

**THE ECONOMICS OF MARGINALIZATION**

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***Abstract***

*Over the past 3-4 decades, not only has the number of citizens comprising the Fourth World been steadily on the rise, but it has also started including more and more communities hitherto not thought to be at risk of being counted in its ambit. Besides Dalits, women, tribals, etc., there is now a new kind of fourth world which hinges on the fact that economic frailty has resulted in a loss of voice for many who were decidedly at least third world before the advent of Economic Imperialism unleashed by the juggernaut of Globalization. Mark Tully, the voice of BBC in India, has written extensively about marginalized sections in this country, and has consistently been warning against the pitfalls of economic hegemony. Besides loss of voice, he is deeply concerned about the loss of identity and the resultant ignominy among those marginalized by Economics. This paper is an attempt to bring out Tully's thoughts on Economic Imperialism and its psycho-social consequences, as evident in three of his books – No Full Stops in India, India in Slow Motion and India's Unending Journey.*

**Keywords:** *Marginalization, Economic Imperialism, Globalization, loss of identity, loss of voice, moral economics*

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### **Introduction**

Over the past 3-4 decades, not only has the number of citizens comprising the Fourth World been steadily on the rise, but it has also started including more and more communities hitherto not thought to be at risk of being counted in its ambit. Besides Dalits, women, tribals, etc., there is now a new kind of fourth world which hinges on the fact that economic frailty has resulted in a loss of voice for many who were decidedly at least third world before the advent of Economic Imperialism unleashed by the juggernaut of Globalization. Mark Tully, the voice of BBC in India, has written extensively about marginalized sections in this country, and has consistently been warning against the pitfalls of economic hegemony. Besides loss of voice, he is deeply concerned about the loss of identity and the resultant ignominy among those marginalized by Economics. This paper is an attempt to bring out Tully's thoughts on Economic Imperialism and its psycho-social consequences, as evident in three of his books – No Full Stops in India, India in Slow Motion and India's Unending Journey.

Picking up examples from three diverse occupations (farming, stone carving and shop-keeping) and the tribal way of life, Tully explains how a globalized economy has ended up hurting those sections of society which were earlier able to make a living, even if barely. He recognizes the fact that economic reforms have now become a necessity; yet, if they are aimed at pushing a vast population beyond the fringes of economic security, it is questionable if they are indeed reforms or just a means for rewriting power equations. It is his experience that 'private wealth leads to public squalor' (Galbraith 276). Also, when this changed world order forces people to look for alternative sources of livelihood, it strips people of their source of pride in their trade, thus storming the last bastion of their dignity.

### ***The Marginalized Farmer***

On a trip to Karnataka, a state increasingly known for the dubious distinction of having an alarmingly high suicide rate among farmers, Tully found the farmers marginalized by the very government which should logically have taken steps to prevent such an extremity to occur. Tully takes up the suicide case of one NingappaBasappaHiregannavar, a farmer who had to take the extreme step in the prime of his life at the age of thirty five. Having inherited part of the family's debt along with his brothers upon their father's death, Ningappa sank deeper and deeper into debt over the years. Ningappa then went ahead and confirmed what an unknown British author had written: The Indian farmer is born in debt, lives in debt and dies in debt. Ningappa hanged himself with his cotton lungi.

India, an agrarian culture, has typically had to deal with the uncertainty that comes with a farming sector completely relying on Nature for subsistence. Yet the farmer of yesteryears, though poor, was able to make both ends meet. What has changed now is governmental policy that forces market prices down and makes farming an unviable business. In fact, Tully is of the opinion that on a policy level, when the government is not actively thwarting initiative in agriculture, it is at least indifferent to the point of callousness. Farmers' activist Sharad Joshi often says that the government need not do anything to bring prosperity to the farmer – it would suffice for it to stop its active meddling to ensure the agriculturist's penury. The innumerable shackles put on agriculture has skewed market forces against the farmer and are making him run faster and faster just to stay where he is. Those who get tired of keeping up are the ones who ultimately have to call it quits.

For a farmer, Tully was told, living in debt is not particularly disgraceful. The real disgrace lay in losing his holdings, however small they may be. The tiny patch of land, when owned, is a source of a sense of belonging for the farmer, thus making him hang on to it even when he is forced to work on other, bigger farms as a labourer just to be able to eat, while still tilling his own bit. When confronted with confiscation, the farmer does not just lose his land; he loses face as well. The social stigma attached to having lost one's roots is rather fierce and can leave a person with nowhere to go – literally. Being a landholder is not just economics; it has a deeply entrenched social slant as well.

