

ICG Lecture Series on Good Governance
Lecture cum Interactive Session on
'Reclaiming the Idea of Government for the Poor'

by **Harsh Mander**

Harsh Mander, social worker and writer, works with survivors of mass violence, hunger, homeless persons and street children. He is Director, Centre for Equity Studies and Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court of India in the Right to Food case. He is the founder of the campaigns Aman Biradari, for secularism, peace and justice; Nyayagrah, for legal justice and reconciliation for the survivors of communal violence; Dil Se, for street children, and 'Hausla' for urban homeless people. He worked formerly in the Indian Administrative Service in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh for almost two decades.

Chair: **Adv. Satish Sonak**, Lawyer & Social Activist

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Brief Report

The choice of the new government will determine the future of human dignity: Harsh Mander

"The country is in the midst of an important election, the choices of the people will be significant in shaping the future and the society as a whole" said Harsh Mander, social worker and writer while he delivered his lecture on "Reclaiming The Idea of Government for The Poor" as part of The Good Governance Lecture Series at The International Centre Goa, Dona Paula on Tuesday evening.

The ex-civil servant and former member of the National Advisory Council, spoke to an engrossed audience describing how governments have been exploiting resources to favour industrialists, how we have become so indifferent to poverty and whether we truly understand the meaning of what is the idea of a good government.

The lecture was hosted by the Director Ms. Nandini Sahai who introduced the speaker and thanked him for accepting the invitation, mentioning that she was glad to finally have him after making earnest efforts to get him to speak at ICG in the past. Adv. Satish Sonak, who chaired the session described him as a fighter for human rights and reminisces listening to him at the Festival of Ideas in Panaji few years earlier.

Mander said that it is a pleasure and privilege to be in Goa and share his ideas, although they may be controversial, it is what he believes. He began by quoting Gandhi's dreams and aspirations for the idea of an India that "wipes the tear from the eyes of the poorest". Illustrating his experiences when he began his Civil Service in 1980, he says the theory then of a good government was for the weak and the oppressed, but it did not live up to the standard. From the mid-80's governments facilitated development for economic growth benefitting only the rich and influential and not the poor. This extraordinary transformation which still continues today has further pushed the poor to the margins of society.

He went on to question Narendra Modi's claims of an "investment and development friendly government" in Gujarat. Further questioning the ease at which the Tata's got land in that state. It was only when an RTI application revealed that the investment made by the Tata's was three times the amount given by loan at a negligible 0.1% interest for 20 years. Besides land and other resources were provided at an unprecedented level. "This means that half the cost of the Tata Nano is on public subsidy" he says.

He describes that his best months in service were in Raigad, Chattisgarh. Now, 20 years later the best gold reserves in land and forest are given by the government to industrialists to facilitate expansion in mining and power plants. This has led to tribals being dispossessed of their land and thus led to rise in Maoists in this part of the country, which is ironically the richest in mineral resources.

He again asks whether this is friendly investment or extraordinary crony-capitalism further deepening the dilemma of ideas of public welfare.

"India is extraordinary as everything you say about it, the opposite is always true", he goes on to explain that you will always see the richest and the poorest side by side. Forbes always features two Indians in its Top 10 Richest List, yet every third child in India is malnourished or homeless. India has 80 million tonnes of resources, growing food that is enough for everyone, but the paradox is that children still go to sleep hungry. The enigma is that some countries in the Sub Sahara and even Bangladesh are far better than India.

Mander urges that we make the government legally and morally responsible. He says that the greatest economic loss is the malnourished productive population due to the low education and healthcare standards. When the Food Bill was passed the rupee fell dramatically, prompting some to say that the Food Bill famishes the rupee. He says corruption is a complex issue due to which the public distribution system does not work.

In his book “ Inequality and Indifference” Ideas of a new India , he laments, with reference to a study, that two million people die every year in India due to avoidable circumstances, which means that at this rate year after year it will translate to holocaust proportions.

He concluded by asking whether we have become so indifferent thereby accepting the normalization of poverty or can we give the poor their dignity by holding the government responsible not for industry but for, as Gandhi said “the last tear from the eye”.

The lecture received a warm response with some eminent citizens in the audience. An interactive session with active participation followed, after which the speaker was presented a memento at the hands of Dr. M. Modassir.

Galileo Fernandes