

Readers' Forum

Depressing Sights

Madhu Kishwar's analysis and remarks regarding the anti-poor and anti-farmer policies of our government and the hypocritical attitudes of some of our voluntary agencies is totally correct. Many of them are asking for protection of the poor from the new economic policy (NEP) while taking full advantage of the situation for their own purposes.

In the course of the last four years of my living and working in Medak district, I've come to realise very closely how exploitative — in a subtle, direct, and indirect manner — most urban people, policy-makers, and *sarkari babus* are towards the poor and the rural people. We do have a situation with Stalinist-type controls over the peasantry in India, dictating prices to them which are more suited to the interests of industrialists and urban dwellers than those of the farmers. 'Sarkari thugs' are a greater danger to Indians than the Multinational Corporations (MNCs). The rich get subsidised by robbing the poor who pay more tax (69 percent) and more interest (60.1 percent) on loans than the rich. Industrialists are buying land at cheap rates from desperate farmers and building factories (and golf courses) not at all suited to the local interests.

I feel increasingly ashamed seeing all these things happen all around me. We want to make believe (and ape the western Third Wave) that we are not primarily a First Wave society a la

Allwin Toeffler. That producers and consumers of essential items in our country are totally ignorant of each others realities. And we claim to be the biggest democracy in the world! What a joke! Eighty percent of India's population has no say in the decision-making processes at all. I have come to believe that ours is a state which shines out as an example of a state that needs to be done away with. We, the citizens of India, have to take things into our own hands. There are many individuals and small groups doing good work — we just need to join hands.

One area that really has to be reconsidered is our *panchayati raj* and the current system of government loans, which operate in a very hostile way for both women and the poor. For years, villagers have been forced to borrow cash from the *sahukars* in the village. They pay an interest rate ranging from 36 percent to 120 percent per annum, depending on their degree of urgency.

The present *sarpanch* of my village is one such *sahukar*. He is an upper-caste Congressman who has 12 acres of land and many other assets. There are no representatives of Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) or women in the *panchayat*. Though he avails of all sorts of subsidies and programmes for the farmers that are provided by the government, I have not heard of or seen him help any of the OBCs, SCs, or women in availing of such programmes. I have asked him to

provide a piece of land for a school/youth centre for OBC/SC children in the village, but I have not got any positive answer from him (or from the previous *sarpanch*, whom I know used to charge fees for allocating government land to poor villagers). So just as they did in feudal times, the poor depend on money-lenders in the village and continue paying huge interest rates.

Sometimes some 'leaders' (e.g. young men belonging to one or the other political party) tell the poor about some government programme and take them (mostly women) around from one office to another like that of the District Collector (DC), Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO), or Development Officer (DO) and then charge them fees for their own food and travel requirements. More often than not, the women return empty-handed, lose their daily wages, and lose their money by paying fees to the 'leader'. Since they are mostly illiterate, they believe most of what the 'leader' says. To get a ration card or an identity card, the poor villagers have to pay bribes to the *panchayat* office personnel and the MRO/MDO office personnel. The villagers are kept hanging around for small services like attesting a paper or signing a document — services that should be free since they are paid for by the government. The worst part of it is that the poorer the people, the more they end up paying.

Recently I got cheap loans for 16 of my farm workers from the local bank.

The manager is a generous-hearted person and after visiting my farm he immediately recommended the loan for the workers. Not a penny of bribe had to be paid by anyone to anyone. Why can't the landlords in the village who go to the same manager for loans for themselves, ask him to grant their villagers loans too? It is clear that the rich want to help keep the poor poor.

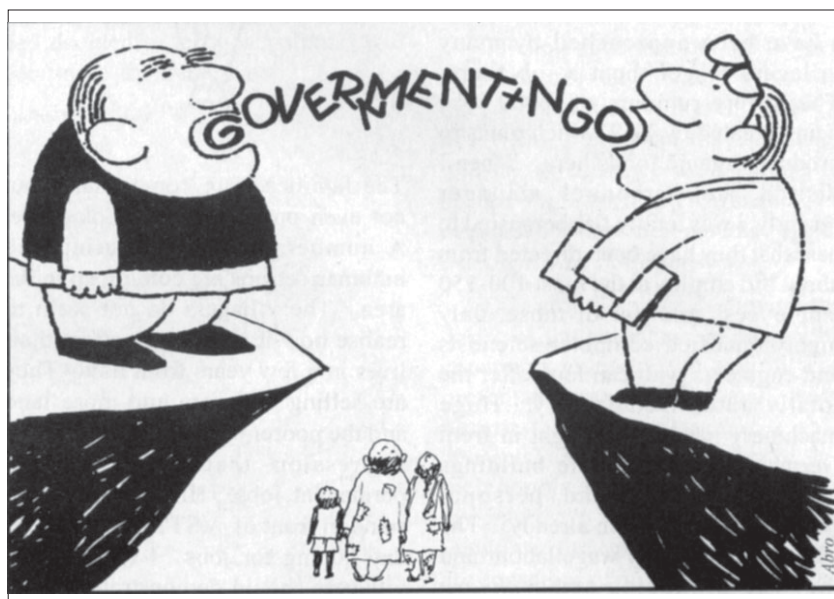
Government schools and polytechnics are another good example of institutions designed to alienate the poor. Twelve children of my farm workers have been admitted in a high school nearby. I have encountered a series of events which prove how corrupt 'educated' people can be.

