



India's Economic Growth Leaves Human Development in the Dust

By Isolda Agazzi



If India followed standards set by the 2012 Human Development Report, its poverty rate would be close to 55 percent of the population. Credit: Sujoy Dhar/IPS

GENEVA, May 23 2012 (IPS) - Ahead of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of India, a coalition of NGOs denounced the gap between the country's growth rate and the rate of poverty, malnutrition and lack of health and sanitation.

They charged that even when laws and policies exist, their implementation is unsatisfactory and assessment of efforts is a difficult undertaking.

"According to official figures, the average growth rate between 2007 and 2011 was 8.2 percent but poverty declined only by 0.8 percent. While this is already disturbing, standards used to measure poverty are very suspect. They are based on a poverty level of 50 cents a day, which is an insult to the poor," said Miloon Kothari, convenor of the Working Group on Human Rights in India (WGHR) and former United Nations rapporteur on the right to housing.

The WGHR was set up three years ago by leading human rights NGOs to prepare for the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR), an inter-governmental review of the human rights record of every single state, that will take place on May 24 at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Indian NGOs compiled their concerns about the country's uneven development in a 170-page report, which said that standards for measuring poverty were not consistent with international standards and did not follow a human rights approach.

Kothari claimed that if the country followed the standards set by the 2012 Human Development Report, its poverty rate would be close to 55 percent of the population.

"There is an obsession with growth and the 11th five-year plan does not depart from this. Growth should not be an end in itself, but a way to achieve goals like education and health. Even scholars like Amartya Sen have argued that India's poverty statistics are very controversial and unreliable. There must be a radical change." Delhi currently ranks 134 out of 187 countries on the U.N. human development index.

The first consequence of poverty is the violation of the right to food. India has the world's highest number of malnourished people, amounting to 21 percent of the population. A full 42 percent of the country's children under the age of five are underweight.

"True, in our country the right to food is justiciable, but the reality is that we have excessive grain and a very unsatisfactory distribution mechanism," Kothari told IPS. "There is a lack of support of the agricultural sector and shocking starvation that biotechnologies make even worse."

He sees a new threat in free trade agreements (FTAs) for which there is no consultation of the public and parliament. "FTAs are not at all consistent with human rights obligations," he added. In this context, the government's refusal to universalise the public distribution of food grains despite overflowing food stocks is "unacceptable."

On the water and sanitation front India holds another appalling record: the largest number of people in the world – 51 percent of the population – that defecate in the open. Sixty percent of rural households lack access to toilets, an issue that particularly affects Dalits, who comprise 16.3 percent of the population, said Asha Kotwal, general secretary of the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum.

"Over 700,000 of our people are involved in the cleaning of toilets using their bare hands, this is a huge shame on our country. From 2008-2010 over 100,000 acts of violence were committed against (Dalits), such as murder, rape, or (forcing women) to parade naked, particularly women asserting their rights."

While on paper Dalits and Adivasis have been allocated a large share of state budgets, they were denied almost 30 billion dollars of that money in the last five years alone.

"It is time to expose the cruelty of the caste system," Kotwal said. "The culture of impunity has affected all of Indian society. The state, the judiciary and the media (discriminate based on caste). Faster growth has meant faster exclusion for us. We need anti-discrimination legislation or an equality act to prevent any (more) discrimination."

India's development process, which relies heavily on the exploitation of natural resources, has also displaced and dispossessed millions of tribal people throughout the country, said Prafulla Samantra, president of the People's Empowerment Movement.

"In Central India, states like Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are being increasingly targeted by multinationals for investment. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 recognises some rights, but it has not been fully implemented and companies keep taking over forest and land. Many tribal people were shot by police defending the multinationals."

The draft land acquisition, rehabilitation and resettlement bill does not take a full human rights approach, nor does it state that evictions should take place only in exceptional circumstances.

"With increasing land acquisition and land grabbing, public interest must be redefined," NGOs say. But even when laws exist, studies on their impact, particularly on women and children, are scarce, according to Madhu Mehra, director of Partners for Law in Development.

An example is the recent change in the religious-based family laws that allow women to inherit. "We keep hearing that women have begun to get inheritance, but is it a fact or wishful thinking?" she asked.

“Women’s groups have asked for this change, but in the paradigm of multiculturalism, their voices are not seen as the voices of the communities.” In fact, women are often represented by religious leaders. The same holds true for the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, which lacks effective implementation.

Another example of the gap between rights on paper and rights in practice is the 2009 Delhi High Court ruling that supposedly decriminalised homosexuality. Despite legal protection, rampant discrimination in health services, employment, education and housing continues virtually unabated, forcing many homosexuals into invisibility.

NGOs are also concerned about India’s non-compliance with international human rights obligations.

“India has still not ratified the convention against torture,” said human rights lawyer Vrinda Grover, “and this is worrisome because torture is routinely practiced by law-enforcement agencies across the country. Its use is particularly systematic and brutal in conflict areas like the Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir and Central India. Enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence remain entrenched in these areas. India must ratify the convention against enforced disappearances,” she stressed.

“India faces enormous human rights challenges,” concluded Kothari, “and the second UPR offers a major opportunity to admit its shortcomings and move from a defensive to a collaborative approach with the U.N.”

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