

A Total War on Indian Poverty

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"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

-EUGENE BLACK

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I deem it a special privilege to deliver the A. D. Shroff lecture this year. This seems to me just the time for a restatement of his basic economic philosophy, more misunderstood now than even in the early fifties when, driven hard by unfair criticism to possible overstatement, he founded, and then continuously inspired, the Forum of Free Enterprise. Precisely because the Forum appears temporarily to have lost out, and not only because of my educational bias towards lost causes, I believe it is necessary to restate his philosophy in the changed imperatives of rapid development in the seventies. There were two central strands in his thinking which I ardently share. The first is that the central role of development is to be found in individual entrepreneurs who conceive, direct and shape viable enterprises designed both for economic growth and social change. The second, and equally important proposition, is that the creation of such entrepreneurship is best secured in societies not overwhelmed by State regulations and the armoury of political power. These two basic elements of his thinking are still true, although the Indian people in the elections of March

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1971 and March 1972 appear to have rejected them out of hand. It is arguable that most of us in the fifties deeply erred in underestimating the compulsions of social justice, meaning, in practical terms, the necessity of making employment for the destitute masses march hand in hand with higher economic growth. But if A. D. Shroff had lived into the late sixties, he would have corrected his emphasis as most of us have done long before the "Garibi Hatao" slogans was invented to win those two historic elections. There was a good reason for our universal complacency in the fifties: it was not until the Census of 1961 that we could know that working population projections for the first two plans were terribly in error. In fact, population had been growing at twice the rate assumed. It was not anyone's fault until 1961 that the employment problem conceived on a growth in working population of only 1.25 per cent per year was deemed to be soluble.

It has been everybody's fault since 1961 that employment imperatives in the Third and Fourth Plans were relegated to a lowly place. Let those who are without sin throw the first stone. And now that our basic sinful nature has been proclaimed, no less than the virtue of having seen the light before it was claimed last month by Mr. Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank, as his own burning conviction, what has really been done to make amends for a decade of absence of mind? The Study Group on the Welfare of the Weaker Sections of the Village Community headed by Jayaprakash Narayan reported in 1961 that between 40 to 50 per cent of rural households had an income of less than Rs. 500 per annum and about 80 per cent had an income of less than Rs. 1,000 per annum. Also that 20 per cent of the rural households owned no land and about 25 per cent had holdings of less than one acre. Every year since 1968 we have had fresh calculations of where the poverty line lies, and four economists in a row have claimed distinction for new statistical exercises all based on the same, somewhat over-worked, data of the National Sample Survey in the early

sixties. But no remedial action of any significance on employment for the 40 to 50 per cent of rural households described in 1961 has yet been taken. It is of course, far easier to draw increasingly refined portraits of the deep tragedy of Indian poverty than to execute even broad-brush policies to dispel the ghastly misery presented.

The question we need to answer is why, particularly with the deep commitment to our people made in the Socialist Pattern of Society by the Congress Party, so little has been done. The cynic may say that the commitment was not genuine. I believe this charge is untrue. I would contend that Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Mrs. Indira Gandhi have had the deepest sympathy for the underprivileged, but have all been unable to translate their compassion into the necessary economic elements firstly, on real income growth, and, secondly, on a pattern of labour-intensive growth adequate to their task. The task was underestimated: its instruments relatively ineffective. But, as with the errors on population of the fifties, these were universal errors. All of us have been at fault. We planned too little growth: we feared too great a present sacrifice. In the end, the growth we planned had far too small a dimension of new employment: and, of course, we failed dismally in the Third Plan to achieve half of what we planned. We may blame the elements we must dislike; the private sector and the great losing giants like Hindustan Steel: the rich landlord and the corrupt government official: above all, the politician corrupted by Power with no trace of his original Gandhian fervour. All these and the Indian working man, too: for he works too little for his own family, and gives nothing to the community. Perhaps all of use are at fault: less or more is immaterial, for mutual recrimination takes us and the unemployed nowhere.

