

A Narrative on Development

Bharat Ramaswami

INDIA UNTOUCHED: THE FORGOTTEN FACE OF RURAL POVERTY

By Abraham M. George

East West Books, Chennai, 2004, pp. 400, Rs. 295.00

Abraham George was born and brought up in Kerala. As a young man he migrated to the United States in the late 1960s. After encountering predictable heartaches, George made money in the computer business. In the mid 1990s, George returned to India to start a foundation that would work for the poor. George's experiences with socio-economic reforms also led him to reflect on wider issues concerning the Indian economy and society. In this book, George offers several essays on the plight of the poor in India. These essays also include discussion of his personal attempts through The George Foundation, of reforms in education, environment and health.

The book starts off with a personal voyage into the darkness of India. In an early chapter, George describes his conscious efforts to understand rural India. Not only are living conditions pitiable, he finds the poor mired in alcoholism, disease and superstition. Government officials and landlords rule the villages. Out of this knowledge sprang George's investment in a school for underprivileged children: Shanti Bhavan. The school is a boarding intentions for the school are ambitious: that it would be one of the best in India that could normally be afforded by only the very rich.

Behind this intent is George's conviction that the social deprivation of lower castes could be broken only by the success of children from poor families in the global marketplace. But could the success of a few make such a difference? While George will not probably claim that, it is clear that what he wishes to achieve is a model of rural education—that its success will spur similar efforts. So what is the model?

While equality of opportunity is close to George's heart, his model of education showers resources on a select few. The children must be poor. They must also show potential for academic achievement. The children are also monitored and non-performing children risk being reverted back to their parents. In an absorbing essay, George deals with the experience in setting up the school—the lengthy tangles with the bureaucracy, the suspicions of the rural community (especially from the well-off) and the problems with the hiring, managing and retaining school staff in a remote location. Much of this could be read with profit by anyone considering similar ventures.

George's discussion is also abundant testi-

mony to how hard it is to start a legitimate enterprise in India even though his Foundation does not use any money from the government. Thanks to government regulations (and the layers of bribes it gives rise to), George had a gruelling time in purchasing land. As a result, he shifted the location of the school from Karnataka to neighbouring Tamil Nadu. Receiving donated supplies from abroad is no simple matter either. Unless amply compensated, customs officials use every rule (of which there are plenty) in the book to delay clearance and heap all sorts of penalties and fees. A running theme in the book is how government officials and local elites make their demands on development projects meant for the poor.

In later chapters, George expounds his mantra for economic success. Economic freedom (from regulation and bureaucracy), competition (removing barriers to entry by new businesses) and globalization are the key. This he believes ensures the most productive use of capital, which is the foundation for economic prosperity. He contrasts the desired environment with what obtains: stifling regulation, widespread corruption. He points to the collapse of public services in infrastructure and the judicial system.

George is dismayed by the attention of the government and the elite on issues of concern for urban industries when they have little impact on the livelihoods of the poor. He calls for a programme of rural development that would emphasize infrastructure, land ownership, high value crops and use of new technology. To show the way as it were, his Foundation has part financed a rural road, purchased barren agricultural land, applied novel water sourcing and conservation technologies and operates fruits and vegetable farms. Part of the profits from the farming enterprise is used to purchase land for landless families. One would imagine that it would not be easy for an NGO to possess the technical and market skills to transform itself into a commercial farming enterprise. Unfortunately, George provides precious little details on this transformation.

The George Foundation is not one to rest on its laurels. In health, George coordinated the writing of complex software to aid medical diagnostics. After persistent efforts, he secured the cooperation of government officials to employ the software in a primary health centre.

George expounds his mantra for economic success. Economic freedom (from regulation and bureaucracy), competition (removing barriers to entry by new businesses) and globalization are the key. This he believes ensures the most productive use of capital, which is the foundation for economic prosperity.

By facilitating the documentation of medical records of the local population, the effort seems to have generated a huge payoff. A parallel initiative has been to develop a private health clinic based on graduated user fees. George also describes the work of his Foundation in other areas: promoting awareness of lead poisoning, the launch of an institute of journalism and the establishment of a museum of rural crafts and arts. In the book, George motivates each of these ventures with his personal appraisal of the existing scenario and how his interventions would help.

Some of his beliefs would appear to be simplistic to social scientists. Critics could contend that his project on schooling smacks of social experimentation where the natives are seen as fit subjects for 'improvement'. George declares that "rationality as most people understand does not apply to the rural poor", suggesting that their views are not always to be taken seriously. George's agenda for the education include introducing them to international foods such as spaghetti and tuna and to social events such as formal dinner nights "as part of their developing social graces". On occasion, George's views can also be excessively sweeping such as his condemnation of Indian attitudes to charity and he surely overplays the anti-American bias that he seemingly finds everywhere.

George has invested a lot of his time and personal wealth in addressing serious social concerns. The variety and complexity of issues and the depressing state of each of them does overwhelm the reader. What does not help either is the wide ranging nature of reflections – George is a lot less interesting when he is talking of matters (India's foreign policy, caste system, the Kyoto protocol and so on) far removed from his development initiatives. What helps is that he writes in a simple, direct and transparent style. He communicates admirably the strength of his convictions, the tenacity of his efforts, the skirmishes with the 'left out' rich and the despair of dealing with corrupt officials. As a narrative on development, it is engaging, instructive and rewarding. ■

Bharat Ramaswami is Professor in Economics at the Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi.