

Human Development report shows worsening poverty in South Asia

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The recently issued report on *Human Development in South Asia 1999* reveals terrible impoverishment and inequality. Sponsored by the United Nations Development Program, the report's theme is "The Crisis of Governance" in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives.

According to the compilers of the report, the Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Center in Pakistan, the political crisis in these countries mirrors the inability of their governments to address the growing poverty and resulting social problems.

South Asia, with 23 percent of the world's population, is the planet's poorest region. About 540 million people, or 45 percent of the region's population, are living below poverty line, with daily incomes of less than one dollar. This proportion is higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific region, including China.

India has the greatest number of poor people. The UN poverty index, quoted in the report, shows that the poverty rate has reached 53 percent in India, 53 percent in Nepal, 29 percent in Bangladesh, 12 percent in Pakistan and 4 percent in Sri Lanka. These figures may be an underestimate. According to the countries' own national poverty indexes, the rate is 48 percent in Bangladesh, 54 percent in Pakistan and 22 percent in Sri Lanka, with no change for Nepal and India.

Report continues: "Income disparities in South Asia are one of the largest in the world. All the countries in the region have a dramatic concentration of wealth and power among their richest members." The highest income-earning layer of 20 percent owns 40 percent of the total income in the region while the lowest 20 percent bracket owns only 10 percent.

Pointing out that economic development in the region has never benefited the poor, the report states: "Even though GDP per capita has been rising annually at around 2.5 percent, between 1960-1965, the average income of the richest 10 percent is still six times the average of the poorest 10 percent." The biggest gap is in Nepal. There the richest 10 percent earn 10 times the poorest 10 percent. The ratio is seven in Pakistan, six in India and Sri Lanka and five in Bangladesh.

Among the 200 million poorest people in the region, the average life expectancy is less than 40 years. This is a direct consequence of worsening health conditions. For the region as a whole, the average life expectancy is 62 years. These figures are in stark contrast to those in advanced countries. In the US and the UK it is 77 years while Japan's average is 88 years.

In South Asia, 879 million people are deprived of proper sanitary facilities—661 million in India, 98 million in Pakistan, 91 million in Bangladesh, 18 million in Nepal and 6 million in Sri Lanka.

A total of 278 million people have no access to safe drinking water—178 million in India, 56 million in Pakistan, 25 million in Bangladesh, 1 million in Nepal and 7.7 million in Sri Lanka. In addition, 276 million people, or 22 percent of the entire population, have no access to basic health facilities—that is 50 percent of people in Bangladesh, 45 percent in Pakistan, 15 percent in India, and 7 percent in Sri Lanka.

After reviewing these catastrophic social conditions, the report comments: "In the face of such powerful evidence, South Asia is still channeling insufficient resources towards the social sectors. Whenever there has been a fiscal adjustment, the axe has fallen on health and education expenditures. Real per capita expenditures on education have followed a downward trend since the early 1990s."

All the countries, except tiny Bhutan and Maldives, spend less than 2 percent of gross national product (GNP) on public health. India's expenditure on health is just 0.7 percent of GNP. In Pakistan it is 0.8 percent, in Bangladesh 1.2, in Nepal 1.2 and in Sri Lanka 1.4.

As a result of inadequate facilities and poor social conditions, the childbirth death rate is shocking—480 per 100,000 live births in the region as a whole. In Bhutan it is 1,600, in Nepal 1,500, in Bangladesh 800 and in India 437.

Part of this toll can be attributed to the poor health of mothers. About 85 percent of pregnant women aged between 15 to 49 are suffering from anemia. In India it is 88 percent, Bangladesh 58 percent and Bhutan 30 percent.

Many of the children who survive birth do not live beyond infancy. In Pakistan the infant mortality rate is 95 for every 1,000 live births. In Nepal it is 75, in India 71, in Maldives 53 and in Sri Lanka 17. Some 79 million children in the region are suffering acute malnutrition. In India alone, 59 million children under 5 years are malnourished.

Shortages of doctors and nurses contribute to the poor health conditions. Throughout South Asia there are only 44.34 doctors per 100,000 people. In India the ratio is 48, in Pakistan 52, in Bangladesh 18, in Nepal 5, in Sri Lanka 23, in Bhutan 20 and in Maldives 19.

Across the region there is one nurse for every 4,078 people and one doctor for every 3,684. By contrast, there is one policeman for every 939. Thus there are four times as many policemen as nurses

or doctors.

The report shows that low literacy rates contribute to the social backwardness. Among the region's adults, 395 million are illiterate. The illiteracy rate in Nepal is 72 percent, in Pakistan and Bangladesh it is 62, in India 48, in Sri Lanka 10 and in Maldives 7.

