

India: Disappearing the Poor

Some will obligingly efface themselves by consuming pesticide, others will join the doomed ranks of armed resistance

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As if to demonstrate that poverty is now a residual issue in the world, the poor are being slowly eliminated from the imagery of the busy global media. “Nowhere in Bollywood films do you see a poor person,” says Pandurang Hegde, activist in the forests of northern [Karnataka](#). “There is no place in the iconography of the new India for anything that suggests impoverishment and loss.”

Nor on the majority of TV stations which have flooded India with their unblinking radiance. The poor have become peripheral figures, with scarcely walk-on parts in the great drama of liberalisation. All that is known is that those living below the fanciful economic latitudes designated by “the poverty line” are being reduced. Poverty is clearly a mop-up operation, and will eventually be abolished by the rising tide which, as everyone knows, lifts all boats. This is an automatic consequence of economic growth. If the poor scarcely appear in the media, is this because their destiny is to become, if not rich, at least no-longer-poor?

If they have not yet been completely eclipsed, at least their wellbeing is now entrusted to NGOs, charities and international institutions, far more dependable custodians of their welfare than any self-help, or organisation on their own behalf. “The poor” have become an object of piety in a secular world. Who does not strive to raise them out of their misery? Is that after all not the purpose of wealth-creation?

Window-dressing is perhaps the highest art in the culture of globalism. In spite of appearances, poverty exhibits a disagreeable tenacity in the world. Since its removal would be an arduous process, it is, perhaps, easier to obliterate the representation of the poor in the world’s media than to wipe out poverty.

It may also be that the media vanishing trick prefigures something far more sinister, preparatory, perhaps, to more material disappearances. For their persistent presence remains a spectre at the global feast. What an agreeable place the world is – or would be – without them: nothing to mar the smiling imagery of plenty, the abundance of the display window and the publicity machine, the shopping mall and the showroom, the wall-to-wall entertainment and TV channels of endless music and laughter.

There are daily intimations of a more brutal dematerialisation of the poor. Wholesale clearances of city slums intensify whenever some spectacular event is to be staged – Beijing has unceremoniously removed its urban poor for the Olympics. Delhi has been cleansing its slums in readiness for the Commonwealth Games in 2010. [Bengaluru](#) is to become “slumless” as a result of its “slum clearance with a mission” programme. On almost every map of the world’s major cities, the areas occupied by the urban poor appear as blank spaces,

emblem of their future erasure.

Their embarrassing presence evokes an archaic world, in which humanity creates its own shelter out of industrial debris, scrapes a living off the garbage heaps of abundance, recycles the discarded goods of others, lives a pinched and frugal existence. In other words, the poor offer a ghastly example of meagre resource-use and compulsory austerity in a context where excess and extravagance are now the norm. No wonder they are increasingly intrusive: they embody our worst nightmare – this could also be our fate when the oil is exhausted, the taps run dry, the world overheats, the seas rise and the deserts encroach ...

Some poor people have also internalised a sense of their own redundancy; and, only too eager to comply with this assessment of their worth, have obligingly rid the world of their presence. At least 140,000 farmers in India committed suicide between 1997 and 2007, almost certainly an underestimate, because the social shame of this cause of death impels many families to conceal it. These suicides are generally attributed to indebtedness: that people can be made to take responsibility for what are clearly socially-induced traumas suggests that the poor have become less capable of resisting personal culpability for the effects of economic forces over which they have no control.

Dr Sanjeev Jain is a psychiatrist at the NIMHANS hospital in Bengaluru. He says every night the city hospitals deal with two or three dozen cases of suicide or attempted suicide. These he calls “accidents of modernity”, people for whom nothing has replaced decaying structures of meaning. Even the lowest castes – the sweepers and cleaners, removers of waste, tenders of animals and conservers of the environment – have seen many of their functions vanish, as much of their labour has been replaced by machines.

And where the poor do resist, how easy it is to label them outlaws, dacoits, criminals, [Naxalites](#), terrorists. The prime minister of India has said that “the single largest internal security threat comes from Maoists”. This, too, is a form of fundamentalism, an ideology of radical nostalgia, a reaction of despair. How simple for the state to shoot them down, and write off their no-account lives as an “encounter” with militants, ultras, extremists, and all the other inventive taxonomies devised to justify the elimination of those they have impoverished to the point of hopelessness.

[Arundhati Roy](#) sees preparations for a “genocide” against the poor; although the word is not quite right in the context, since the poor are not a race. Povericide is an inelegant but more accurate word for what Arundhati Roy sees as a corollary of “the most successful secessionist struggle ever waged in India – the secession of the middle and upper classes to a country of their own”.

As if to support this grim scenario, the ghost of hunger is presently being invoked by the global information machines. The cost of staple foods continues to rise – thanks, we are told, to changing appetites of (some of) the people of India and China, the diversion of agricultural land to jatropha, soya or sugar-cane for biofuel, the using up of fertile farmland for infrastructural projects (India lost over a million hectares of agricultural land between 1990 and 2005), erratic harvests which may or may not be an early symptom of climate change. The Malthusian insight, that no place is set at nature’s banquet for the poor, has been revised: no longer nature’s banquet, it is now a feast crafted by a global food manufacturing industry.

The poor are scattered and divided. While some will doubtless obligingly efface themselves by consuming pesticide, jumping on to the railway track or hanging themselves from a ceiling fan, others will join the doomed ranks of armed resistance, while yet others will almost certainly be drawn into spectacular acts of violence and terror.

In the perpetual artificial sunshine of the technosphere, within the global gated community in which all the inhabitants are rich, the poor have already ceased to exist. But it is one thing to banish them from the enchanted islands of plenty, that virtual reality of the fantasists of wealth, but quite another to erase them from a material world in which they remain an obdurate majority. Their refusal to go quietly into the oblivion for which they are apparently destined is likely to take unpredictable and malignant forms; since they are the footsoldiers of the militias, Maoists, mafiosi and militants who have flooded the spaces evacuated by governments for whom the poor no longer count.

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