

The Beautiful, Expanding Future of Poverty:

POPULAR ECONOMICS AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE

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There is a basic distinction between poverty, which has always been with us, and destitution, which has become more pronounced only recently given the assault on traditional communities and their life-support system. Destitution is directly attributable to processes of development. This paper investigates the psychological structures with which the mainstream cultures of politics live, but especially the ego defense furnished by poverty alleviation (particularly “celebratory” accounts of the decline of poverty) to consolidating middle class consciousness. The presently trendy slogan of globalization can be read as the newest effort to disguise both the declining political clout of the historically disadvantaged and an interest in poverty.

*. . . panting in sweltering summers,
shivering in winter nights, drenched in monsoon rains,
I turned poorer.
But you were tireless; you came again.
“Poverty is a meaningless term . . .
You have suffered deprivation all your life . . .”*

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*My suffering was endless . . .
 But you did not forget me;
 This time, hand knotted into a fist, you said in a rousing voice,
 "Wake up, wake up, you the dispossessed of the world . . ."*

*. . . Many years passed, by now you were cleverer. . . .
 You brought a blackboard and carefully chalked a neat, long line
 on it;
 Your strain showed; wiping sweat from your forehead, you said,
 "This line you see, below it, much below it you live."*

*Fabulous! . . .
 Thank you for my poverty, deprivation, dispossession . . .
 Above all, thank you for the neat, long line, that luminous gift.
 . . . My profound well wisher, thank you many times over.*

—From Tarapada Roy, "The Poverty Line"

The undying myth of development, that it will remove all poverty forever from all corners of the world, now lies shattered. It is surprising that so many people believed it for so many years with such admirable innocence. For even societies that have witnessed unprecedented prosperity during the last five decades, such as the United States of America, have not been able to exile either poverty or destitution from within their borders. The world GNP has grown many times in the last fifty years; even more spectacular has been the growth of prosperity in the United States. Yet, consistently more than 11 percent of its citizens—the figure, according to some, rose to something like 18 percent a decade ago—have more or less consistently stayed in poverty throughout almost the entire period of American hyperprosperity.¹ We are told that in the current capital of world capitalism, New York, 25 percent of all children and 50 percent of African American children live in families with incomes below the official poverty line. Around 40,000 homeless adults live in the streets, subways, under bridges and in train tunnels of the city.² Cardinal Paulo Everisto Arns once said, "[T]here are 20 million abandoned and undernourished

¹Joint report of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities and the American Foundation for Families, quoted in Majid Rahnema, "Global Poverty: A Pauperising Myth," *Intercultural* 14, No. 2 (Spring 1991), p. 21n. According to Michael Harrington, 5 million American children live in poverty. On poverty amidst plenty see Michael Harrington, *The American Poverty* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1984).

²Anna Lou De Havenon, "Globalisation and Increased Poverty in the United States Since 1970s: New York City as a Case Study," International Workshop on Poverty, Marginalisation and Development, New Delhi, 3–5 February 1996.

children in a country that not only has the means to feed all its own children but also hundreds of millions in other countries.”³

I am not speaking here of sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan or South Asia. I am not speaking of countries that struggle to avoid famine or where millions go to bed hungry every night and where radical institutional changes are required to avoid hunger, malnutrition and high infant mortality. These countries can claim they do not have the capacity to remove poverty, at least in the short run. I am speaking of the richest country in the world, which has already spent, according to available estimates, between 5000 billion and four trillion dollars on only nuclear armament.⁴ Given available data, I suspect that minor changes in the American economy, such as eliminating only the country’s nuclear-powered navy, perhaps even the nuclear-armed submarines, can get rid of this poverty. For the gap between the system’s expenditure on the poor, direct in the form of personal relief (food coupons, free medical service or dole) and indirect in the form of security against poverty-induced crimes and poverty-related violence, is not high. But those minor changes, I also suspect, will not be made.⁵

Does this mean that a particularly insensitive elite control the United States or is the American philosophy of development flawed? Or should we argue that American poverty is not the same as sub-Saharan or South Asian poverty, forgetting that Americans, when they think of or ignore poverty, use their definition, not ours? Or can one stick out one’s neck and claim that the dominant model of development, whatever else it can do, cannot abolish poverty, for it has two latent aims of a very different kind. It seeks to push a polity toward a stage when poverty, even if it persists as a nagging social problem, no longer remains salient in public consciousness; and, simultaneously and paradoxi-

³ Cardinal Paulo Everisto Arns, “Sincerity Is Subversive,” *Development*, No. 3 (1985), pp. 3–5, quoted in Rahnema, “Global Poverty,” p. 31.