This nation has at last, as in the Gandhian Age, to gird its loins for a superhuman task. Fifty years ago, in times still engraved upon many minds we were, although equally divided by interests, suddenly by one man's

amazing imagination, forged into one nation. Out of that massive commitment to a single goal came the strategy of non-violent resistance executed with millions harnessed to the task. No one has asked what resources the Indian people had in 1922 to wage a total war for political freedom. In fact the resources were grossly inadequate: the managerial capacity entirely unproved. Yet the problem was seen in its "total" perspective, and the order of sacrifice correctly decreed with massive discipline enforced voluntarily by the visions of a goal which restored both faith and dignity to ourselves. With much greater financial resources, with the vast popular cry for employment generating even fear of middle-class survival, and the cornucopia of technology overflowing, we cannot dream and plan like that again. Why? Partly because, for just this superhuman task we have not yet found a new Mahatma: but since Mahatmas cannot be born in every age, because we really have no penetrating vision of the faith and dignity which a total war on Indian Poverty can give to ourselves, the Indian people have lost their Motivation. There is no unique purpose which drives them, apparently without resources and managerial skills, to accomplish as in the Gandhian Age, the apparently impossible.

It was motivated men and women, in the Gandhian Age, that made India great. And India will be great again only when we have equal motivation to perform in like manner. Precisely because it is the massive motivation of individuals which is the key to current employment oriented development, that I believe that the economist, the political scientist, the historian and all the disciplines of the social sciences put together, occupy a much lowlier place today than the entrepreneur, free or otherwise. Perhaps, the embarrassment of economists is currently greater in that, over the last two decades in a province they wrongfully seized as their own, they have now been proved conspicuously wrong. Firstly, in the dreary fifties, it was fashionable to describe the vicious circle which proved the impossibility of substantial development with-

out aid. Because incomes were low, investment was low: because investment was low, productivity was low: because productivity was low, incomes were low. This could only be broken by massive investment from outside. Secondly, and particularly in the sixties, there was presented the vicious problem of adverse international payments, continuously declining terms of trade and the impossibility of a high growth rate on exports with rapidly rising imports ending in the dogma of the Widening Gap. The rich countries had to grow richer, and a five per cent annual rate of growth for developing countries was so difficult that, in the United Nations First Development Decade, ten years were provided for a task which many Asian developing countries accomplished quietly in five: less quietly, at the end of the decade, South Korea, Taiwan and Iran were demonstrating that they could strike the highest rates of growth in the world. And now rates of growth of ten to fifteen per cent per annum in developing countries—Brazil and Iran head the League in 1971 and 1972—are frequent enough to ask why only India plans growth at five per cent per year while everyone else seems to be planning at least for ten. We may have got our employment priorities all wrong: but why have we failed so strikingly on Growth since we seem to have sought so little else?

Certainly we cannot lay the flattering unction to our souls that, from the massive financial resources we have thrown in the last year into the Growth operation, we obtained results appropriate to capital deployed. Very much the reverse. And it is here India's economists and economic historians have truly failed the nation: for the assessment of optimum choices in the use of scarce resources is the central theme and precise purpose of economic science. The number of our economists is Legion, but those who have demonstrated forcefully the vast and senseless suffering imposed on the country by the extravagant misuse of capital resources in the Second and Third Plans can be counted on the fingers of one hand. To blame our failures on the low rate of saving, instead of

on the wildly inefficient use of our scarce capital is to miss the basic cause of our poorer performance, whether on Production, Prices, Payments or Poverty; also of a decade's inflation. With the right choices of projects and efficient managements thereof, India's Capital: Output ratios in the Plans could have been kept steadily at 2.5 to 1. At this figure for efficient capital use, even a rate of saving as low as 10 per cent of national income would, without foreign aid, have brought us a non-inflationary growth rate of 4 per cent per year. With a rate of investment of 12.5 per cent, we could have had 5 per cent. In fact in the last years we have average about 4 per cent in real terms but with massive recourse to foreign aid and unwarranted deficit financing. Since 1957 we have mortgaged our future with a foreign debt of nearly Rs. 8,000 crores and have unloosed inflation within the country so that prices today are double what they were in 1961, which were 25% higher than when the First Plan ended gloriously in 1956. And, now on the eve of the Fifth Plan, we seem likely to plan exactly as before with an inadequate growth rate, perhaps 6 per cent, and the same inevitable acceptance of inflation, because of too much created money always chasing too little real growth in production.

