



We Must Help One Another or Die

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by **George Woodcock**

"We must love one another or die," said the poet W H. Auden in the early days of the last World War. What we have learnt since then is that we must *help* one another or die. The evidence of ecology, as much as the lessons of history, demonstrates ever more clearly how much our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other human beings and of the very planet on which we live.

The world has evolved over the millions of centuries, a balanced natural economy in which plant and animal species (humanity among them) exist in a delicate equilibrium with inanimate forces. The links are so intimate, the balances so perilously liable to be disturbed, that the very fabric of the mountains can be changed by an apparently humble cause like goats browsing off the vegetable cover of the soil and exposing it to erosion. The destruction of the great forests of Brazil is a matter of concern not only to the people of Brazil but to the people of the whole world whose patterns of rainfall it can drastically change.

We can carry the matter a stage farther. If the gap between poverty and wealth in any country is extreme, that equally is the concern of the whole world. Just as weather patterns are disturbed by the poverty of the soil, so political and social stability are disturbed by the poverty of a people; the effects do not halt at frontiers.

Poverty in India

India is a country that deserves our concern on both counts, and that is why Canada India Village Aid is increasingly involved in assistance that treats the needs of people as inseparable from the need to improve the environment. India is a land whose poverty is on a scale is hard for people in western countries to comprehend. A report received recently from the Indian director of the Bangalore-based Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) estimates that: "Around 40% of the population... still live under the poverty line; at the bottom of the heap are the tribals and the scheduled castes." (The "scheduled castes" are the people who in the past were called "untouchables").

But the poverty line in India is very different from the official poverty line in Canada. Most of our poor people would seem wealthy if they were transferred to an Indian village with dung-and-mud floors to the

houses, a diet dominated by grain and lentils, and human feet or ox-carts for transport. The depressed 40% of Indians to whom the Director of MYRADA refers are the poorest of these villagers, people who possess little or no land, are unemployed or at best enjoy irregular and wretchedly paid employment, live in makeshift shelters and are usually on the brink of starvation.

When a group of four CIVA directors toured India in the 1980s they found women working on road building who earned, at best, the equivalent of \$1 a day, and often as little as the equivalent of 50 cents.

Basic Approaches

Some of the areas where CIVA works in collaboration with like-minded Indian NGOs are among the most environmentally threatened parts of India: area where people traditionally lived at a low level before the present crisis, such as the tribal districts of the Aravalli hills in Rajasthan, and the denuded upland country of Uttarakhand in the Himalayan foothills. We approach such crisis areas with two basic assumptions:

1. The fact that there are 300 million people living below the poverty line in India does not make it a hopeless situation. Perhaps a rapid, comprehensive solution is impossible; the failure of the five-year plans of national development, initiated from 1950 onwards by the Indian government to reach the submerged 40% of the population suggests this is the case. But Gandhi advocated beginning at the grassroots village level, and one of the Indian N.G.O.s with which we work. CHIRAG in the Himalayan foothills, has adopted as its motto an old Chinese saying: "Many little things done in many little places by many little people will change the face of the world." We believe the impracticality of grand solutions does not preclude the validity of small ones, affecting thousands or tens of thousands of people. Enough effective small schemes, aimed not at temporary relief but at changing the lives of People permanently, will renew society, perhaps most of all by removing the sense of hopelessness and awakening the initiative among the poor themselves.
2. Whatever we do through providing funds for specific projects will be fully effective by priming the pump that releases the unused potentialities of the land and the people. Indian peasants, once they understand how changes in farming methods will improve their lives, are willing to help themselves as well as accepting help. And there are ways in which the land often provides the means for its own regeneration. It is a matter of utilizing them properly. Our first aim must be to help the people and the land help themselves.

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