⁴ See, for instance, Stephen I. Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁵ Two issues are especially relevant here, though they may look like digressions from the main concerns of this paper. First, even though students of political culture have not paid any attention to it, in the long run, the political cultures of countries that can but would not remove poverty cannot but be fundamentally different from that in countries that cannot remove poverty in the short run, even if they want to. All societies thrive on their distinctive structures of the ego defense of denial, but the first kind of societies have to structure this denial in a particular way, lest it collapses and that collapse begins to shape public consciousness. A certain mix of extraverted optimism and lonely consumerism is often an indirect by-product of this particular structure of denial. Second, do prosperous, diverse societies *need* poverty, in the sense that poverty plays an unrecognized, functional role in such societies? Many years ago, a structural-functional indeed argued this in the pages of a journal of sociology.

cally, it seeks to continuously stretch the idea of poverty, to sustain the idea of pulling millions above an ever-shifting poverty line.⁶

As for the first aim, it is becoming more obvious that all large multi-ethnic societies, after attaining the beatific status of development, lose interest in removing poverty, especially when poverty is associated with ethnic and cultural groups that lack or lose political clout? Particularly in a democracy, numbers matter and, once the number of poor in a society dwindles to a proportion that can be ignored while forging democratic alliances, the political parties are left with no incentive to pursue the cause of the poor. Seen thus, the issue of poverty is a paradox of plural democracy when it is wedded to global capitalism. And the paradox is both political-economic and moral. The presently trendy slogan of globalization can be read as the newest effort to paper over that basic contradiction; globalization has built into it the open admission that removal of poverty is no longer even a central myth of our public agenda.

This also implies that the main means of removing poverty within the present global developmental regime is the one Sanjay Gandhi—the much-maligned, despotic, perhaps disturbed younger son of a troubled prime minister—intuitively grasped and crudely executed. During 1975–77, when civil rights were suspended in India, he tried to remove the poor in India’s capital outside the angle of vision of proper citizens through police state methods. Normal politics, normal journalism and normal social sciences are now trying to do the same by making the concern with poverty somewhat *passé*. Perhaps, rightly so. Everyone knows what the problem is, and determined scrutiny only embarrasses one and disturbs normal life. The three richest persons in the world have wealth, the UN Human Development Report of 1998 tells us, that exceeds the combined gross domestic product of the forty-eight least developed countries. One of them is Indian and instead of grimly talking of poverty all the while,

⁶Majid Rahnema says, in “Global Poverty”:

To what extent, if any, have various actions and interventions actually alleviated the sufferings caused by various forms of unwanted or unjust poverty? A first look at the state of the art seems to indicate that, despite the confluence of good intentions and many “campaigns,” “wars” and “crusades” against poverty, the human sufferings related to the concept are spreading. The claims of economic development to wipe out the causes of these sufferings have been far from being kept. In the meantime, only new, modernized forms of poverty have been added to the old list. Are the reasons for this inadequacy due to minor, managerial or temporary reasons, or do they raise more fundamental questions touching upon the very structures of the societies concerned? (p. 5).

See also Michael Chossudovsky, *The Globalisation of Poverty: Impacts of IMF and World Bank Reforms* (Goa, India: The Other India Press, 1997).

many Indians have diffidently begun to celebrate such national achievements. The UN report incidentally also tells us that the Americans and Europeans spend US \$ 17 billion per year on pet food, four billion more than the additional funds needed to provide basic health and nutrition for everyone in the world.⁷ These are not easy facts to live with; one has to spend enormous psychological resources to ensure that they do not interfere with our “normal” life by burdening us with a crippling sense of guilt.

“Normal” middle class citizens, particularly those belonging to the liberal-democratic tradition, are uncomfortable with these paradoxes. They usually push them under the carpet through various psychological subterfuges. Who wants to live in moral discomfort when easy escapes are available in the form of popular ideologies of development and easy, “radical” conspiracy theories that absolve one of all responsibility in the name of the inevitability of world historical forces? Who would not like to be on the right side of history if, in the long run, a cataclysmic revolution promises to remove cobwebs like global capitalism and class exploitation, despite our personal foibles, lifestyles or tastes? Indeed, these patterns of intellectualization, serving as powerful ego defenses, explain some of the more obscene instances of developmentalism, where the removal of poverty itself becomes a billion-dollar, multinational enterprise. Graham Hancock has told that part of the story in disturbing and occasionally hilarious detail in his book.⁸

In India, presently going through what conventional wisdom has begun to call early stages of “correct” development, the intellectual consequences of these moral paradoxes often become comically patent. How many Indians are poor? In the 1970s, V. M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath said that around 35 percent lived below the poverty line in the country.⁹ But it was then more

⁷ Quoted in Barbara Crossette, *New York Times*, September 27, 1998. Tariq Banuri warns me that such figures can often be untrustworthy and politically tinged. Once again, I remind the reader that I am not concerned here with the actual, empirically verifiable state of affairs, but the psychological “structures” with which the mainstream, global culture of politics lives.

⁸ Graham Hancock, *Lords of Poverty* (London: Mandarin, 1989). From Hancock’s estimate it appears that, by the end of the 1980s, the development aid industry—only a small part of the global poverty alleviation bureaucracy—was already one of the world’s largest multinational corporations (p. 45). The data on India are particularly disturbing in this respect. Antipoverty programmes spend Rs 200 billion annually. Of this only a fifth, roughly Rs 40 billion, reach the poor (Sunil Jain, “This One’s for “run Shourie,” *Indian Express*, April 29, 2000, p. 8). There is not much scope for debate on the subject. One Indian prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, went to town with a similar set of data.

⁹ V. M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath, *Poverty in India* (Poona, India: Indian School of Political Economy, 1971), Ford Foundation Series.

radical—and intellectually *chic*—to estimate the number of the poor highly; others quickly objected to the figure. Some estimates went much higher. Indeed, the popular image of India then was that of a desperately poor country with pockets of obscene prosperity here and there. That fitted the dominant models of political analysis and social intervention.

Much has changed in India since then. After the unlamented demise of bureaucratic socialism, the Indian élite has now entered the brave new world of globalization. The image of India for them, too, has changed. Thus, by the middle of the 1990s, many were speaking of India as a sleeping giant, fettered not by poverty but by poor economics. Gurcharan Das, formerly of Proctor and Gamble and as enthusiastic a votary of conventional development as one can be, said that his acceptable ideal of a future India was a developed India with about 16 percent of the citizens living under the poverty line. Das talked as if that future was a distant one.¹⁰ As if to please him, in January 1996 some columnists mentioned that the Planning Commission of the Government of India had data to show that, already by 1994—that is, even before the economic reforms were fully in place—only 19 percent of Indians were living under the poverty line.¹¹ One set of figures, based on consumption data, now suggests that the poor in India could now be less than 17 percent.

True, there are occasional spoilsports. According to S. P. Gupta, between 1983 and 1990–91 when economic growth rate was about 5.6 percent, the proportion of Indians living below the poverty line had fallen by 3.1 percent per year. When between 1993–94 and 1997, the growth rate shot up to 6.9 percent per year, the figure went up from 35 to 37 percent.¹² A number of papers in a recent issue of a professional journal and at a conference on food security, too, have contested official figures and the claims of the protagonists of globaliza-

¹⁰Gurcharan Das, “Viewpoint,” *The Times of India*, December 4, 1995; and “Our Second Independence,” *The Times of India*, July 23, 1995.

¹¹Gurcharan Das, “India Is Outpacing Poverty,” *The Times of India*, March 24, 1996; and C. Rammanohar Reddy, “Poverty: Is the Decline Real?” *The Hindu*, January 19, 1996. Das also mentions that “spectacular” developmental success has brought down the percentage of people below the poverty line from 58 to 17 during 1972–82 in Indonesia, 37 to 14 during 1973–87 in Malaysia, and from 49 to 26 during 1962–86 in Thailand. Yet he does not ask (1) why even in such small countries the success has not brought down the figures spectacularly below that of an unsuccessful country like India and (2) whether, even before the Southeast Asian economic crisis, removal of poverty went any further.

¹²S. P. Gupta, “Trickle Down Theory Revisited: The Role of Employment and Poverty,” Lecture at the Annual Conference of the Indian Society of Labour Economics, reported in “Has Poverty Worsened with Reforms,” *The Hindu*, December 30, 1999.

tion.¹³ In a detailed paper, Deepak Lal, Rakesh Mohan and I. Natarajan even suggest ways of reconciling the diverse findings on Indian poverty.¹⁴ I do not want to enter that part of the story, for my interest is not in the measurement of poverty or development under globalization, but in the cultural-psychological constructions of poverty and how they enter public awareness. My argument is that, right or wrong, such data now have less and less impact on India's political culture. For the globally popular ego defense that there is a one-to-one relationship between growth rates and decline in poverty appears to have already become a part of the character armor of the development establishment and middle class consciousness.

I am suggesting that the idea of a decline in poverty, real or imaginary, may now defy the economists and acquire an autonomous life of its own.¹⁵ It will also have, I suspect, predictable consequences in a competitive polity. Political regimes and parties will probably claim even sharper drops in the proportion of the poor, till we shall discover in a few years that, like bonded labor, poverty has "vanished" from the Indian scene, that Gurcharan Das's ideal is already there waiting to be celebrated. In the next few years, giving a low figure of the poor in India might become as fashionable among the Indian literati as giving a high figure was three decades ago. Meanwhile a majority of India's expanding middle class—including a majority of Indian politicians, economists and bureaucrats—will feel perfectly justified in getting on with the job of economic development and of building a powerful national-security state. In 1995, the same year Das wrote of his utopia, others claimed that roughly 200 million Indians did not have enough to eat. They also claim that during the same year, 5 million metric tons of food grains, including rice and wheat, worth nearly US \$ 2 billion, were exported. There is no controversy over the fact that, with that

¹³*Economic and Political Weekly*, March 24, 2001; and Anna Panchayat, A Public Hearing on Hunger, Food Rights and Food Security, organized by the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, New Delhi, India May 30–31, 2001.

¹⁴Deepak Lal, Rakesh Mohan, and I. Natarajan, "Economic Reforms and Poverty Alleviation: A Tale of Two Surveys," *Economic and Political Weekly* March 24, 2001, pp. 1017–1028.

¹⁵Not that the fate of the idea of poverty has been particularly dignified in economics and the other social sciences. I am reminded of the particularly insightful comment of Lakshman Yapa that "poverty does not reside exclusively in the external world independent of academic discourse that thinks about it; the discourse is deeply implicated in creating poverty insofar as it conceals the social origins of scarcity. Although the experience of hunger and malnutrition is immediately material, 'poverty' exists in a *discursive materialist formation* where ideas, matter, discourse, and power are intertwined in ways that virtually defy dissection." (p. 7 in "What Causes Poverty? A Postmodern View," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, No. 4 (1996), pp. 707–728.

money, we did not buy cheaper grains for the poor, but consumer goods and military hardware.¹⁶ The suicide of farmers, which in recent years has reached almost epidemic proportions in India, almost never takes place in underdeveloped, ill-governed states like Bihar, but in India's most prosperous, economic-reforms-minded states. This is not an exception; 78 percent of the world's malnourished children come from countries that have food surpluses.