The first thing that I heard villagers say is that the principal of the village school had told them that they would have to pay Rs 500 to get their children admitted into the school. When I heard this, I contacted the principal directly and finally was able to get the children admitted for Rs 80 per year. However, it took a lot of persuasion and time filling forms and getting previous school leaving certificates, which again the poor families were asked to pay for. Though the principal and the teachers were very friendly in the beginning, they didn't do all what they were supposed to do, like providing free books. The Mandal Education Officer (MEO) told me that the school has been provided with more books than demanded but the teachers and the principal kept telling me that they were short of books. A few books were handed over to some children at Rs 2 to 5 per package. The children were asked to buy the remaining books in books shops in town. I am told that the books are sold to the shops who in turn sell these to the children at higher rates. And nobody — neither the 'educated' teachers, the principal, or the shopkeepers can be caught.

The same people routinely misbehave with the school children. The children get beaten up badly on their heads and faces and are verbally abused over small matters such as not having their uniforms on. The very same 'educated' teachers more often than not come from villages themselves and sometimes also belong to OBC castes. The kind of influence that our present educational system and the impact that a *sarkari naukari* (government job) has on the minds of our people is obvious. Neither the teachers nor the

planners have bothered to make a bus stop for the little children even though the NH9 is a very dangerous road to cross.

The same is true for the local polytechnic, which has got grants from government for community work and has started tailoring courses for the OBC/SC women and a juice/jam-making course for the Reddy (upper caste) women. Some of my farm women attended the tailoring course. They reported periodically about how the polytechnic employees got their own



principal is interested in any change in their style of teaching. When I offered to conduct an environmental project with the children using my farm as an experimental field, they showed no interest whatsoever.

In trying to get a bus stop organised in front of the school (a huge complex along the NH9), I have approached the manager of the APSRTC Bus Depot many times, but the buses will not stop for the kids.. I have been given many excuses and was even told to carry the children in my own jeep! For 17 years neither the school authorities nor the city

acquaintances admission in the courses and used up most of the material (cloth, thread, machines) rather than equitably shared the materials with the poor participants for whom the government has designed the courses.

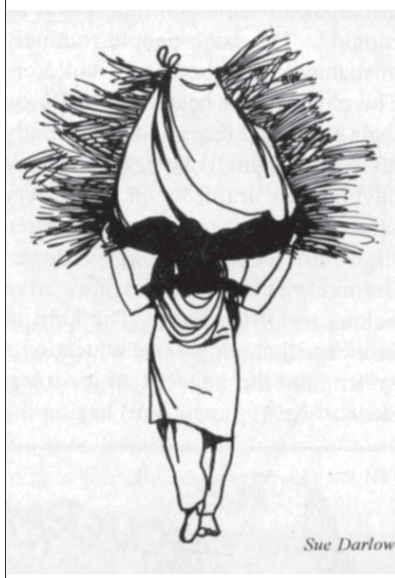
The principal had initially asked me to work as an observer and advisor. But later as I reported these incidents more than once, I stopped getting invited to meetings. Also, the employees started complaining about my creating feuds amongst the participants. But my workers and myself know pretty well why they talk

like that. They didn't like anyone preventing them from distributing all the resources amongst themselves

Finally, I continue to witness rich urbanites exploiting the desperate situation of even the bigger farmers. Agriculture is such a headache these days and most of the agricultural workers are illiterate and do not know what is happening.

