

The vision of Participatory Governance

The twenty-first century requires fresh ways to solve the serious problems of poverty and environmental degradation. The old rigid ideological approaches have to give way to ones, which involve more of the actors and stakeholders in society. The disempowerment processes of globalisation today are far too complex to look at them from over-simple Marxist or Gandhian methods, although both these approaches offer important insights.

We propose an approach of non-violent pressure groups and lobbies (and peaceful confrontation where necessary) that always keeps open the doors for negotiation and dialogue. Such an approach that considers everybody a stakeholder in the well being of society may more successfully address the problems of the poor than one that polarizes along sharply rigid lines, where the reaction may be strong and the poor are the sufferers in the long run. **Peaceful non-violent pressure and resistance can go hand in hand with negotiation and dialogue.**

Pipal Tree hopes to bring civil society, political and religious leaders, bureaucrats, businessmen and the media into the advocacy/mediation programme we have described below.

We will be guided both by secular ethical principles and compassionate spiritual values to motivate people to be compassionate and work towards a just transformation of Indian society. Right now there is a great deal of cynicism that corruption, selfish individualism and market fundamentalism will not permit the creation of a humane and sustainable model of development.

In India, globalisation is here to stay whether we like it or not. The question is: is it the right kind of globalisation? Will it exclude more and more people and inflict human rights violations on a massive scale or will it be a globalisation that takes into account issues of equity and ecological sustainability?

We believe that the time has come for a broader dialogical approach that is inclusive and keeps the Gandhian focus on the last man and the last woman. This broader dialogical approach will attempt to convince all the actors that it is in the self-interest of everybody to respect the dignity of every person and ensure minimum material conditions for human existence. Without such an inclusive approach society will fast fall into violence, terrorism and chaos.

The environmental implications of the dominant neo-liberal paradigm of development are already seen in the health problems, water shortages and global warming that we are facing. Can we progressively, incrementally change course?

It is clear that today self-interest is seen as the law of the jungle where each one grabs as much of wealth, power and influence without thinking of the social or environmental consequences. Can we move towards another kind of self-interest where compassion, ethics and spiritual insight become an alternative set of markers to the naked material self-interest we witness today? Obviously such an approach has to be anchored in social movements and other civil society initiatives.

Towards Responsible Governance

Governance has been defined in the Alliance for a Responsible Plural and United World as ‘the regulatory system for that complex life form we call human society. It manages a society’s internal functions as well as its relationship with the outside world and thus guarantees its stability and adaptability.’

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states: Governance is the exercise of economic, political, and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises mechanisms, processes, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their legal obligations, and mediate their differences. The UNDP understanding is closer to a grass-roots peoples perspective although it remains silent on the role of corporate and private business sectors.

Thus, we could say that governance is the ability of the state to orient itself to the goals of social justice and equity and then deliver or create the conditions where the basic necessities are available to the poor.

There are possibly two aspects to a meaningful governance processes. Put simply, this has to do with democratic decentralisation on the one hand and sustainable development on the other. Unfortunately, these two dimensions are often conceived and implemented separately without the necessary integration. To be effective they should go hand in hand from the very beginning.

We are now clear that the conventional development efforts that sought to eradicate poverty and inequality have failed. Even where the goals of a programme have been laudable, they have been derailed by the lack of political will and a lukewarm bureaucracy. The public institutions in India are not known for accountability and transparency. This is, obviously, not merely a management problem. Perhaps the best way to remedy the situation is to create a public that will demand both participation and accountability from the legislature and the bureaucracy. As part of this effort there is also the need to evolve similar processes in the functioning of companies and markets.

Governance and the poor: inclusive perspectives

In India the poor and the marginalized are dalits (former untouchable castes), Adivasis (tribals), women, poor minorities and other urban and rural sectors like ‘unskilled’ coolie and landless agricultural workers. These sections do not have political power or sufficient institutional access for loans, education and health. Their situation is better wherever they are organised into social movements or associations. It is clear that the poor and the marginalized will never have power given to them. They have to empower themselves through their own efforts. Other wise, they will be permanent recipients of charity. Central to any governance process is the ability to deal with power structures and develop the possibility to participate in decision making processes. In this connection it is therefore appropriate to briefly look at those ideologies and methodologies that empower the poor to see what role they can play in the 21st century.

In the Indian context Gandhi and Marx were important ideological markers in guiding social action. Later Paulo Freire’s method of conscientisation became popular. And still

later came PRA (participatory rural appraisal). Any meaningful approach for the early decades of the 21st century must draw what is positive from all these approaches and construct new inclusive paradigms that can strengthen governance in relationship to the poor. None of the above methods need be seen as mutually exclusive. Only vanguardist and sectarian individuals will see social transformation as needing a 'correct line' deriving from a closed and undemocratic system of thought. Doubt, self-criticism and a dialogical way of enhancing social praxis are intrinsic to the new inclusive approaches we need to put together.

Keeping the above vision in mind we hope to take up crucial issues and initiate/strengthen a process of problem solving using neo-Gandhian methods of advocacy, mediation, communication and networking. We are already involved in some of the issues that are listed as part of this programme.