These are probably indicators of the changing culture of mainstream Indian and global politics and the fact that we are trying to get socialized into a new style of poverty management—through blatant use of the ego defense of denial, of the kind the psychoanalysts and psychiatrists expect to confront only in a clinic. Rabi Ray, former Speaker of the Indian Parliament, seemed to have sensed this change. He recently pointed out that when, in Maharashtra, a relatively prosperous state in India, hundreds of tribal children died of starvation some months ago in the Amravati district, there was not even a ritual demand for the resignation of the chief minister. Likewise, when it was discovered that about Rs 840 million had been swindled from the public distribution system, that is, from funds meant to combat hunger and provide food security to the poor, newspapers only made passing references to it and concentrated on spicier but smaller scams.¹⁷ It is unlikely that the political parties or the development community—or even the opponents of the World Bank—WTO regime—will spend sleepless nights over the fact that in India, “there is 36 percent diversion of wheat, 31 percent diversion of rice and 23 percent diversion of sugar from the system at national level.”¹⁸

For those nasty, suspicious souls who distrust statistical gamesmanship, such examples pose a different set of problems. And this brings us to the second aim of the global developmental regime. Was India once really so underdeveloped that four-fifths of Indians lived under the poverty line? Is it now so developed that only one-fifth of its citizens can be considered poor? Is there something wrong with our concepts of poverty and prosperity? To answer these questions, we might need other kinds of social and political awareness and a different set of concepts. These concepts may have to come, however uncomfortable the possibility may look to us, from outside the conventional liberal ideas of democracy and psephocratic politics on the one hand and the standard format of globalized intellectual order on the other.

¹⁶Frances Moore Lappe, Joseph Collins, and Peter Rosset, *World Hunger: Twelve Myths* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 2nd ed.

¹⁷Rabi Ray, Inaugural address at Anna Panchayat, New Delhi, May 30–31, 2001

¹⁸Draft, Tenth Plan of the Planning Commission, Government of India, quoted in “PDS has Missed Target: Planning Commission,” *The Times of India*, June 7, 2001.

First a word on poverty. Poverty is not destitution. When some intellectuals and activists talk of poverty being degrading or reject any critique of development as romanticization of poverty, they actually have in mind destitution, not poverty, but are too clever by half to admit that. By collating or collapsing these two terms, apologists of development have redefined all low-consuming, environment-friendly lifestyles as poor and, thus, degrading and unfit for survival in the contemporary world. In fact, Anil Gupta points out that there is a high correlation between poverty and biodiversity.¹⁹ This is understandable because modern economics “equates wealth creation with the conversion of national resources into cash. But cash is constantly depreciating. On the other hand, . . . what progressively increases in value, besides strengthening our economic foundations, are our finite and living natural resources.”²⁰ Also, a modern political economy, with its maniacal emphasis on productivity, continues to reduce the range of diversity to serve the market.

Large parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia were poor by contemporary standards of income and consumption before colonial administrators and development planners began to identify them as poor. That does not mean that they had massive destitution or that the quality of life there was abysmally poor.²¹ Destitution, or at least large-scale destitution, is a more recent phenomenon. It has been increasing among many traditionally poor communities over the last hundred years, partly as a direct result of urbanization and development. The most glaring instances of destitution are found not in traditional, isolated tribal communities, but among the poor communities that are uprooted and fragmented and move into cities as individuals or nuclear families. It is also found among landless agricultural laborers who for some reason lose their jobs in a situation where agriculture is industrialized or becomes nonprofitable. They are the ones who find themselves unable to cope with the demands of an impersonal market or the culture of a modern political economy. That is why poverty turned into a different kind of social problem when England began to see widespread enclosure movement and massive industrialization in the Victorian era.

¹⁹ Anil Gupta, *Why Does Poverty Persist in Regions of High Biodiversity: A Case for Indigenous Property Right System*, Working Paper No. 938, mimeo (Ahmedabad, India: Indian Institute of Management, 1991).

²⁰ Amrita Patel in her J. R. D. Tata Oration on Business Ethics, 1999, quoted in Rajni Bakshi, “Redefining Progress,” *The Hindu*, December 12, 1999.

²¹ For a recent work that indirectly but powerfully argues this point, see *The Spirit of Regeneration: Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development*, ed. Frédérique Apffel Marglin with PRATEC (Proyecto Andino de Tecnologías Campesinas, Peru) (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998). For an example of a work on precolonial India that takes this point of view see Dharampal, *Beautiful Tree: Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (New Delhi, India: Biblia Impex, 1983).

Indeed, when we talk of poverty, we usually have that other kind of created poverty in mind, but are too defensive to admit that. We suspect that our world-views, ideologies and lifestyles are in league with the creation of this new kind of modern poverty.

