

Modern India: Abysmal Poverty and Social Destitution. Neo-Liberalism's Death Knell

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

Global Research, October 08, 2012

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Today in Chennai (Madras), I witnessed a dead-end journey. A deafening firecracker was set off by a gathering of men at the head of a funeral procession. Stray dogs flinched and onlookers cowered. Shutters were hastily pulled down. The raucous entourage made its way along the street in Triplicane. Cows scattered, dust swirled and the afternoon humidity made for uncomfortable viewing.

Cheap alcohol swilled from small glass bottles could not disguise the poverty on show. It was etched in the men's faces, played out in their mannerisms as they danced and given away by their ragged clothes. This large, noisy crowd accompanied the vehicle carrying the flower-adorned body to commemorate a life lived, a passing over. A celebration of living and dying in a country drenched in religion, obsessed with ritual and defined by rigid social stratification.

The booze-fuelled dancing of the men was imbued with certain desperation. The poor always celebrate with a harder edge. They acted as if they controlled the street, as if they ruled the world for the day. They don't. And they never will.

They no doubt inhabited a similar neighbourhood to the one they danced through, with its filthy, sweatbox dhabas, grimy hardware stores, world-weary faces and vegetable stalls. Young children clung to their mothers' shoulders, perched side saddle on saree-covered hips. The choking stench of animal waste and urine permeated the humid atmosphere. Cows munched on the stinking garbage overflowing from the large plastic bins.

This is modern India. It's here and now. But it's not the 'modern India' so often celebrated by the media. That's an India of steel and glass cyber parks, Mumbai skyscrapers and the affluent who also act as if they control the world. But they actually do. And their type possibly always will.

It's a modern India inhabited by a minority. A privileged minority, whose reservation quota is never questioned, is barely acknowledged. By accident of birth, whether through class or caste, or a combination of both, its members were always in prime position to take advantage of the privileges afforded by background in the brave new world of economic neo-liberalism.

That's the lie of meritocracy for you in a heavily stratified society skewed either in your favour or against you long before you ever leave the womb.

It's a hard lesson that those dusty, crying kids who clung to their mothers' hips will soon learn. Their tears came fast and furious in the afternoon heat and will probably do so throughout life. It's a tough lesson that the hardened men at the front of the funeral

procession learned long ago.

They may well be mired in poverty, but they are every bit as part of today's 'modern' India as those whose lives revolve around the Sensex, international vacations or business trips and luxury homes. Those two sections of India may be worlds apart, but they inhabit the same land mass, with one living off the cheap labour of the other.

From the building sites to the farms, the scrawny bodies of the disadvantaged and exploited provide the sweated labour for today's affluent India that wallows in high rise AC penthouses and is dominated by obesity and other 'rich man's' nutrition-related diseases – living off the fat of the land, quite literally.

After the procession had made its way through the area, the dogs and cows once again meandered freely and women began where they had left off by shopping for vegetables. And you can bet your bottom rupee that it was spiralling food inflation that was dominating their thinking. Making ends meet is the be all and end all around here.

Other concerns dominate the thinking about ten minutes' walk away in the latest shopping mall to have suddenly sprung up, where the price of designer jeans or sportswear is the burning priority. Less than a kilometre from the stifling, vegetation-strewn locality, the international brands have arrived, adorning the large glass frontages of the latest temple of consumerism. This is not a world of lunghis, steaming chai and steaming filth or of undernourished parents with their hungry kids.

This is the world of Lacoste, Nike and Baristo. This is the world where a cup of coffee can cost the best part of a daily wage for most in this country. This is a world of acquisitive materialism, conspicuous consumption and huge four-wheel drive vehicles. It's the modern India lying next door to the other modern India whose inhabitants will never visit or step foot inside, unless it's to collect plastic bottles in a sack carried on back or to wipe clean the hallowed floors dirtied by the designer boots of the privileged.

Poor, thin women worked each day till they dropped in order to help build this mall and hundreds like it. Their babies played in the dirt nearby. They built it for privileged, well-nourished women whose servants will mind their kids as they adhere to the 'shop till you drop' dogma of modern advertising. Shopping is freedom, so the mantra goes. I don't see much freedom.

While one part of India remains trapped by poverty and disadvantage, another part has bought into the filthy veneration of money and narcissism – a power play that is concerned with redefining who people are and what India should be about – a consumerism and a neo-liberalism that is divisive and ultimately wholly unsustainable.

Today in India, I witness a dead-end journey.

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About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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