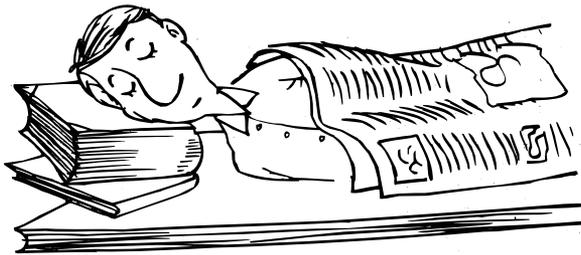
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currently being articulated in economic and military terms. It is argued that our overarching goal should be to become a great economic and military superpower, a global player occupying a seat at the top table and shaping the affairs of the world. India, we are told, cannot do so unless it is fully integrated into the global economy, opens up its markets, liberalizes and deregulates its economy, and in general does all that is needed to ensure a free inward flow of capital and goods. It should forge close ties with great powers, especially the U.S. with its control of major international institutions and ability to meet our nuclear ambitions.

I feel troubled by this vision, for several interrelated reasons. First, it is born out of fear and frustration: fear of being bypassed by history and overtaken by China, frustration at being ignored or patronized by others. It is other-determined, and does not spring from our own autonomous choices based on a careful assessment of the available alternatives.

Secondly, suppose we did become a great economic and military power by 2020, or at least 2050. So what? Military power is always relative, and cannot guarantee security beyond a certain point. If inequalities increase or persist in their current form as they certainly will, should we be willing to pay that price, especially as they impact unevenly in our religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and socially divided society? In other words, economic development cannot be an end in itself. It is a means, and requires a clear moral vision of what we intend to do with it.

Thirdly, the proposed vision leaves unanswered the question as to the kind of people we wish to be. Unlike most western societies in which middle classes played a socially and culturally revolutionary role, ours remain intellectually superficial, culturally dilettante, and politically apathetic to the plight of their underprivileged countrymen. Recent surveys suggest that the reading habits



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of most of them remain disappointingly shallow. Few read serious literature even in their own languages or patronize the arts, and many of them find even the newspaper editorials and the declining group of serious columnists intellectually challenging.

Finally, this vision of India as marching single-mindedly towards becoming an economic and military superpower is narrow and exclusive. It has no place for large sections of Indians, is consumerist in its orientation, morally uninspiring, and lacks shared values on which to unite all Indians. It is hardly surprising that it relies on the state as the sole source of unity and order. The poor and the underprivileged cannot count on the state to redress their heart-rending grievances or on their morally insensitive fellow-citizens to campaign for them. They either suffer and decay quietly or direct their fury against the state.

The idea that India's overarching aim should be to become an economic and military superpower then is deeply flawed. We need an alternative vision of the kind of country we wish to be, and of our place in the world. That vision must have a moral core, and should embody the principles of individual liberty, social justice, equal opportunity, and fraternity or a sense of community that are articulated in the Preamble of our Constitution. Our economic development should realize and be judged and guided by these goals. This calls for a social democratic, not a neoliberal state that we are bent on becoming, carefully monitored global integration, and close attention to the quality of life available to all our citizens, especially the poor.

While we must be able to defend ourselves against those who wish us ill and equip ourselves accordingly, we need to make a clear and objective assessment of the likely sources of threat. We should appreciate that a sensible and generous foreign policy devoted to cultivation of friends, regional cooperation, and giving voice to the poor and oppressed people of the world is a better form of national defense than military power and dubious global alliances. We should ensure that no country is in a position to dictate to the world, and should work with others to build up representative global institutions and international balance of power. We can also play an important role in curbing the apparently endless and brutal war on terrorism by mediating between the West, especially the U.S., and the Muslim world.

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### Strengths and weaknesses

Nehru's vision had its weaknesses but it also had its great strengths. We need to incorporate its abiding insights into a more satisfactory vision of India. We need to undertake a critical and careful assessment of our civilisational resources. No society can altogether break with its past, certainly not ours in which the past is a constant present. We have much to be ashamed of in our civilization but also much to be proud of.

Our strengths include our openness to the world, our pluralist attitude to life, our capacity to take a relaxed view of and live with multiple identities; our composite culture that has resulted from the unplanned dialogue and day-to-day negotiations of the various cultures and religions that come to our land; and our aesthetic, erotic, and philosophical heritage that is so rich that few currents of thought in the world do not have analogues in ours.