It is not possible in a short time to deal with the prospects of the containment of Indian inflation, but I might express my own view that the central thrust of such a policy must be the reduction of the Capital: Output Ratio in the economy to the figure of about 2: 1 which was achieved in India's First Plan, in which, incidentally, inflation and international payments crises were totally absent. If the Capital: Output Ratio were so reduced, India could, perhaps over the next ten years, achieve a 7 per cent rate of annual growth without inflation, with an average rate of domestic saving of 14 per cent which would emerge spontaneously from the growth process. This central solution both for growth and the containment of inflation depends on the appropriate product mix between Agricultural, Industrial and Tertiary Projects. This

implies a major choice in favour of agriculture; also in favour of small irrigation works in place of the large multi-purpose projects: and of medium and small-scale industries wherever viable. The great multi-purpose projects, large steel plants, or heavy machinery plants are impressive monuments to economic progress, but they are to be accepted only in very small quantities at a time. For otherwise they can, we have seen in India between 1957 and 1967, totally derange the Capital: Output Ratio and unloose inflation as well as multiply foreign debt.

There is no virtue in Indian growth systems in which poverty is not attacked as the first purpose of economic and social change. The major purpose of the surplus generated by raising average growth rates from five to at least seven per cent per year is to make a massive commitment to Employment for the protection of the poor, and to Education to ensure that the next generation of children of poor parents participate actively in our lofty programmes of development. Large fractions of our population qualify only for unskilled occupations, which are casual in the worst meaning of that term and do not yield even subsistence wages. Tragically, the social conscience in these areas has not stirred itself sufficiently even to enquire precisely how deep frustration and despair have entered into the minds of these neglected millions. Resources must be set apart for massive employment, designed specifically for the rehabilitation of men and women who have been cheated of their dignity and a rightful place in the societies in which they have been born.

Conditions will vary from State to State depending on numbers, skills available, and the occupational pattern which can be usefully designed to prevent this employment programmes from degenerating into poor relief. Rural works programmes on canals, roads, small construction works, even distribution and retail sales should be dovetailed successfully into all the nation's plans, so that most of the new employment created is productive, even while being socially inescapable. It is probable that at

least two per cent of GNP, of the growth rate of 7 per cent proposed, will need to be committed to this programme; even if it should be more, the charge cannot be evaded. For failure on this count will imply that the real objective of development will be reduced to nothingness: for it is their need, not those of the more privileged, which is our central challenge. It seems certain, too, that, in the seventies, the solution of this problem will be a condition of political and economic stability.

The character of the strategies required for rapid economic and social change must be set in what might be described as the cultural grooves appropriate for local involvement and hard but congenial work. The supplies of missing ingredients, by whatever agencies, of capital and technology help, but they do not, when massively injected, always, or even generally, get massively absorbed. It is in the rapid absorption of productive capital in the social milieu, in which the people have already made their occupational choice, that the secret of rapid economic development resides. This is in fact the major element in reducing the Capital: Output Ratio in the short period. If the projects fit into an existing cultural pattern, the original capital injected spreads rapidly in familiar lanes, both in the minds of the original recipients and among the "natural" ancillaries, by-products of the initial thrust. There is currently at work in the Indian Union an efficient prototype of an economic and social revolution of just this type. I have chosen for description the most vigorous of the Indian communities in which this new pattern of economic and social development is generating a rate of progress equal or greater than, that required for India as a whole.

In a manner mysterious to behold in India's Punjab, there is currently no intolerable unemployment. A huge agricultural thrust and an industrial revolution going on simultaneously and both assisting and hindering one another have made every city of the Punjab an amazing demonstration of a supremely effective growth machine.

