
Ganga Devi

A Question of Literacy and Development

Ganga Devi — the river goddess — the river Ganges, the life line of the northern Indian plains stretches all the way east to Calcutta. Ganga Devi is aged beyond her years with the struggle of family cares. The abortion and births of eight or nine children have dried her blood; their feeding, clothing and schooling have dried her bronchi. The failure of her husband's business, the desertion of her eldest son after getting a good job; the death of her husband and grown up daughter have broken her heart. She has 'settled'; i.e., married and employed all the children, even the youngest, who is mentally handicapped — the most functional I have ever seen — working as a "peon" (mail, file carrier and odd jobs) in the Shimla medical college, married to an orphan tribal girl. Yet Ganga Devi runs the household with an iron and knowledgeable hand. Not a

A case study is presented of an illiterate, but wise and knowledgeable Himalayan woman, who ably managed family and village affairs; farms, herbal healing; spinning and stitching. She could read the weather, the land, the trees, the crops, birds, animals and people. She is one of the millions of women who produce 50% of the world's food. She is also one of the 280 million illiterate women in India. But the present day agrarian-industrial development and the literate neo-Brahmins have not only bypassed, marginalized and devalued her, but have been living off the fat of her back and usurping the meagre resources of the third world. This development-literacy axis has deepened the gulf between peoples. This gulf is the root of all dehumanization and violence. What are the limits of the arrogance of the written word is the crucial question.

hair turns without her consent. She knows all the rites and rituals for every feast of the moon, every sacrifice, every offering for the pacification of the dead and the defied, and the dues to the hierarchy of elders. She prescribes the recipes for the daily fare, as well as the special fare for the feeding of the Brahmins to appease the dead, and the very, very special family recipes for preserves, pickles and rejuvenating, high protein tonics. She and her family are vegetarian, so high protein processing of wheat germ and cereals is carefully passed down from generation to generation. Yet Ganga Devi attends to and listens to people who come from far and near — massaging, healing, prescribing a diet, herbal medicine, advice and suggestions for local and family politicking; massaging a woman's stomach, directing

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her second son in setting a sprained ankle. Ganga Devi can hardly see, having sacrificed her sight to the stitching of clothes for family and village and spinning the finest wool into the small hours of night, to supplement and even at times support the meagre family income. And all this after the household chores of fetching fuel and water from distances and heights in

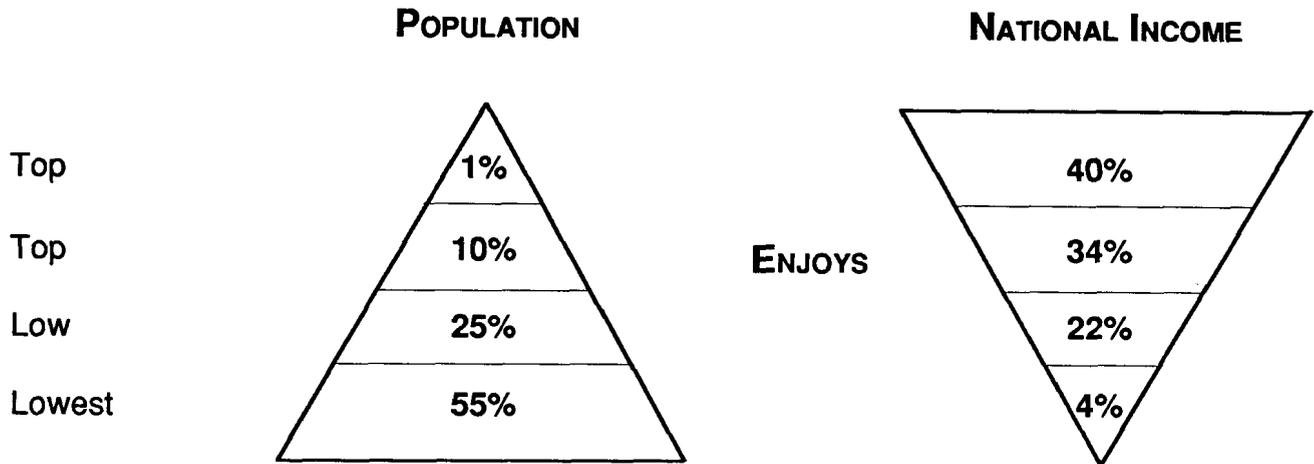
are valued, protected, reimbursed and set high in the peculiar value system of schools and ivory towers of learning in our morally decrepit and bankrupt, destructive civilization.

For the last two thousand years, the privileged, the elites, the parasites have been riding on the backs of the millions who toil to keep and maintain us, the top

rural areas it is 46.42%: males, 51% females, 29%. In the urban areas, 67.44%: males, 73% and females 60.6%. In the Shimla rural areas, 37.16% literacy: males, 49.54% and females, 23.74%². Ganga Devi lived and died in the village Ghana Hatti, 12 km west of the capital, Shimla.

It is the rich and elite of the cities, the

INVERTED PYRAMIDS THEORY



the hills to feed the family of man, children and cows.

The tragedy of Ganga Devi was that, when she became ill with the burden of supporting the life and health of others, she was treated by alien (allopathic) health systems which had reduced the able woman to a helpless dependent on expensive drugs. She never recovered and died after a long resistance.

Ganga Devi was one of the 280 million illiterate women of India. A statistic we look upon with horror, dismay, shame. Yet Ganga Devi could read the earth, the plants, the woods, the trees, the sun, the sky, the clouds, the rains, the sowing, the harvesting, the seasons, the people, the births and the deaths. She could predict droughts by looking at the length and intensity of the orange-red coloration of the cob-like ovary of the Himalian Snake plant; the intensity of the summer by the redness of the flowers of the silk-cotton tree.