The reason is obvious. Poverty in societies unfortunately left outside the loving embrace of modernity did not necessarily mean starvation or total collapse of life-support systems. For lifestyles in such societies were not fully monetized and the global commons were relatively intact. Even with no income, one could hope to survive at a low, but perhaps not entirely meaningless level of subsistence. Community and nature partly took care of the needs of the poor, especially given that these needs in lush, tropical surroundings were not many. For the moment, I am ignoring the line of argument that supports the idea that “convivial poverty is a blessing, not a scourge” and that poverty, though it might not be the wealth of nations, can certainly be in many ways “the alternative wealth of the humankind.”²² That also is a powerful argument, even though it may not look so on the face of it. However, I cannot resist quoting the confession of a development expert from Guyana, who works for the United Nations, about the world’s poorest region, sub-Saharan Africa:

For the last several years, my professional life has been focussed on answering a question that has troubled me for some time: . . . “how can you ask someone who is hungry now to care about the future generations.”

In thinking about this, I stumbled over even more basic questions. Who are the poor? What does it mean to call people poor? . . .

My first insight was a personal one. While I knew that I did not grow up in a “rich” family, I never knew that I was very poor until I learned the definitions of poverty put forth by economists such as the World Bank. I got the same reaction from many agropastoralists with whom I worked in Africa. . . . Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have said the same thing: many communities did not know that they were poor until development agencies told them so.

For more than 50 years, one of the main activities of the development enterprise has been to assess, analyse and make prescriptions to meet the needs (basic or otherwise) of those considered “poor.” It was an enterprise stimulated by the Cold War. . . . Ever since US President Truman announced in 1949 that non-aligned countries were “underdeveloped,” and that the US would

²²Rahnema, “Global Poverty,” p. 44; Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971); and *Toward a History of Needs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977). Also, A. Tevoedjre, *Poverty: Wealth of Mankind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

give them aid so that they can become more like America . . . , intense research in the name of development has flourished. Attention has been focussed on countries' deficiencies and needs; at the same time, the strengths, gifts and successful strategies of the "poor" diminished in importance. . . . These semi-nomadic communities had tremendous but *non-monetary* wealth; indigenous knowledge cultivated over centuries of living in harmony with the land, a rich cultural heritage and highly-evolved adaptive strategies, which enabled them to cope with shocks and stresses to the systems that provided their livelihoods.²³

Such arguments immediately provoke accusations of romanticizing of the past. Almost invariably by those complicit in the new slave trade of our times—exporting living, contemporary communities and human beings to the past in the name of progress and rationality. I have been for some time speaking of a form of proletarianization new to the modern world, but known to students of Hellenic democracies. The proletariat in ancient Greece were those who existed but were not counted. In this century, we too have mastered the art of looking at large sections of humanity as obsolete and redundant. These sections seem to us to be anachronistically sleepwalking through our times, when they should be safely ensconced in the pages of history. Such communities certainly should not trouble us morally, we believe, by pretending to be a part of the contemporary world and relevant to human futures. It is as an important part of that belief that the idea of underdevelopment has redefined many communities as *only* collections of the poor and the oppressed. We talk of indigenous peoples, tribes or Dalits as if they had no pasts, no myths, no legends and no transmittable systems of knowledge; as if their grandparents never told them any stories, nor did their parents sing them any lullabies. We steal their pasts paradoxically to push them into the past. To speak on behalf of the poor and the oppressed has become a major ego defense against hearing their voices and taking into account their ideas about their own suffering. But I am digressing. Let me get back to my main argument.

Destitution usually means zero income in a fully modern, contractual political economy. In an impersonal situation where individualism reigns, in the absence of money income, one can no longer depend or fall back upon the global commons, either because it is exhausted or depleted, or because it has been taken over by the ubiquitous global market. Neither can you live off the forest and the land nor can you depend on the magnanimity of your relatives and neighbors. The neighbors are no longer neighbors; you discover that they

²³Naresh Singh, "The Wealth of the Poor," *Choices* 5, No. 2 (October 1996), pp. 12–13.

have become individualized fellow citizens, who neither expect nor give quarter to any one, often not even to their own families.