Our weaknesses include our relatively rigid social order, a weak social conscience, passive tolerance that allows different cultures and relations to coexist in peace but without much critical engagement, and our inegalitarian and hierarchical self-consciousness that finds it difficult to detach individuals from their social status and nurture the spirit of equality. We need to take a calm and critical look at all this, consolidate and build on our strengths, find ways of overcoming our weaknesses, and construct a new vision of India on that basis.

The alternative view of our identity that I am advocating cannot be fashioned in the Prime Minister's office, the Planning Commission or meetings of some advisory body. It can only grow out of a vigorous democratic debate. Democracy is not just about voting in elections and choosing a government. It is also about deciding what kind of country we wish to be. Political freedom is not just about choice between available alternatives, it is also about exploring new alternatives.▶

About the Author: **Lord Parekh**, *Professor at Hull University is a political philosopher and academic who has taught at several British universities, including the London School of Economics.*

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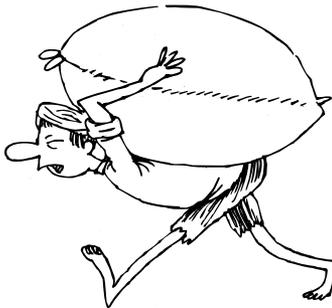
## In Search of Elusive Jobs

by T. K. Rajalakshmi

The International Labour Organization (ILO) report "Global Employment Trends for Youth" for 2006, reveals the sorry state of youth employment in developing economies and demystifies certain notions about the factors that cause unemployment in the 15-24 age bracket.

It points out the perils of ignoring the agrarian sector, particularly in countries in South Asia, South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where much of the unemployment and underemployment appear to be concentrated. It hints that while employment opportunities may have increased in some countries, it is not necessary that the jobs generated can be described as decent work. There is also no direct correlation between the high rates of economic growth and decent employment. Also, high rates of economic growth may not necessarily have "employment content".

The highest regional youth unemployment rates are observed in West Asia and North Africa (25.7 per cent) followed by the Central and Eastern Europe,



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**In Search of Elusive Jobs** by T. K. Rajalakshmi February 23, 2007  
Frontline, Vol 24, No 3  
<http://www.flonnet.com/fl2403/stories/20070223001910000.htm>  
[C.ELDOC1.H40/23frb07frn3.html]

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sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (16.6 per cent), South-East Asia and the Pacific (15.8 per cent), South Asia (10 per cent) and East Asia (7.8 per cent).

There are basically two kinds of unemployed, says the report. The first category comprises those who are looking for employment but are unable to find it; the second category consists of those who work under poor conditions and get willy-nilly thrown out of the labour market. They are also called "discouraged workers". The "working poor" are in some kind of work but yet are unable to find decent and productive work. They are found in the informal economy. Currently, 85 million unemployed youth and 300 million working poor youth subsist at the \$2 a day level and around 20 million discouraged youth face a deficit of decent work opportunities. The three categories together comprise around 35 per cent of the world youth population.

The report demystifies that access to education is still a major challenge for young people especially in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Affordability was one of the main reasons.

Secondly it argues that while education may automatically lead to decent employment in developed countries, it is not so in the developing economies where economic development has not kept pace with the increases in educational attainments. One of the most obvious examples is the abundance of unemployed youth with higher education degrees.

A third and very important misconception highlighted is the perception that young people generally like to look or "shop" around for the best job. The "shopping around" was more likely to occur in a context where there was an abundance of demand for such skills; for example, the demand for computer programmers in the U.S. in the 1990s. While this demand itself has come down with the decline of the boom economy, nowhere in the world is insecurity of employment an exalted value, especially where there are not too many good jobs going around. Security of employment is often preferred over job satisfaction and "shopping around" is more a developed economy phenomenon. Also in developing countries a majority of the youth appeared more bothered with the conditions of work rather than unemployment itself.

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While youth unemployment seems to be increasing, youth labour force participation rate (the share of the labour force in the working age population) has decreased globally. During the past decade, only the developed economies and the European Union saw a considerable decrease in unemployment. The report attributes this to a combination of successful youth strategies coupled with fewer younger people in the workforce. With a growing aging population in the developed economies, it is evident that the demand for employment is being generated. The sharpest increases in youth unemployment due to economic crises over the last 10 years were in South-East Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Another popular misconception was that the poor are poor because they do not work, that they are indolent and rely on social safety nets. What is the state of the working poor amongst the youth? According to the United Nations, one in five young people in the world lives in extreme poverty, and using the \$2 (cumulative household income) a day criterion, nearly half of all young people can be categorized as living in poverty. It is also a matter of great irony that sub-Saharan Africa, which has been on the radar of global and donor attention for several decades now, continues to have six out of every 10 young people in situations of extreme poverty. There seems to be a connection, albeit limited, between tertiary enrolment in education and youth inactivity. Interestingly, youth inactivity rates rose between 1995 and 2005 and continue to be the highest in West Asia, North Africa and South Asia. Enrolment declined in higher education in Central and Eastern Europe (non-E.U.), the CIS region and sub-Saharan Africa. In South Asia, especially India, enrolment in higher education is less than 10 per cent.

The report rightly underscores the link between poverty and declining educational enrolment. The need to focus on the 18-24 age group has never been as acute as before and the social consequences of this cannot be emphasized enough. Lack of decent work, says the ILO report, if experienced at an early age, has the potential of permanently compromising a person's future employment prospects and could well lead to social exclusion. The trend is clear and it can only be reversed by conscious government policy aimed at addressing these new work-related vulnerabilities.▶



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## 'Trickle-down' theory doesn't hold up

by Robert H. Frank

WHEN ASKED why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton famously replied, "Because that's where the money is." The same logic explains the call by John Edwards, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, for higher taxes on top earners to underwrite his proposal for universal health coverage.

Providing universal coverage will be expensive. With the median wage, adjusted for inflation, lower now than in 1980, most middle-class families cannot afford additional taxes. In contrast, the top tenth of one per cent of earners today make about four times as much as in 1980, while those higher



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'Trickle-down' theory doesn't hold up by Robert H. Frank, Hindu, April 13, 2007  
<http://www.thehindu.com/2007/04/13/stories/2007041302391100.htm>  
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up have enjoyed even larger gains. Top earners are where the money is. Universal health coverage cannot happen unless they pay higher taxes.

Trickle-down theorists are quick to object that higher taxes would cause top earners to work less and take fewer risks, thereby stifling economic growth. The surface plausibility of trickle-down theory owes much to the fact that it appears to follow from the time-honoured belief that people respond to incentives. Because higher taxes on top earners reduce the reward for effort, it seems reasonable that they would induce people to work less. On close examination, however, this claim is supported neither by economic theory nor by empirical evidence.

As every economics textbook makes clear, however, a decline in after-tax wages also exerts a second, opposing effect. By making people feel poorer, it provides them with an incentive to recoup their income loss by working harder than before.

### **Brutal lessons of experience**

If lower real wages induce people to work shorter hours, then the opposite should be true when real wages increase. Then, the cumulative effect of the last century's sharp rise in real wages should have been a significant increase in hours worked. However, the workweek is much shorter now than in 1900.

This theory also predicts shorter workweeks in countries with lower real after-tax pay rates. Yet here, too, the numbers tell a different story. For example, even though chief executives in Japan earn less than one-fifth what their American counterparts do and face substantially higher marginal tax rates, Japanese executives do not log shorter hours.

### **Inequality and growth**

Trickle-down theory also predicts a positive correlation between inequality and economic growth, the idea being that income disparities strengthen motivation to get ahead. Yet when researchers track the data within individual countries over time, they find a negative correlation. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, for example, income

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inequality was low by historical standards, yet growth rates in most industrial countries were extremely high. In contrast, growth rates have been only about half as large in the years since 1973, a period in which inequality has been steadily rising.

The same pattern has been observed in cross-national data. For example, using data from the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for a sample of 65 industrial nations, the economists Alberto Alesina and Dani Rodrick found lower growth rates in countries where higher shares of national income went to the top five per cent and the top 20 per cent of earners.

In contrast, larger shares for poor and middle-income groups were associated with higher growth rates. Again and again, the observed pattern is the opposite of the one predicted by trickle-down theory.

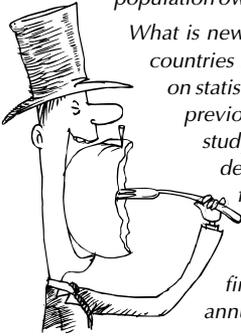
In the United States, trickle-down theory's insistence that a more progressive tax structure would compromise economic growth has long blocked attempts to provide valued public services. Although every other industrial country provides universal health coverage, these theorists insist that the wealthiest country on earth cannot afford to do so.