Agricultural production is up 8 per cent per year; industrial production not less than 10 per cent and tertiary occupations perhaps in between. Against an average rate of growth of 4 per cent for India as a whole, Punjab has got 9 per cent and, unless power crises like this year's intervene, can do better. Inequalities undoubtedly exist, but there is no visible dire poverty now in this State. In this cycle of activity, camaraderie is the norm; the division between rich and poor is greatly reduced.

I propound the view that in the multitude of prototypes which we are considering, this will prove the most effective for the attainment of rapid growth with national self-reliance and a vigorous commitment by local employment to the elimination of poverty. It satisfies the three economic conditions as essential to the strategies required to force acceleration and social change out of economies just ticking over at a steady but insufficient rate of growth. The Capital: Output Ratio is low: the demand for highly trained personnel is minimal: the activities generated are highly labour-intensive. The first provides defence against inflation; the second escapes a serious bottleneck in managerial and sophisticated skills; the third, most important of all, attacks poverty directly by providing employment, albeit at low levels, for those with very limited education. It thus bypasses the degrading labour market of the backward industrial economy.

In all these respects, it partakes of some of the early virtues of all revolutions; what is new is that these strategies keep the great rural unemployed gainfully occupied in their own home environments. There is no uprooting of men and women: and happily, as a consequence, no insoluble abysmal fit of insanitation and ill-health in shanties in the towns. The industrial revolution is carried to the country where it need have no victims: wealth accumulates but men need not decay. Moderation is imposed both by the smaller size of units and the intermediate level of technology which is far less dominated by the mechanical division of labour. Profits of each unit

may be lower than in large-scale modern industry, but the social gains are great, perhaps incalculable. In the end this consideration will be final. Developing countries should not choose the high capital-intensive, sophisticated technologies designed for labour-short affluent societies except in the few areas such as steel, cement, paper and petrochemical plants where the economies of scale are decisive. These are properly areas where foreign aid and public sector operation are still employed because of long periods of gestation and relatively low profitability.

Let me stress where the economic strategy differs from the arid experiments of development in many countries, notably in India during the Second and Third Plans from 1957 to 1966. In the first place, the injection of State capital takes place in agriculture, not in industry: secondly, it takes place continuously year after year by support prices for foodgrains at levels which not only encourage all the new technologies of fertiliser use, mechanisation (where, occasionally, labour is short) and high-yielding varieties but all the necessary capital formation to support the agro-industries which the agricultural revolution immediately requires. The discontinuity in an area of stop-go industrial investment generates lags in market demand against which developing countries seem to wrestle in vain. The small artisan—the ubiquitous “mistri” as we call him in India—cannot develop either his skills or his operations on the chance that construction on a new industry may give him gainful employment year after year. But a continuous stream of buses, tractors, scooters, motor-cycles and millions of cyclists now provide occupation continuously for every garage and the little “mistri” in practically every rural area of the State.

I have propounded the view that with available technology, managerial drive and cost accountability, and the appropriate social environment, India can sustain a growth rate of 7 per cent per year over a decade with marginal foreign aid, primarily to support the balance of payments. I do not subscribe to the view that we should

be satisfied with a 7 per cent rate of growth, or that we should not utilise substantial foreign aid, of course without strings, to secure a higher rate both of growth and employment. I consider that we should, because of our vast employment responsibilities in the seventies, strive for a minimum growth rate of 8 per cent per year with at least 6 per cent growth in foodgrains to secure food resources to finance in a non-inflationary manner rural works of the average order of Rs. 1,250 crores per year, half in food and half in cash. The whole strategy for providing 12 million jobs from rural works over the next decade was described adequately in the Annual Number 1971 of my Institute entitled "A Blueprint for Employment". I need not elaborate on it here: but it is necessary to stress the social compulsions which now make a minimum Rural Works Employment programme of this order inescapable.