Simultaneously, the differences that traditionally existed between lifestyles of the rich and the poor begin to disappear. That distinction partly protected the poor from destitution and loss of dignity. Till quite recently, in some traditional parts of Africa and Asia, the rich lived in brick, stone or concrete houses; the poor lived in mud houses. The rich wore expensive clothes or Western dress; the poor had two sets of traditional clothes. They wore one when they washed the other, which suggests that they probably could stay reasonably clean. The rich ate well, the poor ate poorly, but they did eat. In tropical surroundings, that meant that the poor survived to constitute, in some cases, a politically important element in the society. Regimes at least tried to give the impression of doing something for them and most political parties, in competitive democracies, vied for their support. In India, for instance, the needs of the poor were an important metaphor in politics until the beginning of the 1980s.²⁴ That cultural difference between the rich and the poor also probably ensured that when some religious orders or movements spoke of the beauties of voluntary poverty, it was not an invitation to a life of indignity and constant hunger. The Jaina or Buddhist *bhikshu* did live a meaningful social, not merely spiritual life.

In much of the world now, larger and larger proportions of the poor have everything the rich have, only they have its fourth-rate, down-market versions. The difference between the rich and the poor is becoming less cultural and more economic. The culture of poverty no longer protects the poor. In any North American slum one finds that they have the same range of things the rich have—perhaps a television set purchased for ten dollars in a garage sale, a pair of torn, unclean blue jeans made by low-brow clothiers, and even a sofa-set with springs coming out of the upholstery, discarded by the wealthy on a metropolitan footpath. Go to a poor Bangladeshi village or an East African tribe in a remote, less accessible part of the country, and you will find that the rich and the poor live differently. The poor can still survive by living a low-consuming, meaningful life at the edge of the monetized economy. Even today, villages in many Third World societies are not entirely the same as metropolitan cities in this respect. You do not usually find in villages, unless they are located near frontiers or on important trade routes, large-scale drug addictions or alcohol-

²⁴Rajni Kothari's *Growing Amnesia* (New Delhi, India: Penguin, 1996; London: Zed Books, 1996) supplies some clues to the political conditions under which the politics of poverty declines in importance in an open society. On the absence of economic democracy and its relationship with hunger, see Lappe, Collins, and Rosset, *World Hunger*.

ism, high crime rates, ethnic or religious violence, and pathetic dependence on means of mass communications for interpersonal linkages or entertainment.

That traditional safety net now increasingly lies in tatters. And increasingly a sizeable section of the world's poor are becoming destitute. In the cities, the very poor have been destitute for at least the past one hundred years, except to the extent that some cities, mainly slums, in the Southern world retain something of their older village ties and ambience. Development may have removed poverty in many societies, but it has done so by expanding the proportion and the absolute number of the destitute. There are only a few exceptions to this rule. All are due either to the inability to extract wealth through formal or informal colonialism, or through ruthless, authoritarian exploitation at home.²⁵

It can be argued that other forms of social change also do not remove poverty, or remove it to a lesser extent than development does and hence we have no option but to live under a conventional developmental regime. But no system becomes morally acceptable only on the grounds that human creativity or ingenuity has not yet found a better system. Nor does any system acquire an intrinsic moral stature or the right to snuff out alternative human possibilities by virtue of the fact that earlier systems were worse. For some reason, development has claimed such a stature and the rights that flow from it, and this claim is backed by development's alleged ability to remove poverty.

At the end, an autobiographical footnote. I have two brothers, both reasonably well-to-do by Indian standards. In interviews to newspapers and journals and in private they have said more than once that they come from a poor family. And I remember one enthusiastic interviewer who came close to discovering a "log cabin to white house" trajectory in our lives. Frankly, I have had the same upbringing as my brothers and I have never felt that we experienced poverty in our childhood. In my memory, our childhood was no different from the middle class upbringing many other Indians have experienced.