Low and middle-income families are not the only ones who have been harmed by our inability to provide valued public services. Many top earners would willingly pay higher taxes for public services that promise high value. This theory, which is supported neither by theory nor evidence, is ripe for abandonment.▶

About the Author: **Robert. H. Frank** is an Economist at the Johnson School of Management at Cornell University; he is the author of *The Economic Naturalist*.

### **Richest 2% own 'half the wealth'** by Andrew Walker

*The richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of all household wealth, according to a new study by a United Nations research institute. The report, from the World Institute for Development Economics Research at the UN University, says that the poorer half of the world's population own barely 1% of global wealth.*



*What is new about this report is its coverage. It deals with all countries in the world - either actual data or estimates based on statistical analysis - and it deals with wealth, where most previous research has looked at income. Wealth in this study is what people own, less what they owe - their debts. The assets include land, buildings, animals and financial assets.*

*The analysis shows striking divergences in wealth and in types of assets between countries. It also finds that inequality is sharper in wealth than in annual income.*

*Why does it matter? Because wealth serves as insurance against times when incomes tend to fall: such as unemployment, sickness or old age. It is also a source of finance for small businesses, a particularly important point since it is the countries with lower levels of personal wealth which also tend to have weaker financial systems without the funds, ability or inclination to lend to small firms.*

*The report is not about policy recommendations. But it does draw attention to the importance of enhancing banking systems in developing countries to help generate the funds for business investment. ▶*

**Andrew Walker** is an Economics correspondent for BBC World Service

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### **Richest 2% own 'half the wealth'** by Andrew Walker

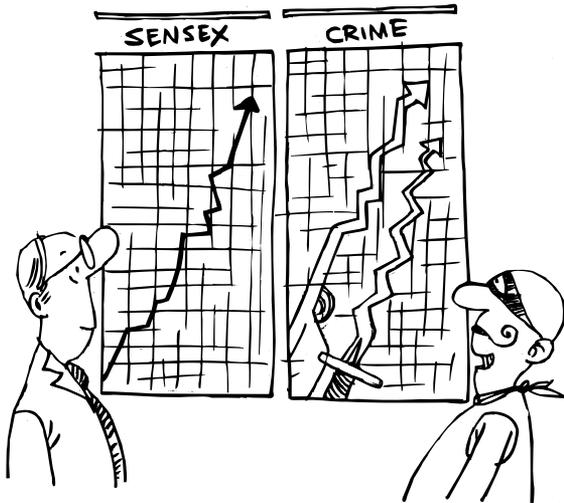
December 05, 2006

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/6211250.stm>

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## 'Its outright war and both sides are choosing their weapons'

*Chhattisgarh. Jharkhand. Bihar. Andhra Pradesh. Signposts of fractures gone too far with too little remedy; Arundhati Roy in conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on the violence rending our heartland*



**There is an atmosphere of growing violence across the country. How do you read the signs? In what context should it be read?**

You don't have to be a genius to read the signs. We have a growing middle class, reared on a diet of radical consumerism and aggressive greed. The