What the Indian farmer is facing right now is not just a financial crunch but an identity crisis as well. Family jewelry has always been a point of honour for Indians and having to pawn or sell it comes with a lot of emotional baggage. Jewelry is only pawned or sold in extreme conditions as a last resort, but farmers routinely have to let go of this mark of honour for their survival. So common had it become to rely on the family gold that in Surdhenapura, where Tully went, that to have pawned family jewels seemed to be almost a badge of honour.

Tully wonders what the point of farming was if it was only going to be a loss. He found two answers to his query. One, there was nowhere else to go. There just weren't any opportunities, besides labouring. But second, and perhaps the real reason the farmer persists, is what Tully was told by a farmer who was himself in deep debt and had no hopes of repaying it with only 2.3 acres of farmland to his name. He said that for the farmer it was not just the money that counted. Owning land was a matter of prestige and it would be a disgrace if a farmer did not till it. By forcing farming to conform to economic policies loaded against the profession, the system results in the sons of the soil having to face not just bankruptcy, but also social ignominy.

### **The Marginalized Small Businessman**

Globalization does promise a flood of new jobs, but it is conveniently silent on the issue of those lost in the process. Small businesses are the backbone of India's market. But by bringing in retail chains to do their job, these will be the first to be edged out. While retail undertakes to give better returns to the farmer and create new jobs for urban youth, it does nothing for those

who lose their identity when they lose their family business. In an eerie echo of the loss of face for farmers upon losing their land, small-time businessmen face an equally disturbing prospect when their roadside convenience store or greengrocery is threatened by closure. Drawing from personal experience, Tully recounts how his fishmonger fillets fish without losing a millimeter of the flesh; his butcher cuts all his meat to order before his customers' eyes, and his grocer offers free credit and home delivery, no matter how small the purchase. These people pride themselves on their skill and personal relations. But if the butcher, the grocer and the fishmonger are put out of business by firms such as Tesco and Walmart – retail chains that have already decimated small shopkeepers in their country of origin – these shopkeepers will lose not only their jobs but their source of self-respect. And that, says Tully, really can't be replaced by stacking shelves in a supermarket or swiping bar-codes at a till.

Another factor to be considered is the specific requirement of supermarket chains for young English speaking staff. This is at best a niche. To contend that loss of livelihood in one sector can be smoothly compensated in another is grossly fallacious. The middle-aged corner store owner who had to shut shop because a new retail outlet edged him out would certainly be a misfit in it as a salesman. Neither would his experience at managing his store count as he would have to grapple with computerized systems which may be beyond him. If he is at all accommodated in the new supermarket, he would be a face among hundreds – not his own master any more, and thus a man who has had to compromise on his dignity.

### **The Marginalized Artisan**

Tully takes up the unlikely example of the small town of Mahabalipuram to demonstrate that tourism, one of the supposed boosters to the economy, does not only fail to bring in much foreign exchange, but has actually become one of the new colonizers of India. Indian tourism says Tully, with the exception of Agra and Goa, attracts more backpackers than any real money spenders. Thus, the argument that tourism is good for the economy falls flat on its face. In any case, whatever benefits tourism lends the economy; they are soon upset by relentless commercialization.

As soon as the once sleepy, seaside town of Mahabalipuram saw some success as a tourist spot specializing in stone carving, tourism threatened to take over the place. Seeing its potential, the government banned all further construction in the town so that it could be developed for tourism. This inevitably resulted in an artificial inflation in land prices since the demand for land exceeded the supply. Stone craftsmen living on minimum wages did not have the wherewithal to own a home in the now-expensive Mahabalipuram. Besides, without permission to build anew, existing structures fetched more prices than they would normally, thus proving to be an incentive for locals to sell. In either case, as an angry local businessman put it, the government wanted to drive the local people out so that tourists could move in. He was not against development, but he also did not see why development should be controlled by planners who lived in genteel suburbs and knew nothing of the forces that drove rural society. Tully found himself in agreement with the businessman. Tourism was taking its toll on locals

rather than helping them build a more robust economy based on the reason the industry became successful in the first place.

### **A Marginalized People**

That western models of development do not necessarily agree with the needs of India has been stressed time and again by Tully. One more instance, in which development has failed to see eye to eye with those it seeks to benefit, is elaborated upon in his *No Full Stops in India*. Tully had occasion to visit Patangarh, a remote tribal village in the Narmada Valley in Madhya Pradesh, where he was able to observe tribal life at close quarters. Setting out from Bhopal, it took them two full days to reach the village – a journey that should not have taken over a day even on passably good roads. After innumerable ditches and potholes had wearied down their otherwise hardy Ambassador car (clearly, accessible roads were not part of the government's developmental agenda for tribals), Tully and a local by the name of Jangarh who had made it big in the city as an artist, reached Patangarh.

