

## PERSPECTIVES FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

In the last Panel, **Fr. Joe Xavier, Sr. Jeanne Devos, Mr. Yves Berthelot** and **Ms. Mary Chelladurai** were invited to share their perceptions of the Colloquium and present some perspectives for social activists. **Fr. R.V. Mathias** was the Moderator. We give here Mathias' Report and a few extracts from Berthelot, Devos and Chelladurai. Mathias' Report follows Xavier's presentation in parts 2 and 3, while adding some reflections of the other speakers and his own.

### I. ORIENTATIONS FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

**R.V. Mathias**

This Report highlights *Three Images of India, The Participants' Strong Realisations* during the Colloquium and the *Individual and Collective Responses of Activists*.

#### 1. Three Images of India

I would like to describe *Three Images of India*.

1. *A glittering and shining India is often projected in the local and international media: the future superpower, a strong economy with 9.5% annual growth; successful IT engineers and ambitious businessmen; many high-paid job opportunities...* This represents only a small section of our country, that of about 15% well-off of our population: the very or relatively rich people linked with the global market and its political and business advisers, executive officers and engineers, and its IT and other workers who carry out the tasks given by their 'masters'.

2. *The fate of most of the other 85% of the population is however very different.* They are the oppressed, discriminated against and excluded Dalits and Tribals, the increasing number of rural and urban poor, the exploited women and children, unorganised workers and migrants, the despairing peasants deprived of their lands and other

---

R.V. Mathias has been the National and International Animator of the YCW (Young Christian Workers) movement for many years. He is now the Rector of Christ Hall Seminary, Madurai.

livelihood resources, the impoverished fish workers with their meagre catches because of the powerful rich who indiscriminately deplete the sea, and so on.

3. *The third image comprises a special category of people, namely, **the socially conscious and dedicated persons** who do not accept today's established order that is centred around the economy alone, thus alienating and excluding millions and depriving them of their human dignity and rights. *They believe in the development of each person and the whole person, the complete and integral development of the entire humanity. Whatever may be their background, these persons of 'good will' (we may say, these activists) are committed to, and work for, the creation of more human conditions, the possession of life's necessities for all, the broadening of knowledge and culture, the transformation of oppressive social structures, etc.* (Paul VI, *On the Development of Peoples*, 1967, #14, 17 & 20-1).*

#### 2. The Participants' Strong Realisations

During the Colloquium, **the participants deepened their understanding and reinforced their convictions.** These are some of their experiences and realisations.

- While discrimination, exclusion and exploitation of the marginalised have increased down the years, *the globalisation era has brought in new forms of marginalisation.* Our experiences show that today there are more subtle, invisible and multiple forms of exploitation. The identification of our enemy was rather easier some years ago, using various tools of socio-cultural analysis. Today the enemy is here as well as far, within and in the structures around.

- In the Indian context, the victims are ultimately the Dalits, Adivasis, women and children. The Colloquium moreover highlighted the wretched conditions of Muslim women and child workers. The marginalisation process of these communities cannot be merely attributed to factors like non-literacy, lack of skills and poor hygiene; *the fundamental realities of resourcelessness and powerlessness are clearly at work.*

- *There is a close nexus between the state and the market forces.* The state has conveniently forgotten the principles enshrined

in the Constitution of India and is increasingly playing the role of 'broker' for the market forces, changing overnight the existing policies and laws. *These changes*, which claim to usher in the 'new' (e.g., by speaking of the New Economic policy, New Industrial Policy, etc.), *have one common characteristic – they are all anti-poor*. Ironically, they have all been introduced in the name of 'development'! The Dalits for example are not any more only the victims of the caste system and patriarchy, but have also become the victims of development.

- After the introduction of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation, *the marginalised experience the shrinking of the democratic space and the expansion of the private space*. The market forces are itching to make huge, easy and quick money, and are willing to get rid of all those who cannot contribute towards this goal. Any attempt to confront the state and its policies are dealt with an iron hand, resulting in the gruesome killing of the marginalised. *There is a blatant violation of citizenship and the livelihood rights of the poor*.

### 3. Individual and Collective Responses of Activists

- **We, the social activists, reaffirm our faith in the 'small people', in the power of the poor, exploited and excluded**, who are the main agents of the reconstruction of society on the basis of human dignity and justice. Along with value-based intellectuals and spiritual leaders, we proclaim our solidarity with the poor and the marginalised to facilitate this change process towards a new paradigm of development.

- The NGOs too often adopt a project-oriented approach and develop donor-driven attitudes. Having realised this syndrome, *we need to make a conscious shift from a project- to a process-oriented approach*. Instead of being project implementers, we must become monitors of the people's agenda. **We must shift from a need-based to a rights based approach**. We should not be concerned only with charity and mere economic development, but with social justice. **In this, the primary task and priority is to hold the state accountable and responsible for the well-being of its citizens**. The NGOs should not try to run parallel governments!