A massive and all-absorbing programme for Employment should, for at least a decade, be the single point strategy for Indian Social Justice. The intellectuals of India, who pursue debate far above deeds, will find in the words Social Justice, a many-splendoured thing raising each day a hundred "basic" issues of economic and social inequality; on caste and class: on property, calling for ceilings on land and houses; on opportunity, calling for elimination or ceilings on Big Business houses: on Distribution by State channels against the "Trade". But the poor of India ask for nothing but jobs. It is this massive cry of frustration and despair, mounting beyond all conceivable limits with an addition of 63 million to India's working population within the next ten years, which will overwhelm the intellectuals who cannot meet this challenge. There may be good reason, as well as rich political dividends, in radical slogans to stay impatience with gestures which may temporarily withhold turmoil and disorder. But anyone who truly measures events of the last three months knows that the real content of Social Justice is food, clothing and shelter. The attempt to distract India's unemployed with plans and yet more plans, and pro-

grammes, radical and yet more radical, must fail. We may as well face the central fact. Social justice means Jobs.

Because Social Justice means jobs, the dimensions of India's challenge on employment in the next decade should be our first framework of reference. This does not, as does so much of economic science of the forecasting variety, involve any econometric skills. It is all the simplest arithmetic. Nor does it, as so much else, call for the mathematical theory of probability in order to measure the chance which attends on the dreadful event to be overcome. India's working population for the next decade is certain, because all those to be in it have already been born; per contra, those not already born will not be in it. This is, therefore, a closed universe, not escapable and, in terms of numbers, finite and bounded both ways. This might make it look more manageable: in fact many Indian economists, forgetting their arithmetic, consider it is the same unemployment problem of the sixties. Some staggering facts on the new working population explosion are, therefore, required to demonstrate the point that the problem is not only new to India: it has never been overcome at any time in the history of the world.

For the first thirty years of this century, India's working population went up by about 19 million; this was about the same figure for the quinquennium 1960 to 1965, showing the problem had grown six times in intensity. But this will be a little more than half of the working population coming through between 1976 and 1981 which is now estimated at 34 million. In other words, what we will require is a tempo not less than ten times of the first thirty years and nearly double that of just a decade ago. For the whole decade we will need 63 million additional jobs, or about 6 million jobs a year.

There is no evidence that we are providing, or could provide with current projects, anything more than three million jobs a year. A total restructuring of projects is,

therefore, required. The first element is doubling the current rate of growth from an average of 4 per cent to an average of 8 per cent. But growth itself will not be enough, since when productivity increases, as it must, growth fails to give proportionate employment. In Indian industry, as a whole, productivity in the sixties has tended to increase at about half the rate of growth implying that an 8 per cent growth of industrial production generates only a 4 per cent rise in employment. Industry and Tertiary occupations may provide, on the most optimistic rendering, about 27 million jobs over the next decade; agriculture, already overburdened, perhaps 10 million more. We will still need 26 million additional jobs, although our "visible" job creation at 37 million in these ten years will have exceeded what we have done in the last 25 years. We need, in employment, to run three times as fast as in the sixties to keep unemployment no higher than it is now.

This then is the framework of a truly grand national responsibility lasting over a decade and imbued with every overtone of inevitable disharmonies in Politics, Administration and Social Ethics. It may be described as a single point programme, but we know that this involves, as did the battle for political freedom, a new way of thinking everywhere. The absolute priority given to employment implies the subjection of every other conflicting ambition, except possibly the pursuit of higher growth which is a basic condition of ultimate victory. As in a state of war we must impose discipline upon ourselves so as to divert our resources into the national pool. The administration of this pool is largely a Government responsibility, and, provided the same singlemindedness informs Government commitments, we should not oppose the raising of Government revenues over the country as a whole from about 20 per cent of GNP today to 25 per cent of GNP in 1982. This additional draft must be tied precisely to projects, and Governments, Central and State, made strictly accountable for execution of these projects, with acts of waste and nepotism now so widely prevalent, ruthlessly exposed. The obligations of discipline are mutual. As in a state of

war, Governments must mobilise resources for victory, applying the necessary discipline for that purpose: but of equal importance to prevent the inevitable abuse of power, the people must be able to discipline the Government. For this purpose, freedom of expression and the fundamental rights of the Constitution, even as though in an emergency, must operate without restraint. A new balance will need to be struck between the public sector's acquisitive instincts and its capacity to perform: equally the private sector must accept voluntarily the sacrifices to be endured by all.