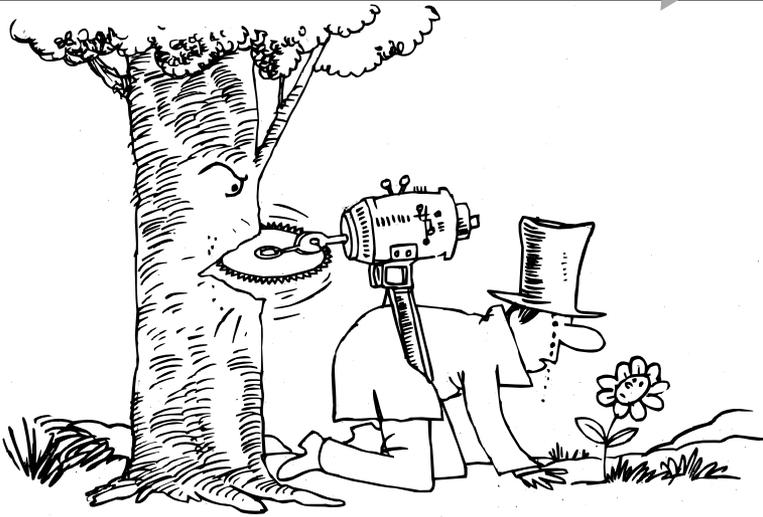
**'Its outright war and both sides are choosing their weapons'** by Shoma Chaudhury  
 Tehelka, March 31, 2007  
[http://tehelka.com/story\\_main28.asp?filename=Ne310307Its\\_outright\\_CS.asp](http://tehelka.com/story_main28.asp?filename=Ne310307Its_outright_CS.asp)  
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greed that is being generated (and marketed as a value interchangeable with nationalism) can only be sated by grabbing land, water and resources from the vulnerable. What we're witnessing is the most successful secessionist struggle ever waged in independent India — the secession of the middle and upper classes from the rest of the country. It's a vertical secession, not a lateral one. They're fighting for the right to merge with the world's elite somewhere up there in the stratosphere. They've managed to commandeer the resources, the coal, the minerals, the bauxite, the water and electricity. Now they want the land to make more cars, more bombs, more mines — supertoys for the new supercitizens of the new superpower. So its outright war and people on both sides are choosing their weapons. The government and the corporations reach for structural adjustment, the World Bank, the ADB, FDI, friendly court orders, friendly policy makers, help from the 'friendly' corporate media and a police force that will ram all this down people's throats. Those who want to resist this process have, until now, reached for dharnas, hunger strikes, satyagraha, the courts and what they thought was friendly media. But now more and more are reaching for guns. Will the violence grow? If the 'growth rate' and the Sensex are going to be the only barometers the government uses to measure progress and the well-being of people, then of course it will.

**You once remarked that though you may not resort to violence yourself, you think it has become immoral to condemn it, given the circumstances in the country. Can you elaborate on this view?**

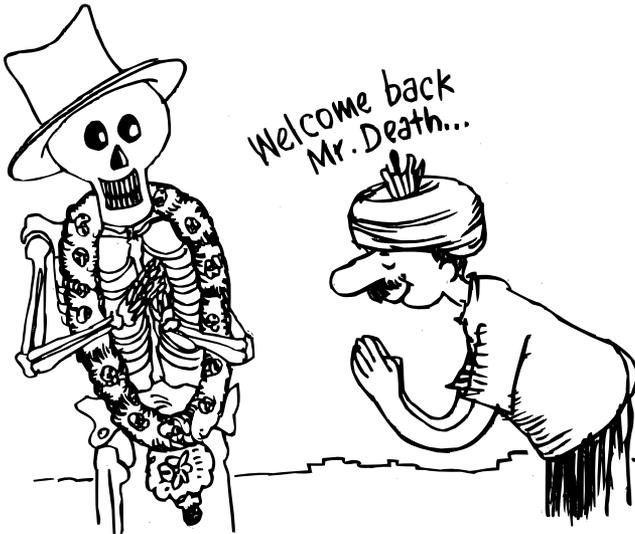
I doubt I used the word 'immoral' — morality is an elusive business, as changeable as the weather. What I feel is this: non-violent movements have knocked at the door of every democratic institution in this country for decades, and have been spurned and humiliated. Look at the Bhopal gas victims, the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The nba had a lot going for it — high-profile leadership, media coverage, more resources than any other mass movement. What went wrong? People are bound to want to rethink strategy. When Sonia Gandhi begins to promote satyagraha at the World Economic Forum in Davos, it's time for us to sit up and think. For example, is mass civil



disobedience possible within the structure of a democratic nation state? Is it possible in the age of disinformation and corporate-controlled mass media? Are hunger strikes umbilically linked to celebrity politics? Would anybody care if the people of Nangla Machhi or Bhatti mines went on a hunger strike?

I've always felt that it's ironic that hunger strikes are used as a political weapon in a land where most people go hungry anyway. We are in a different time and place now. Up against a different, more complex adversary. We've entered the era of NGOs — in which mass action can be a treacherous business. We have demonstrations which are funded, we have sponsored dharnas and social forums which make militant postures but never follow up on what they preach. We have all kinds of 'virtual' resistance. Meetings against SEZs sponsored by the biggest promoters of SEZs. Awards and grants for environmental activism and community action given by corporations responsible for devastating whole ecosystems. Now we have NGOs who make a lot of noise, write a lot of reports, but whom the sarkar is more than comfortable with. How do we make sense of all this? The place is crawling with professional diffusers of real political action.