- **The primary purpose of all our educative and conscientising involvements is to create a 'politicised citizenry'**. All our interventions must aim at making people aware of their rights and enabling them to assert their rights and thus become 'subjects' of history.

- **As activists involved in NGOs and people's movements, we need to build synergies and promote collective action**. A meaningful blend of various stakeholders is very important in this process. The following are some of the areas of concern. *To strengthen the quality of their response, the NGOs must rope in committed intellectuals*. Large and small NGOs engaged in specialised sectors like health, education, economic development and human rights, or working with specific groups like women, Dalits and farmers or in different geographical areas, *all should find ways and means of collaboration and networking*. We also need to establish linkages between general commitments, focused interventions and participation in broad solidarity platforms. Both local interventions without global linkages and participation in global networks without live contacts with local realities are quite insufficient. *Solidarity in action is real power/shakthi*.

- The globalised world adheres to the principle of TINA – 'There Is No Alternative' to globalisation. It either co-opts or trounces all democratic alternatives. Yet, new emerging spaces like the World Social Forum with its slogan, 'Another World Is Possible', give us new vistas for constructing a better world, a world with dignity and life for all. *How do we strengthen and expand such new spaces?*

- Such colloquiums can be held on a regular basis. *They should pay attention to the new forces that will contribute to shape the future*. Three such factors may be mentioned here. The first is climate change with its consequences on migrations. Ecological refugees will probably be numerous in South Asia and India. Second the growth of the world population, the market for 'green-oil' and the forces of globalisation and industrialisation are likely to result in greater competition for land with serious implications for small farmers and food prices. Third, the emerging powers will increasingly challenge the US hegemony and its ideology.

- Participative governance is a new way of living. While demanding a culture of participation, transparency and accountability from the state, *NGOs must develop the same culture at their level of organisation and work.*

- In their personal lives, relationships and involvements, the social activists must adopt the new mindset, values, attitudes and behaviour patterns highlighted in this Colloquium. This is indispensable to get the trust and confidence of the people and be effective in our work. *In our struggles with the people, we must grow with them in our attention to human rights and justice, our concern for equality, participation and solidarity, our gender sensitivity and deep respect for all people, and so on. This is the only way to achieve a human-centered development, resulting in harmony and peace.*

---

## II. FUTURE-ORIENTED REFLECTIONS

Yves Berthelot

### Human Rights and Rights Based Approach

**Human dignity** was the most used concept during the Colloquium. I do believe like you that to make a person or community conscious of its dignity helps it to overcome injustice and violence. I would however suggest that all of us also consider how to call on the dignity of policemen, civil servants, politicians, and employers. They cannot be all corrupt and prisoners of the system.

**Education.** *It is a role and responsibility of people's movements and NGOs to educate people about their rights.* Those who know that they have rights are more conscious of their dignity and exercise their rights. A serious difficulty is that often officials are not aware of the human rights provisions and of the conventions that India has signed, ratified and translated into national laws. *The civil society organisations should undertake to educate civil servants and police on human rights and consider with them how best to implement these rights.*

**What is a Human Right?** It is important not to mislead people on what human rights means. *The economic, social, and cultural rights* (like the rights to food, water, housing, education and healthcare) *oblige the state to conduct policies that enable people to enjoy*

*these rights.* (Unless incapacitated, people are not directly entitled to be given food, water, houses and employment by the state.) *The state is also obliged to respect these rights* (for instance, not to deprive a peasant from his land without equitable compensation) *and to protect the people against violations by a third party* (for instance, when a factory dries out the water traditionally used for irrigation or pollutes the environment). Even with this strict definition, **there are many cases where the state should be challenged.**

*The violations of economic, social or cultural rights may lead to protests that are often met with violations of individual rights, including arbitrary detention, degrading treatments, and even torture.* This is likely to become more frequent with the increasing income gaps and the greediness of the powerful for the assets of the poor like shelter space and land. *To mitigate this risk, it may be useful to establish closer links between human rights NGOs and development NGOs.* Collaboration may help when slums or poor housing are destroyed in cities and when lands are confiscated. It may also be good to denounce these violations to national courts and regional or international human rights bodies. The World Organisation Against Torture in Geneva can, among others, assist you in the preparation and presentation of cases.

### The Role of NGOs and People's Movements

*Movements and NGOs have to regularly question their goals and approaches.* In this context, I would like to mention two issues that deserve to be addressed.

1) *How to strike a proper balance* between your own experiences and convictions of what is good for the people and the wishes and priorities that the people express? So many Western NGOs impose their views with their money, which often leads to disasters as in the post-tsunami year. Empowering the people may be the best response to this question, but it is worth discussing it.