Politics remains the Art of the Possible. So, although we often overlook this unwelcome fact, is Economics. It will not be possible for us to discipline one another, unless we cease to ride our hobby-horses which generally imply that we attempt, like Sancho Panza, to ride in all directions at once. We are right to clamour against State takeovers of well-run private enterprises by bad or untried managements such, for example, as the Indian Copper Corporation. We are also in order in reminding the Government, which tilts at inflation with Fair Price Shops without supplies, that mere edicts for maximum prices have never worked. The basic laws of supply and demand are no respecters of persons. One of Rome's greatest Emperors, Diocletian, who promulgated such an Edict in 301 A.D., found this to his cost. His prestige was at its height: his authority absolute; his failure complete. Those of us who do not subscribe to current policies are called upon not to rejoice upon such failures: we must contrive to present a better choice.

I believe if A. D. Shroff were alive today, he would present the choice that I have attempted to describe: more growth with disciplining of all factors of production; much more employment with large rural works and educational programmes built into every stage. This would be for him no change of faith; for, above all, he was a humanist. Those who knew him well know how sensitive he was to human misery: he was full of human compassion,

a virtue which filled the Gandhian Age and has been conspicuously absent in our own. When he proclaimed his faith in Free Enterprise he was more concerned with individual self-reliance than with wealth: with the harnessing of the free talents of many thousands of entrepreneurs than the advancement of his own firm or the large business houses which, by some quirk of history, have now been indented with all free enterprise. He would have done what we all wish to do: to abolish the poverty which degrades millions of Indian citizens and shames us before all the nations of the earth. Perhaps we are all Socialists now, as Sir William Harcourt said in 1894; but climbing on a fragile bandwagon will not help to accomplish the task, even if it should erase our futile arguments on Public and Private Enterprise approaches to the current challenge which can shake this nation to the core. We are not sensitive to the tragic poverty that surrounds us: how can we respond vigorously to the invisible threat to our survival?

I do not know the answer. We know that it is not Socialism, nor Free Enterprise, nor Resources nor Plans, which have down the years, been the catalytic agents of any nation's will. Human motivation, in the whole field of knowledge, is the most mysterious of Nature's hidden secrets. Somehow we have lost our purpose: there has been a terrible depletion of this nation's will. Yet, barely four decades ago, this same nation made history by raising, out of mass mediocrity and indifference, thousands of men of quality and, perhaps, a hundred of geniuses. We have all the circumstances and opportunities to live beyond the Gandhian Age. The challenge, in the degree of degradation of our fellowmen, is certainly greater. But endemic poverty and the terrible dehumanising of about two-fifths of our population seem unable to draw us now to any great heights of endeavour. The disease is spiritual: we see no indignity in resting while this massive humiliation, as great as foreign rule, lies so heavily upon us. Nor are our minds even awake to the explosive character of a society in which this frustration and anger grow every day. There is now no inevitability of gradualness; yet our

reforming zeal is more gradual than ever. It is strange paradox: the greater the challenge, the less vigorous our response both on Growth and on Employment. Yet, just a year ago, on Bangla Desh we roused ourselves to accomplish a stupendous task, suggesting that we did not lack either moral courage or physical prowess. To every fearful Indian today, can we not present the victories of the Gandhian Age and the successes of 1971 as proof that we are still capable of performing what look like superhuman tasks? I believe we can and we must. But we will fail unless we can, as in the Gandhian Age, deeply involve the masses in their own struggle for freedom from want. We have hitherto failed by promises, more and more glaringly unfulfilled, to communicate confidence: when involved, the millions, as they move to the task, will, perhaps, show us the way.

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

**“Free Enterprise was born with man
and shall survive as long as man
survives.”**

**—A. D. SHROFF
(1899-1965)
Founder-President,
Forum of Free Enterprise.**

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