There was a time when mass movements looked to the courts for justice. The courts have rained down a series of judgements that are so unjust, so insulting to the poor in the language they use, they take your breath away. The judiciary, along with the corporate press, is now seen as the lynchpin of the neo-liberal project. In a climate like this, when people feel that they are being worn down, exhausted by these interminable 'democratic' processes, only to be eventually humiliated, what are they supposed to do? Of course it isn't as though the only options are binary — violence versus non-violence. There are political parties that believe in armed struggle but only as one part of their overall political strategy. Political workers in these struggles have been dealt with brutally, killed, beaten, and imprisoned under false charges. People are fully aware that to take to arms is to call down upon yourself the myriad forms of the violence of the Indian State. The minute armed struggle becomes a strategy, your whole world shrinks and the colours fade to black



and white. But when people decide to take that step because every other option has ended in despair, should we condemn them? We are living in times when to be ineffective is to support the status quo (which no doubt suits

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some of us). And being effective comes at a terrible price. I find it hard to condemn people who are prepared to pay that price.

**You have been travelling a lot on the ground — can you give us a sense of the trouble spots you have been to? Can you outline a few of the combat lines in these places?**

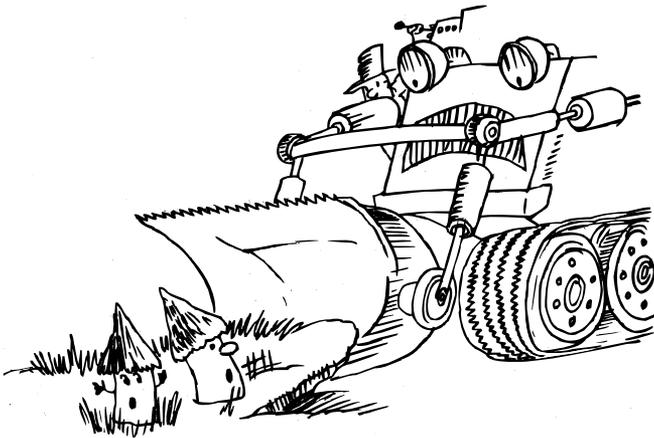
Huge question — what can I say? The military occupation of Kashmir, neo-fascism in Gujarat, civil war in Chhattisgarh, mncs raping Orissa, the submergence of hundreds of villages in the Narmada Valley, people living on the edge of absolute starvation, the devastation of forest land, the Bhopal victims living to see the West Bengal government re-wooing Union Carbide — now calling itself Dow Chemicals — in Nandigram. I haven't been recently to Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, but we know about the almost hundred thousand farmers who have killed themselves. We know about the fake encounters and the terrible repression in Andhra Pradesh. Each of these places has its own particular history, economy, ecology. None is amenable to easy analysis. And yet there is connecting tissue, there are huge international cultural and economic pressures being brought to bear on them.

**How does one view the recent State and police violence in Bengal?**

No different from police and State violence anywhere else — including the issue of hypocrisy and doublespeak so perfected by all political parties including the mainstream Left. Are Communist bullets different from capitalist ones? I don't know if all of this has to do with climate change. The Chinese Communists are turning out to be the biggest capitalists of the 21st century. Why should we expect our own parliamentary Left to be any different? Nandigram and Singur are clear signals. It makes you wonder — is the last stop of every revolution advanced capitalism? Think about it — the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid struggle, the supposedly Gandhian freedom struggle in India... what's the last station they all pull in at?

**The Maoist attack in Bijapur — the death of 55 policemen. Are the rebels only the flip side of the State?**

How can the rebels be the flip side of the State? Would anybody say that those who fought against apartheid — however brutal their methods — were the flip side of the State? What about those who fought the French in Algeria? Or those who fought the Nazis? or those who are fighting the US occupation of Iraq? This facile new report-driven ‘human rights’ discourse, makes politicians of us all. However pristine we would like to be, the tragedy is that we have run out of pristine choices. There is a civil war in Chhattisgarh sponsored, created by the Chhattisgarh government, which is publicly pursuing the Bush doctrine: if you’re not with us, you are with the terrorists. The lynchpin of this war, apart from the formal security forces, is the *Salva Judum* — a government-backed militia of ordinary people forced to take up



arms, forced to become *spos* (special police officers). The Indian State has tried this in Kashmir, in Manipur, in Nagaland. Tens of thousands have been killed; hundreds of thousands tortured, thousands have disappeared. Now the government wants to import these failed strategies into the heartland. Thousands of *adivasis* have been forcibly moved off their mineral-rich lands into police camps. Hundreds of villages have been forcibly evacuated. Those lands, rich in iron-ore, are being eyed by corporations like the Tatas

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and Essar. While everybody's eyes are fixed on the spiralling violence between government-backed militias and guerrilla squads, multinational corporations quietly make off with the mineral wealth. That's the little piece of theatre being scripted for us in Chhattisgarh.