2) *How to strike a balance* between the aspiration to grow in order to reach more people and influence the authorities and the risk of bureaucratisation that would cut the NGO from the people? An answer could be networking and alliances. Again, it is worth discussing it.

In conclusion, let me add that *you should make your success stories and approaches known in India and abroad*. I know the limits and even dangers of exchanging experiences, but this can also stimulate and show that there are answers to seemingly intractable problems. **In short, this can give hope.**

---

### III. THE THRUST OF NGOS

Mary Chelladurai

I see two essential things regarding the thrust of NGOs. 1) The Church has so far worked under the impression that it should keep away from politics. The result has been that the Church has utterly neglected the political maturing of our people. We must understand that *taking a neutral position in politics is already taking a political stand* – it states that we are satisfied with the political situation, even though it is unjust and riddled with misuse, corruption, nepotism and other ills. *The Church and all of us, who constitute the Church, should consciously get involved in politics to build a just society.*

2) The study of the socio-economic situation of the country makes us understand that the rich, who are only a minuscule number, are exploiting the majority of the poor. The poor make the life of the rich comfortable. If the unorganised sector becomes united, we can definitely put forth the legitimate demands of the poor for their labour and services. *If networking and collaboration is strengthened and founded on a proper ethos, the NGOs can make the rich hear the cries and demands of the poor, and realise that their services will not be cheap any more.*

---

### IV. OUR APPROACH TO LIFE AND PEOPLE

Jeanne Devos

Jeanne Devos enthused and inspired the participants with her sharing. “1) What counts is our life-style, spirituality and culture. We must live our values with conviction and struggle with energy against all forms of slavery and towards justice for all. 2) *Let us live in solidarity with the people*, starting with the poorest, and challenge

the governments, NGOs and funding agencies to respect and ensure the dignity and rights of all people.

3) Instead of running projects, we should simply support, encourage and monitor the change process. We don't need the security of knowing where to go; our sensitivity to people is enough. 4) Let us work hard, resist inhumanity and injustice, and promote new life and hope. It is not money but dreams that create the future. *The spirit of justice and hope will create peace.*”

---

### NOTES FOR THEMATIC REPORTS

**I. 1.** For details, see Agapit Tirkey, *Promoting Tribal Rights and Culture*, NBCLC series, *India's Social Challenges* No. 9, esp. chs. 2 & 3. **2.** Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, same series, 87. **3.** Ibid., 79-81. **4.** Desrochers John, in Tirkey, op. cit., 5. **5.** Desrochers, *Integral Liberation*, Dec. 2004, 276-7. **6.** Desrochers, in Tirkey, op. cit., 4. **7.** Economic & Political Weekly (EPW), *Editorial*, 8/12/2007/6. **8.** Quotations taken from the 2008 Calendar of Vikas Adhyayan, Kendra, Mumbai.

**II. 1.** On government policies and gender inequalities, see for example Saraswati Raju, “Locating Women in Social Development”, in *India, Social Development Report*, Council for Social Development, Oxford, Delhi, 2006, 77-95. **2.** See for instance *Ishvani*, May-August 2006, 200-3. **3.** Taken from Christina Samy.

**III. 1.** See P. Kantor, U. Rani and J. Unni, EPW 2006, 2089. **2.** Rakhi Sehgal, “State, Market and the Household”, EPW 2005, 2286. **3.** Ibid. **4.** *Statistical Outline of India 2004-05*, Tata Services Ltd., Mumbai, 2005, 35. **5.** 2005 Draft Bill in *Advocacy Internet*, July-August 2005, 38. **6.** J. John, *Editorial, Labour File*, March-April 2005, 2-5. **7.** S. Sakthivel & P. Joddar, “Unorganised Sector Workforce in India – Trends, Patterns and Social Security Coverage”, EPW 2006, 2108-9. **8.** See for example the data given by S. Jesupatham (*Integral Liberation*, June 2001, 75-80) and R. Hensman (*Advocacy Internet*, op. cit., 8-9). **Using different categories, ILO speaks of about 85% of the Indian workforce in the unorganised sector, but the growth trends are similar.** **9.** J. John, op. cit., 3, quoting Manmohan Singh.

**IV. 1.** See the relevant article of the Working Group on Children Under Six, “Strategies for Children under Six”, EPW 2007 no. 52, 29/12/2007/87-101. **2.** A.B. Bose, “Child Development in India” in op. cit., II. n. 1, 151. **3.** J.B.G. Tilak, “Education...”, ibid. 36. **4.** J. Drèze, “Universalisation with Quality, ICDS in Rights Perspective”, EPW, 26/8/2006/3706 & 3714.