Living on the edge

Working with marginalised communities in India
Every life deserves a certain amount of dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it

Dictionary definition of marginalisation: ‘The process whereby something or someone is pushed to the edge of a group and accorded lesser importance. This is predominantly a social phenomenon by which a minority or sub-group is excluded and their needs or desires ignored’.

The Encyclopaedia of Public Health definition: ‘To be marginalised is to be placed in the margins and thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the centre’.

**Introduction**

Marginalisation has been defined as a complex process of relegating specific groups of people to the lower or outer edge of society. It is a phenomenon that affects millions of people throughout India. People who live on the margins of society have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them. This results in their inability to contribute to wider society. A vicious circle is set up whereby their lack of positive and supportive relationships means that they are prevented from participating in local life, which in turn leads to further isolation. This has a tremendous impact on the development of those deemed to be the most vulnerable in society. The objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy a productive, healthy and creative life. It is a complex problem and through the delivery of our work, we are addressing the multiple factors that contribute to communities being marginalised within the regions we operate.

**Poverty trap**

We find that those who live on the margins of society, often live without the fundamental freedoms of action and choice that many others take for granted. They lack adequate food, shelter, education, healthcare access and other social and political opportunities that prevents them from leading a fulfilling life of their choosing. Due to their isolation, they also face extreme vulnerability to ill health, economic dislocation and natural disasters.

This in turn pushes the community to poverty, misery, low wage, discrimination and livelihood insecurity. Furthermore, their upward social mobility is extremely limited. Politically this process of relegation denies people equal access to the formal power structure and participation in the decision making processes leading to their subordination to and dependence on the economically and politically dominant groups in society.

“Every life deserves a certain amount of dignity, no matter how poor or damaged the shell that carries it”

Rick Bragg
Marginalisation

Through our work, we find that there are certain characteristics that marginalised groups possess. In the main they;

• suffer from discrimination and subordination
• live on the edge of cities, towns and villages
• have physical and/or cultural traits that set them apart and which are disapproved of, by a dominant group
• share a sense of collective identity and common burdens
• have shared social rules about who belongs and who does not
• have a tendency to marry within the group
Thus, marginalisation is a complex as well as shifting phenomenon linked to social status.

Understanding poverty

Ultimately, poverty has many different faces, each one as unique as the next, each with strengths and weaknesses that can catalyse or inhibit an individual’s journey out of their wretched existence.

Getting used to selling your dignity for a rupee’s work is one thing and living on the edge of precariousness another. But witnessing the rest of the population reaping the benefits of formidable growth is probably the most dangerous and unstable feature of poverty in India today.

The caste system

Caste based marginalisation is one of the most serious human rights issues in the world today, adversely affecting more than 260 million people in India alone. Caste based discrimination entails social and economic exclusion, segregation in housing, denial and restrictions of access to public and private services, employment and enforcement of certain types of jobs on the most stigmatised members of society, resulting in a system of modern day slavery or bonded labour. However, in recent years due to affirmative action and legal protection, the intensity of caste based discrimination is reducing.

The caste system in India is a strict hierarchical social system based on underlying notions of purity and pollution. Brahmins are on the top of the hierarchy and Shudras or Dalits constitute the bottom of the hierarchy. The marginalisation of Dalits influences all spheres of their life, violating basic human rights such as civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. A major proportion of the lower castes and Dalits are still dependent on others for their livelihood. The term ‘Dalits’ also suggests a group who are in a state of oppression, social disability and who are helpless and poor. They are mainly landless with little control over resources such as land and water.
Dalits (untouchables)

Literacy rates among Dalits are very low. They have meagre purchasing power and have poor housing conditions as well as minimum access to resources and entitlements. Structural discrimination against these groups takes place in the form of physical, psychological, emotional and cultural abuse which receives legitimacy from various social structures and indeed the wider social system. Physical segregation of their settlements is common in towns and villages forcing them to live in the most unhygienic and inhabitable conditions, predominantly on the margins of society.

All these factors affect their health status, access to healthcare and quality of life. There are high rates of malnutrition reported amongst Dalits, resulting in mortality, morbidity and anaemia. Access to and utilisation of healthcare among these communities is influenced by their socio-economic status within society. They belong to the poorest strata of society and have severe health problems.

Our approach

Our approach is to understand the ‘whole’ person, building relationships that respond to locally defined problems with culturally sustainable solutions. We are helping some of the most stigmatised members of Indian society develop their capacity to meet basic needs and create solutions to poverty and injustice. For us, the focus is not on being the voice of the poor; rather it is on enabling them to speak for themselves.

To achieve this we continue to venture where others remain reluctant to go, working with our Partners to develop sustainable solutions rather than illusory quick-fixes and exploring the potential to move not just money but ‘minds and policies’.

We are doing this by instilling and nurturing the development of vital skills for self-reliance through delivering a variety of support programs. Promoting health education (including information and assistance accessing local healthcare facilities) micro finance (in the format of self-help groups, micro enterprise projects and financial literacy). Arts (such as craft development) children’s activities (promoting creativity and engagement) general education, rights and civic responsibilities and delivering a range

The difference we continue to make

In order to facilitate sustainable change with those that live on the margins, we at the Foundation are building strong relationships, proving that we are here to assist them, not to decide for or use them, as they are often accustomed to. They have a better understanding of their needs than we do and it is imperative that they have ownership in the development process and the decisions that affect them, thus community participation is at the heart of what we do.