I who have a Ph.D. in Psychology can read none of these. Yet me and the likes of me are squandering the meagre resources of the third and fourth world. We

dogs. And we in our arrogance have not even acknowledged this service, never asked what price we have extracted from the wretched of the earth.

All over the earth, it is the illiterate poor, and it is the women who are the poorest of the poor and the most illiterate from the villages, that are the mainstay of a country's economy, through their cheap labour and their contribution in food production. In the northern states of India, by and large it is the women who are mostly involved in tending the land and the animals, whereas the men aspire to a more comfortable life in offices and cities. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has found that women in rural areas grow at least 50 per cent of the world's food.¹

In India there are 343.3 million illiterate persons (approximately 49%). The southern state of Kerala has the highest literacy rate of 69% and the desert state of Rajasthan has a rate of 24% with the lowest female rate of literacy at 12%. In the Himalayan State of Himachal Pradesh, the literacy rate is 42.48%: males, 58% and females, 31.4%. In the

Neo-Brahmins, who are the beneficiaries of the country's educational system, a system which can be well represented by the inverted pyramids theory.

The top 1% enjoys 40% of the National Income and resources, whereas the lowest 55% gets only 4%. There are a number of schemes to alleviate poverty, but hardly a trickle filters down to those who really need it. 52% of the population is below the poverty line; i.e., they hardly get two square meals a day. Malnutrition, anaemia, V.D. and T.B. are rampant in the hills. Ivan Illich has been vindicated: the inroads of development have only bled the countryside. The so-called green and white revolutions (wheat, rice and milk) and the apple-revolution of the Himachal Pradesh have only gone to nourish the cities. These cash crops are not for the rural poor. Zafar Futehally finds, "Whatever development [there has been] has led to only menial jobs for the hill people with the bulk of profits going to outsiders from the plains."³ Cement-concrete houses and Japanese watches (male properties) have been traded for nourishment and health. Again it is the women and chil-

dren who are the victims of our present day 'development.' Mental illness has been found in Himachal Pradesh to be higher in females of agricultural occupation, lower casts, lower education and income.⁴

The current Punjab problem of Sikh terrorism and fundamentalism could be viewed in the light of 'development,' where the green revolution has made the rich richer and the poor poorer. The poor peasants happen to be Sikhs and the rich

have been forced out of their homes, into the city slums which are hot beds of crime, drugs and prostitution. If development means multi-million dollar huge dams, in India there is enough evidence to show that whole villages have been uprooted, forests, hundreds of years old, have been submerged, and the neighboring hills, the fragile Himalayas, made unstable, giving rise to landslides, floods and earthquakes. (For example, Tehri Garhwal Dam, The Narbada Project, The Bodhghat Project

written word has brought us to the brink of annihilation. The very paper I write on, the very words that I am spawning, are felling a tree, a large price indeed for literacy. Ganga Devi remains a crucial question in our thrust for literacy and development.

¹Kamla Bhasin and Bina Agarwal, *Women and Media: Analysis Alternatives and Acts* (Delhi: Kali for Women with ISIS, International Pacific and Asian

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OR THE LAST TWO THOUSAND YEARS, THE PRIVILEGED, THE ELITES, THE PARASITES HAVE BEEN RIDING ON THE BACKS OF THE MILLIONS WHO TOIL TO KEEP AND MAINTAIN US, THE TOP DOGS. AND WE IN OUR ARROGANCE HAVE NOT EVEN ACKNOWLEDGED THIS SERVICE, NEVER ASKED WHAT PRICE WE HAVE EXTRACTED FROM THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH.

traders and business men happen to be urban Hindus. Traditionally a wheat growing area, Punjab (and neighbor Haryana) has taken to growing high-yielding, high-quality rice — mostly for export and profit taking. This breed of rice requires a great deal of irrigation. The water supply being limited and coming from the rivers of the Himalayan mountains, water dispute is a major bone of contention and the source of demand for Khalistan. Here again the main victims are women and children who suffer most brutally in the male games of violence and rioting. If development is counted in the industrialization of the country, most of the industries are capital rather than labour intense. They have helped largely in destroying indigenous cottage industries: plastic has replaced pottery; mechanization has deprived women of their traditional jobs of weeding and hoeing, harvesting, threshing, and marketing vegetables, fish, etc. They cannot operate tractors, threshers, harvester combines, air conditioned vending trucks — these have been usurped by the males. Whole communities of rural poor women and children

(sponsored by the World Bank) in the tribal Gondwana belt of Madhya Pradesh and others).⁵ The government promises concrete houses, schools, and hospitals for the uprooted tribals, totally destroying their eco-system, their indigenous herbal healing, their lifestyle of harmony with the forest, land and their thatched homes, practical in providing airy coolness during long hot and humid summers and easily renewable.

Education and literacy are said to be the fourth cornerstone of development. Much needs to be reflected upon regarding what, how and for whom. An ethics, a morality of development needs to be understood and implemented. Unless and until the various gaps in society, in living, the dualities between people, the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the industrial and the agrarian, the first, second, third and fourth worlds, man and woman, father and child; between I and thou resolved, development, literacy and education will only breed violence, destruction and degeneration.

The power and arrogance of literacy knows no bounds. The arrogance of the

Women's Forum, 1984).

²1981 Government of India Census figures.

³Zafar Futehally, "The Hills are Alive, Just Alive," (New Delhi: *The Express Magazine*, May 29, 1988).

⁴Kishwar Ahmed Shirali and Sandhya Kanwar, "Mental Illness and Hill Women: A Demographic Study," (New Delhi: *Journal of Personality and Clinical Studies*, 3(2), 1987), pp. 103-108.

⁵Chandra Kant Naidu, "The Dam on the River Narmada," (New Delhi: *The Express Magazine*, May 29, 1988).

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