Of course it's horrible that 55 policemen were killed. But they're as much the victims of government policy as anybody else. For the government and the corporations they're just cannon fodder. For the Maoist guerrillas, the police and spos they killed were the armed personnel of the Indian State, the main, hands-on perpetrators of repression, torture, custodial killings, and false encounters. They're not innocent civilians if such a thing exists. I have no doubt that the Maoists can be agents of terror and coercion too and they have committed unspeakable atrocities.

I have no doubt they cannot lay claim to undisputed support from local people — but who can? Still, no guerrilla army can survive without local support. That's a logistical impossibility. And the support for Maoists is growing, not diminishing. That says something. People have no choice but to align themselves on the side of whoever they think is less worse.

The government has slammed the door in the face of every attempt at non-violent resistance. When people take to arms, there is going to be all kinds of violence — revolutionary, lumpen and outright criminal. The government is responsible for the monstrous situations it creates.

**'Naxals', 'Maoists', 'outsiders': these are terms being very loosely used these days.**

'Outsiders' is a generic accusation used in the early stages of repression by governments who have begun to believe their own publicity and can't imagine that their own people have risen up against them. That's the stage the CPM is at now in Bengal, though some would say repression in Bengal is not new, it has only moved into higher gear. In any case, what's an outsider? Who decides the borders? Are they village boundaries? Tehsil? Block? District? State? Is narrow regional and ethnic politics the new Communist mantra? About Naxals and Maoists — well... India is about to become a police state in which everybody who disagrees with what's going on risks

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being called a terrorist. Islamic terrorists have to be Islamic — so that’s not good enough to cover most of us. They need a bigger catchment area. So leaving the definition loose, undefined, is effective strategy, because the time is not far off when we’ll all be called Maoists or Naxalites, terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, and shut down by people who don’t really know or care who Maoists or Naxalites are. In villages, of course, that has begun — thousands of people are being held in jails across the country, loosely charged with being terrorists trying to overthrow the state.

**The Indian State and media largely view the Maoists as an “internal security” threat. Is this the way to look at them?**

I’m sure the Maoists would be flattered to be viewed in this way.

**The Maoists want to bring down the State. Given the autocratic ideology they take their inspiration from, what alternative would they set up? Wouldn’t their regime be an exploitative, autocratic, violent one as well? Isn’t their action already exploitative of ordinary people? Do they really have the support of ordinary people?**

I think it’s important for us to acknowledge that both Mao and Stalin are dubious heroes with murderous pasts. Tens of millions of people were killed under their regimes. Can we pretend that China’s cultural revolution didn’t happen? Or that millions of people in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were not victims of labour camps, torture chambers, the network of spies and informers, and the secret police. The history of these regimes is just as dark as the history of Western imperialism, except for the fact that they had a shorter life-span. We cannot condemn the occupation of Iraq, Palestine and Kashmir while we remain silent about Tibet and Chechnya. I would imagine that for the Maoists, the Naxalites, as well as the mainstream Left, being honest about the past is important to strengthen people’s faith in the future. The Maoists in Nepal have waged a brave and successful struggle against the monarchy. Right now, in India, the Maoists and the various Marxist-Leninist groups are leading the fight against immense injustice here. They are fighting not just the State, but feudal landlords and their armed militias. They are the only people who are making a dent. And I admire that. It may well be that when they

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come to power, they will, as you say, be brutal, unjust and autocratic, or even worse than the present government. Maybe, but I'm not prepared to assume that in advance. If they are, we'll have to fight them too. But right now, it is important to acknowledge that they are bearing the brunt of being at the forefront of resistance. Many of us are in a position where we are beginning to align ourselves on the side of those who we know have no place for us in their religious or ideological imagination. It's true that everybody changes radically when they come to power. But does this mean that people whose dignity is being assaulted should give up the fight because they can't find saints to lead them into battle?

**Is there a communication breakdown in our society?**

Yes.▶







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