We find that each person has different starting points, based on the circumstances of their life stories. In working with the most marginalised, we have learned that we need to ‘listen’ to them to understand how to customise our program of support to suit their individual needs. In doing so, we are able to do such things as mediate in community disputes, provide comprehensive capacity building, employment support and empowerment training, or suggest lifestyle changes to promote better hygiene in and around the household. These changes helps them realign their paths out of extreme poverty, with many realising their potential to “graduate” to a better quality of life.
The role of civil society

Since the late 1970s, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played an increasingly prominent role within civil society, widely praised for their strengths as innovative and grassroots driven organisations with the desire and capacity to fill the gaps left by the failure of States across India in meeting the needs of their poorest citizens.

Given the non-political arena in which they operate, NGOs have had little participation or impact in tackling the more structurally entrenched causes and manifestations of poverty, such as social and political exclusion. NGOs are recognised as only one, albeit important, actor in civil society. Success in this sphere will require a shift away from their role as service providers to that of facilitators and supporters of broader civil society organisations through which the poor themselves, can engage in dialogue and negotiations to enhance their collective assets and capabilities.

Therefore, those that live on the margins are often exposed to poor treatment by institutions of the state rendering them powerless to influence key decisions affecting their lives. As a consequence of the economic, political and cultural deprivation, a vast chunk of this population has emerged to be socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent. Devoid of the basic necessities of life they are relegated to live on the periphery of towns and villages.
So where do these communities stand today?

Though there has been some improvement in certain spheres and despite some positive changes, the standard of living for marginalised communities has not improved.

The practice of untouchability and the large number of atrocities inflicted on Dalits continue even today mainly because of hidden prejudices and neglect on the part of officials responsible for the implementation of Special Legislations; i.e. the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCRA) and the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA).

The Indian Government needs to make a long overdue and meaningful intervention in this regard so as to mitigate the sufferings of Dalits due to practice of untouchability and atrocities inflicted upon them. In addition, they should also treat this matter on a priority basis to ensure that officials and civil society at large are sensitised on this crucial issue.

Human rights

Generating meaningful and effective participation of the most vulnerable is necessary to both win and sustain positive change over time. This is hard, resource intensive work and requires a myriad of innovative organising and developmental approaches. Working with them to devise strategies to use human rights tools in the service of their issues, both creates new possibilities for change and inspires hope.

This is not only the right thing to do; it is the effective thing to do. Within these daily experiences of humiliation, you will find simple, low cost solutions that could result in the fulfilment of a right previously denied.

This work requires a different staff structure from that of traditional human rights organisations. It needs Community Workers capable of inspiring, skilling and mentoring people; policy workers who focus on ‘demystifying’ human rights principles, so they can be grasped and used by those directly impacted; and a management system which allows strategic and operational priorities to emerge from the bottom up, not the top down.

We believe that a human rights-based approach must take power relationships into account. This includes the inter-relationships between the three spheres; of those marginalised, the organisation(s) working with them, and the State. Time must be given at all stages of human rights work to take into account the power that a State has over the most vulnerable and work out what human rights tools they can employ to build their power.

Human rights will not be seen as relevant if they are not producing change in small spaces. When human rights are used to shine a light on the daily lives of people experiencing humiliation, as is happening in many places throughout India, they are rightly valued as tools for the assertion of human dignity. It is ironic that while human rights are widely accepted as ‘universal’ and particularly concerned with those most marginalised in society, they rarely seem relevant to those very people.

What we are doing

With our partners, we are developing approaches to better understand resilience amongst those deemed most vulnerable in society. A critical component of this work is the translation of our findings into programs and policies where appropriate.

Our findings on resilience is particularly well suited as its about identifying the strengths of individuals and communities in order to replicate what is working in the lives of those who cope successfully and seeing how they can help others who are equally vulnerable, in order to change the odds stacked against them.

For us, it’s not the investments that determine how any great organisation is judged, but the outcomes of those investments. Those outcomes are guided by our ability to innovate, influence and in the end, generate impact. To this end, we continue with our work providing hope and inspiration to thousands living on the margins of society, improving their standing and helping them to gain acceptance back into wider society.
Concluding thoughts

Some state that human rights workers and organisations have become divorced from the people who need those rights the most. This is an understandable conclusion but one which fails to examine many instances where human rights concepts, institutions and organisations have been appropriately placed at the service of those in most need. There is important learning within these examples, which those working for change must examine.

We suggest that human rights organisations, should adopt a new approach to produce positive change for and stay relevant to those who need advocacy the most. Knowing the terminology of rights and citing them to those in power is not sufficient to produce positive change. Rather we suggest, that new strategies and tactics are required.

There are huge segments of the population that are not included in the official poverty count, namely the Dalits, women and minority ethnic tribes, all groups living on the margins of society and it’s more convenient for politicians to announce massive reductions in poverty by simply not including them in a census. It is easier to pretend they do not exist at all. However, it is obviously difficult to change the way an entire country and its society functions.

Right now, rather than trying to radically alter local customs and disrupt wider social dynamics in India, policies should find a way to take them into account. Otherwise, by allowing these groups to be systematically excluded, authorities risk massive social disorder and further tensions.

At the very least, recognising the issue will help to address it by creating a debate and gathering solutions from across the board. How else would you tackle an issue if it doesn’t officially exist?

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