Women suffer the most. Of the illiterate, 243 million are women, or 64 percent of the total number of women. For the entire region, the illiteracy rate among is 38 percent. The highest rate is in Nepal—86 percent, followed by 76 percent in Pakistan, 74 percent in Bangladesh, 72 percent in Bhutan and 62 percent in India.

Fifty million children in the region are not enrolled in primary education. About 35 million children in India never get any education. Throughout the region, 41 percent of children drop out of school before grade 5. The teacher-student ratio is 1 to 60, with the worst figures in India and Bangladesh—64 and 71 respectively.

The authors of the report condemn the governments of the region for disregarding the need to develop education and label their policy as an obstacle to the creation of a proper social environment for a civilized life. Only 3.2 percent of GNP is spent on education. In Pakistan it is 2.1 percent, in Bangladesh 2.3, in Nepal 2.9, in Sri Lanka 3.1 and in India 3.5.

The report points out that declining education levels and adverse living conditions push people into desperation and frustration, igniting a growing trend of child abuse, prostitution and anti-social activities.

Human Development in South Asia, quoting the UNICEF report of 1995, estimates the child labor force in the region as 134 million. About 100 million are in India. A very high proportion of children aged 10 to 14 work for a livelihood. In Bhutan it is 55 percent, in Nepal 44 percent, in Bangladesh 29 percent and in Pakistan 17 percent.

According to the report: "Child prostitution is widely known to exist in South Asia but is rarely... discussed. Widespread poverty and inadequate social safety nets have left many children with no choice but to sell their bodies simply to survive from one day to the next."

The rapidly growing child sex trade is fueled by the fear that adult prostitutes may transmit the AIDS virus. The reports estimates that around 100,000 children are involved in prostitution. But according to the facts given in the report itself, the number must be higher.

Child prostitution is an organized business run by affluent cliques. According to the report, every year about 7,000 children are brought into India for prostitution. Quoting a Nepalese non-government organization, the report says 100,000 to 200,000 Nepalese girls are working as prostitutes in India. Severe poverty in Nepal, dowry and other social problems facing teenage girls and a high school drop out rate have combined to condemn many girls to prostitution. Bangladeshi girls are also brought into India and Pakistan, while Indian girls are transported to other countries of the region to be sold for prostitution.

The report records that 30,000 Sri Lankan children are being used as sex workers for foreign tourists. It describes the plight of the children caught in the civil war in northern Sri Lanka. When breadwinners are slaughtered, orphans are compelled to sell their bodies to corrupt businessmen who exploit their desire to escape

from the war zone. The children are regularly gang-raped, harassed and forced to perform dangerous sexual acts. They are also exposed to AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases. The report goes on: "According to a recent survey of Nepalese sex workers who return from India each year, nearly 65 percent are HIV positive. Their own communities often reject those who manage to escape and return to their homes."

"In India, in 1996 there was a 31 percent rise in the cases of child rapes since 1992, with more than 4,000 reported cases. Similarly the fact that in 1998 more than half of all rape victims in Punjab (Pakistan) were minors, reflects the failure of state authorities in protecting the most innocent and the weakest of society," the report states.

Cultural backwardness and severe poverty also contribute to brutal violence against women. In India there were 84,000 violent crimes against women in 1993 and this number increased to 115,723 in 1996. In Sri Lanka 26,565 cases of violence against women were reported to the police during the first months of 1998. Bangladesh has the worst rape statistics. In that country, 10 women out of every 10,000 are raped.

Domestic violence is also increasing. "The gravest form of violence is that committed against women. Often a hidden scourge, it is also on the rise in South Asia. It cuts across boundaries of countries, class, age, and ethnicity. However, data regarding this is extremely hard to find, as women seldom come forward with information, especially when the perpetrators of violence are from within the family." In Nepal 50 percent of the crimes against women involve domestic violence. In Pakistan two women are assaulted every hour.

Almost all girls in poor families face the problem of dowry. According to deep-seated custom in most of the countries in the region, especially in India and Pakistan, a woman must give a dowry of money, jewelry, household goods or land to the bridegroom and his parents at her marriage. If the bride fails to bring the agreed dowry, she can face cruel treatment at the hand of the bridegroom and his family. Women have committed suicide. In some cases, the family kills the bride by dousing her with petrol and setting her alight.

In Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India the dowry problem has reached disastrous levels. Even according to the inadequate data, there were 23,000 deaths relating to dowry in India between 1994 and 1998. "Similarly, reports from Lahore indicate an average of sixteen cases of bride burnings a month—with most of the victims belonging to poor families".



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