VST, a Nizam tobacco company, has bought 200 acres of land nearby. I have been approached by many villagers to get them a job there. There were rumours of 9,000 jobs being created by VST which plans to produce organic foods here. When I visited the personnel manager recently, I was totally flabbergasted to hear that they have been directed from above "to employ at the most 100-150 employees" and out of those, only highly qualified computer scientists and engineers who can look after the totally automatised factory. Huge machinery has been brought in from Germany, huge concrete buildings have been built, and personal computers can be seen already. The local labour is daily wage labour and they are producing some *kheera* (cucumbers) and other pickles for export to foreign customers. VST is giving seeds and pesticides to local agriculturists to produce the raw material for total export. What relevance does this operation have for the villagers here, especially those who have been dislocated? What is the difference between this and a MNC? It seems worse to see Indians exploiting people so they can create jobs and cash only for themselves.

Sumitra, a nearby pharmaceutical factory, has had a number of poisonous explosions which have even killed some villagers who worked there on a daily wage basis. The



families were compensated but not even one court case took place. A number of other polluting and inhuman set-ups are coming up in the area. The villagers do not seem to realise how it is going to effect their lives in a few years from now. They are selling off more and more land and the poorer ones are still under the impression that they will get permanent jobs. Hundreds of them stand in front of VST's factory every day hoping for jobs. I feel that the villagers should demonstrate against the setting up of such factories rather than beg them for an inhuman job.

**Asha Kachru, Medak District,
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Between Generations

Rikke Andreassen conducted a five-month research project at Alagappa University, Coracidia, Tamil Nadu that focussed on the relationship between women's higher education and its impact on post-graduate life choices. Below is an excerpt from her findings concerning marriage and employment, based on the responses of 108 women.

In exploring women's attitudes towards marriage I chose to focus in two areas. The first set of questions surrounded the relationship between women's future marriage plans and their desires for employment. The second set concentrated on what kind of marriage they preferred, the traditional "arranged marriage" in which the parents of the bride and bridegroom choose the spouse and arrange the wedding, or the more recently introduced self-arranged marriage in which the couple chooses each other.

The majority of students (57.4 percent) said that they planned to be married after having worked one or two years; 4.6 percent even specified the year of their marriage, which was, at the latest, 1997. 9.3 percent either did not know, or stated that it depends on circumstances beyond their control such as, "when a good alliance comes", or, "according to my parents' will."

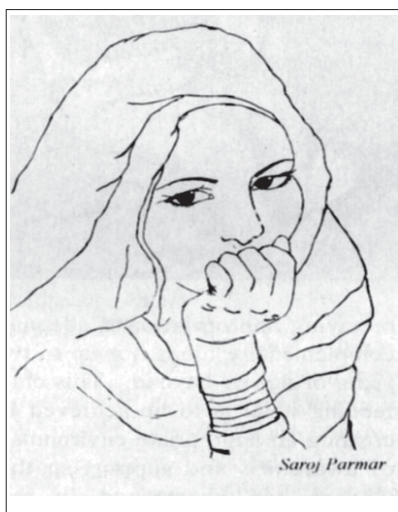
25.9 percent of the women reported that they will get married after completing their degree. This last group is interesting seen in the light of their following responses. All of these women indicated that they would like to work after completing their degree. However, 68 percent of them also said that they will either not work after getting married or that they will let their work participation depend upon the wishes of their future husband and in-laws. This means that 15.7 percent of the students either will not or may not become employed after finishing their degree, because of marriage. If the number of students who will not work because of marriage is added to the number of students who did not desire employment after graduation, the total is 22.2 percent of the participants who are not likely to seek employment after graduation.

80.6 percent of the students stated that they would prefer a parental arranged marriage, whereas only 15.7 percent would prefer a self-arranged marriage. A small group (3.7 percent) wrote that they would prefer a blend of the two types of marriage, in which the parents agree on their self-chosen partner. Overall, 95.4 percent of the women's parents were reported to prefer arranging their children's marriage themselves, and 4.6 percent of the parents would accept either type of marriage. While 8.3 percent of the women reported that their communities would accept self- as well as parental-arranged marriages, the rest of the women said their communities would only accept marriages arranged by parents. All of the women who wanted their parents to arrange their marriage had parents who also wanted that, with the exception of three sets of parents who were willing to accept both kinds of marriages.

Reasons given for preferring a parental-arranged marriage included: "love is blind so by that we won't get a good partner" and "parents have rich experience in life and they will be in a better position to choose our life partner according to our character." In contrast, the women who preferred a self-arranged marriage argued that "there will be a better understanding in a love marriage"; and "it's easier to select the right partner when you know him before marriage."