My brothers genuinely believe we were deprived because their standards have in the meanwhile changed. At one time, they seemed to have a different vision of prosperity and poverty. One of them, I remember, refused to refurbish his apartment after he joined a multinational corporation because he did not want his old friends to feel diffident when they visited him. Changing circles of friends, economic success, and growing exposure to the global middle class culture do change worldviews. The meaning of poverty itself expands to include many kinds of lifestyle that in another time would have qualified as a reasonably good life. As the idea of a "normal" life changes, so do the concepts of

²⁵ Ashis Nandy, "Development and Violence," in Charles Strozier and Michael Flynn, eds., *Trauma and Community, Essays in Honour of Robert J. Lifton* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. 207–218.

subnormality and abnormality. They begin to include things that were once a part of normality. It is a bit like modern concepts of mental illness, which now include many states of mind that once were considered part of normality and are still considered normal in many societies. Many problems of living have been medicalized and are now handled through elaborate psychopharmaceutical interventions.²⁶

This is not spectacularly new. It is something like the changing concept of long life in a country where life expectancy is on the rise. Problems arise when the myths of permanent youth and immortality take over and we get busy keeping time at bay through cosmetics, tonics and fashionable technologies like cardiac bypass, designed mainly to bypass the fruits of overconsumption. I have now come to suspect that the shifting definition of poverty never allows one to remove destitution. It keeps people like us constantly busy pulling ourselves above an ever-shifting, mythic poverty line into a concept of “normal” life that should look less and less normal to socially sensitive psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. Even though I might sound like a world-renouncing ascetic or a hard-boiled Gandhian, I cannot help echoing the Jaina philosopher and editor of *Resurgence*, Satish Kumar, and claim that poverty is not the problem, our idea of prosperity is.²⁷

This is not a rehash of the nineteenth-century socialist rhetoric, which saw property as the original sin. That belief overlay the fantasy that in the end, natural resources being infinite, socialized property would make everyone prosperous; only in the short run did one have to pauperize the wealthy to ensure justice. Mine is an effort to capture the tacit faith of tens of thousands of social and political activists and environmentalists, who often include our own children. They constitute today a global underworld, a substratum of consciousness that defies at every step the mainstream culture of global economics. Frequently they go about their job foolishly, sometimes hypocritically, but occasionally with a degree of ideological commitment and moral passion, too. However woolly-headed they may look to us, we shall have to learn to live with that underworld in the new century. (The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund obviously understand this better than do many of their naïve supporters among journalists and corporate executives. Their spokespersons

²⁶I am reminded of the particularly insightful comment of Lakshman Yapa that “poverty does not reside exclusively in the external world independent of academic discourse that thinks about it; discourse is deeply implicated in creating poverty insofar as it conceals the social origins of scarcity.”

²⁷Satish Kumar, “Poverty and Progress,” *Resurgence* 196 (September–October 1999), p. 6; and John Gray, “The Myth of Progress,” *Ibid.*, pp. 11–13, are only two of the more recent writers who have reemphasized this old formulation.

have had to repeatedly affirm, after the Seattle and Washington demonstrations during 1999–2000, that the Bank and the IMF shared the values of the demonstrators, who otherwise were misinformed or misguided.)

I seem to have come full circle. I now find that I have given you a strange, internally inconsistent set of arguments. On the one hand, I have argued that poverty cannot be eliminated through development because there seems to be an iron law of democratic politics in large, multi-ethnic, diverse societies. This law ensures that once a sizeable majority of the population comes within the patronage structure of either the state or the modern political economy, the electoral fates of regimes and parties begin to be determined by issues other than poverty and poverty-induced human suffering. Indeed, development may or may not remove poverty in large, diverse, open societies, but it always tends to produce destitution. I have also suggested that the developmental regime can often serve as a psychological regime, and help us cultivate a social deafness and moral blindness toward parts of the living world around us.

On the other hand, I have argued that poverty cannot be eliminated because it is in many countries an ever-expanding concept and because true or absolute poverty, which I have called destitution, is usually a small part of it. Taking advantage of this psychological elasticity, the so-called mainstream culture of politics encourages you to work hard to remove your own poverty before bothering about the destitution of the others. For the latter you reserve the beauties of the trickle-down theories. However, the two propositions may not be as orthogonal as they look. I shall wait for my more knowledgeable economist friends and development experts to educate me on this score and help remove the anomaly. In the meanwhile, like M. K. Gandhi—the insane, subversive stepfather of the Indian nation-state—I recommend that we try to get rid of destitution and learn to live with poverty, at least ours.