

Tamil Nadu journalist shocked by poverty in Glasgow

Steve James
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By measures of absolute wealth, poverty in India is far worse than in Britain. But economic measures of poverty are only one way of looking at the question. Respected human rights journalist and researcher Mari Marcel-Thekaekara claims that, in other respects, poverty in Europe--particularly that caused by unemployment--has a more paralysing impact.

Marcel-Thekaekara has long campaigned for the rights of the oppressed Adivasi people in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, as well as writing for the *New Internationalist* magazine and many academic journals. She has also written on the conditions facing "untouchable" sanitary workers in Gujarat. Last Saturday she wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper on visiting several of the poorest working class areas in Britain from 1994 onwards.

"We were told that Easterhouse housing estate in Glasgow is considered Europe's worst slum. We thought this was ludicrous--these people have assured housing, electricity, hot and cold water, refrigerators, gas or electric cooking ranges. By Indian standards, this was middle class luxury. At the back of my mind I could see anaemic, emaciated Adivasi women carrying water in pots from half a kilometre away; huts without electricity and women searching for firewood every day, thankful if they had a kilo of rice to feed their families.

"Then, suddenly, we were hit by the reality of the poverty surrounding us in Glasgow. Most of the men in Easterhouse hadn't had a job in 20 years. They were dispirited, depressed, and often alcoholic. Their self-esteem had gone. Emotionally and mentally they were far worse off than the poor where we worked in India, even though the physical trappings of poverty were less stark."

"The Easterhouse men ... felt far more hopeless than

people in India who scabbled in garbage heaps to sell scrap metal, paper and rags to feed their children. Both groups were at the bottom of society."

Marcel-Thekaekara recounts her shock on finding out from a local social worker, Bob Holman, that problems she associated with the Third World were prevalent in Britain--malnutrition, one generation being shorter and weaker than the last, lack of protein. She also visited poor working class estates in Dudley and in Gloucester, where she and her husband were attacked by the local press for exposing the reality of malnutrition in Britain.

Recent figures released by Glasgow City Council shed some statistical light on Marcel-Thekaekara's experiences in Glasgow.

* In this school session 32,653 children, 43 percent of the total school population, received free meals at school. 44,102, 58 percent, received grants for clothing. Free meals are given to children whose parents receive the basic state benefit--Income Support. Clothing grants are given to parents on Income Support and Family Credit--a top-up benefit to supplement the wages of the poorest working parents--and on Housing Benefit.

* In total, 118,993 households, 43 percent, also receive Income Support or Job Seekers Allowance, paid at the same rate. Income Support is paid at a poverty level rate of £50.45 a week for a single person over 25, £39.85 for 18- to 24-year olds, £30.30 for someone between 16 and 17. A young couple receives £60.10. If they are over 25 they get £79.10.

Within Glasgow, in 1998, there were dramatic variations between neighbouring areas. In Drumchapel, 69.9 percent of children received free school meals and 89.7 percent clothing grants, while in the somewhat better off West School Management Area, the figures were 32.5 percent and 45.7 percent respectively.

The same pattern is reflected in health. In the Gorbals

area, a name synonymous in the 1930s with grinding poverty and destitution, 27 percent of the population has a limiting long-term illness, compared to less than half that in nearby Milngavie. The figure for all Glasgow is 18 percent, compared with 13 percent in Scotland as a whole. In Pollock 18 percent of mothers are under 20 years of age, compared to 7 percent throughout Scotland.

Social conditions in Glasgow are a direct result of two decades of continual attacks on the working class, supervised by the ruling Labour City Council. Today, viewed from the top of one of the city's numerous tower blocks, Glasgow looks as if entire areas have been rubbed out and filled with wasteland and rubble. Like many of Britain's old industrial cities, such as Manchester, Sheffield or Liverpool, the industrial reorganisation of the 1980s erased entire industries that once provided secure jobs for thousands of workers.

In Glasgow the process began somewhat earlier. From the early 1970s, a host of steelworks, shipyards and engineering plants closed. Between 1978 and 1993 the city lost two-thirds of its 107,515 manufacturing jobs. These have never been fully replaced by jobs in the service sector. Over the UK as a whole, employment declined by 1 percent between 1991 and 1993; in Glasgow it fell by 14.4 percent. From a high point of 1,055,000 in 1965, the city's population shrank to about 616,400 in 1996. A further 5 percent drop is predicted by 2001.

New electronics industries have tended to move to the enterprise zones and new towns established along the motorway corridor stretching from Greenock in the West to Edinburgh in the East. Glasgow, while still a busy commercial, media and educational centre, has, in the main, attracted only low-paying service sector jobs, and more recently call centre employers.

Successive local government reorganisations have removed wealthy neighbourhoods from the city's local tax base, leaving all the most poverty stricken areas. In response, the Labour controlled City Council has increased taxes to punishingly high levels, while slashing vital social services.

A recent *Glasgow Herald* article highlighted the plight of the Possilpark area, reckoned by the Scottish Office to be Scotland's most deprived suburb. Companies such as Blindcraft, a Whitbread bottling plant, the Saracen Foundry, and Heatovent have all

closed, leaving 80 percent of tenants receiving housing benefits and 68 percent of children on free school meals. The council-funded *Stepping Stones* child and family support centre, which provides essential services to poor and often extremely isolated parents, faces closure. Similar centres in nearby Ruchill and Springburn were closed last year.

Mari Marcel-Thekaekara shared her experiences in Britain with a group of Adivasi and noted the high level of understanding and empathy this generated. "Poor people themselves often spot the similarities immediately. They see beyond the physical differences and empathise with each other. Which brings them closer to each other than to the rich of their respective countries, who at best can only sympathise with them."

See Also:

Growing levels of poverty in Scotland
[4 March 1998]



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