The majority of students showed a great concern for their parents' wishes about their future. Some said it was because they did not want to lose their parents' support, and others felt more secure about the choice of a partner that their parents would make, compared to the kind of decision that they would be able to make. A large group of respondents simply felt it was a matter for their parents to handle.

Since there was a good deal of importance given to the parents' wishes in marriage decisions, I was interested to know if a similar importance was attached to parents' wishes about their daughter's future employment. If that was the case, then it seemed doubtful that the 7.14 percent of women whose parents will not let them work will choose to take up a job against their parents' will; especially because all 7.14 percent had decided to let their parents' will determine their marriage.



The six women in this study who had boyfriends all indicated a desire for a self-arranged marriage with their boyfriends, which they thought would be possible after convincing their parents about their desire. One of the women explained that if she couldn't convince her parents, she would marry her boyfriend anyway, even though she said that would mean breaking away from her parents forever. Only one pair of parents approved of self-arranged marriages (and happened to have had one themselves) but unfortunately, since the woman's boyfriend was from another caste, they would not accept her relationship.

Five of these women with

boyfriends predicted that their parents would not accept the relationship if they came to know of it, and the girls believed that they would be scolded and perhaps beaten, and then immediately married off. Even though the women felt sure that their parents would be extremely upset, they believed that they would be able to convince their parents in the end to accept their choice..

Of the small number of women who preferred a self-arranged marriage but did not presently have a boyfriend, more than half said they will try to convince their parents to accept the marriage, while the rest decided to follow their parents' wishes even if it was not their desire.

This attitude about following the desire of the parents is similar to the comments given by the women who prefer an arranged marriage: "My parents' wish is also my wish"; "Parents' choice is ahead of ours. It's their happiness that counts more than my interest"; "I will never differ in views with my parents because they are conscious of my well-being"; "Our parents fulfill everything that we want without expecting anything. Only thing they expect from us is they want our marriage according to their wish."

**Rikke Andreassen, Risskov,
Denmark**

Natural Protection

Scientific research in recent decades has confirmed traditional wisdom that human breast milk surpasses anything available from our most sophisticated technologies in terms of its nutritional content, immunising potential and ability to reduce susceptibility to allergies.

Breastfeeding is beneficial to the mother's health as well as her newborn

by speeding up post-natal recovery and reducing the risk of breast and ovarian cancer. Many people believe that there are psychological benefits that accompany breastfeeding, helping to develop emotional bonds between mother and child.

However, our markets are flooded with infant milk formulas and plastered with images of the stout, chubby-cheeked “Glaxo-baby”. Working mothers embraced breast milk substitutes as the answer to the dilemma of fulfilling responsibilities to both their child and their job. Even hospitals, with their staff of medical professionals, have fostered the use of breast milk substitutes, despite the scientific support in favor of breast milk.

Fortunately, global welfare organisations such as the World Health Organisation and UNICEF have undertaken the task of promoting breast milk as the best option for infant care and nutrition. The Innocenti Declaration, a statement adopted at the meeting of WHO/UNICEF policy makers “Breast feeding in the 1990s. A Global Initiative”, underlines the importance of breastfeeding. It reads, “... as a global goal for optimal maternal and child health and nutrition, all women should be enabled to practice exclusive breastfeeding and all infants should be fed exclusively on breastmilk from birth to four to six months of age. Thereafter, children should continue to be breastfed, while receiving appropriate and adequate complementary foods, for up to two years of age or beyond. This child feeding ideal is to be achieved by



creating an appropriate environment of awareness and support so that women can breastfeed in this manner”.

The Indian government has set up a national task force and instructed all the state governments to help and cooperate with the WHO-UNICEF team who have begun the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative for encouraging hospitals to promote

breastfeeding. The government has also passed the Infant Milk Substitutes, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods (Regulation of Production, Supply and Distribution) Act in 1992. This act aims to regulate production, supply and distribution of infant milk substitutes, infant foods and feeding bottles and to ban their advertisements with a view to promote breastfeeding. The mandatory message of “Mother’s milk is best for your baby” on containers of breastmilk substitutes is another result of this act.

The dilemma remains, however, for working women who figure nowhere in the schemes envisioned by the United Nations Initiative and the Indian government. Policy makers, it seems, imagine that every Indian woman is a housewife who deliberately abstains from breastfeeding

because she has become enamoured with the feeding bottle. Few practical options are currently available for women who must return to their work soon after their child’s birth for reasons of economic necessity or job security, since working women are only granted three months of maternity leave.

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