There is a stream of thought (typically liberal) which blames Sanskritization for the corruption of pristine tribal life, but Tully does not find himself in agreement with this view. Sanskritization in fact, is the least of the tribals' problems, he feels. Tully observes that it is not religion but government sanctioned and government approved materialism that is undermining the tribals' way of life. The natural habitat of tribals has been systematically usurped. The villagers of Patangarh, whose life and culture depend entirely on forests, now had to walk six miles to collect wood. On his way to Patangarh, Tully observed that what was once a dense forest is now reduced to rolling green hills dotted with clumps of trees here and there. He witnessed women and children carrying twigs and dried grass on their heads, reminding him how dependant tribals still were on the fast-dwindling forests and common land. Their way of life was not supported by massive development projects that threatened to destroy jungles completely.

While taking away their land and livelihood, tribals were given no chance to commercially benefit from their resources. Tully avers that arbitrary governmental controls prevent tribals from realizing their economic potential. Citing the example of *mahua*, the local tiple, Tully points out that it was just as good as many country-made liquors in India. It flowed in abundance in Patangarh, as it does in all tribal belts of central India. The commercial distillation and sale of this liquor is officially banned, meaning that while the local *Feni* of Goa can rake in money, the *mahua* which could have been a ticket to a better living for the tribals is prohibited from doing so. Such capricious laws are proof that those assigned the responsibility of the development of tribals rarely bother to build a tribal economy around what is already available, and choose the easier option of using the same yardstick for all kinds of people, regions and circumstances.

The lesson Tully draws from Patangarh is that when thinking about tribal welfare, it would be more intelligent to think of ways that would keep intact the values these communities live by and then work development around it. Tully is aware that tribals do not enjoy the

benefits of health care, sanitation, clean drinking water, education and other basic amenities, and presses for the provision of these to the original inhabitants of the forests. But the provision of amenities does not necessarily have to be fallout of modernization, he feels. There have to be better ways of doing good while preserving the beautiful tribal civilization. Development schemes that steamroll all differences to level them into one monotonous landscape cannot do justice to diversity.

Tully found that the tribals of Patangarh were a highly cultured people with their own religion, rituals, language, art, dance forms, poetry, knowledge, and customs suited to life in the forests. But though culturally rich, they are an economically poor people, and certainly, a measure of material security would not hurt them. However, when attempts are made to bring prosperity to the forests by destroying them and the culture that has evolved with their original inhabitants, Tully questions the wisdom of such endeavours. It would be much better, says Tully, if use is made of the already existing skills of the tribals to strengthen their economic standing.

The damning conclusion that safeguards for tribals in the constitution have not really helped anybody comes from the government machinery itself. In the twenty-ninth report of the Review Committee for Tribal Welfare, the Commissioner appointed by the government describes those safeguards as 'more or less meaningless'. The Commissioner called attention to the fact that the tribal people and wildlife have co-existed reasonably well for years and that wildlife has not been destroyed by the bow and arrow. If today the tribal is caught in a time-warp, the blame must rest on growing inequality following their loss of traditional occupation and habitat brought about by that outsider.

Tully would like to know if exercises undertaken in the name of tribal welfare can really be called development or progress if the government cannot give more than it takes away. The answer to this question will be a correct pointer to present circumstances, says Tully. As of today, Tully finds pervasive evidence of 'development' destroying tribal culture, identity and pride, and indeed, destroying their livelihood.

## **Conclusion**

Tully is deeply concerned that the sweeping changes in the market are hurting the most vulnerable sections of society and that merciless steamrolling of these sections goes against the basic principles of humanity. While appreciating the fact that it is no longer possible to contain the economy within geographical boundaries, he advocates Moral Economics (Tony Atkinson 157), which is an inclusive form of economic planning that takes economics beyond just profit maximization and includes values like empathy and compassion.

Detractors argue that making some people better off without making anyone worse off is not objectionable (Mankiw 22). However, Nobel Laureates like Amartya Sen (87) and Mohammad Yunus (138) rubbish the theory that a handful people can control sufficient wealth

for it to constitute a real percentage of the entire world's wealth and yet ensure equitable distribution. The real issue is that lobbies that have a stake in keeping millions under the poverty line have convinced successive governments that reforms have to be at the cost of the underprivileged or they are not at all. Of course, what complicates the issue further is that often the government is synonymous with those with a stake in poverty of the voiceless millions. Moral economics, on the other hand, makes it possible to have a society that is not only fair and just, but is also accommodating of diversity, thus creating a rich fabric of all hues and textures. Tully cites Rajiv Kumar, the Director of a think tank called Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations to say that moral economics doesn't necessarily mean doing away with market economics, but it does mean a guided market. After all, the whole point of having a government, elected or otherwise, is to have a system that works towards maximizing the wellbeing of society. If that end is not being served, it is the law of the jungle that is in operation.

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