

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Looking Back... And Ahead

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*Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Washington, DC, December 6, 1997*

By Pramila Jayapal

It's both wonderful and sad for me to be here today — wonderful in that I have a chance to share some of my incredible two years in India with you, and sad in that it's a realization that my fellowship really, truly has come to an end. I've tried to stretch it out as much as I can, taking nine months to leave for India, and then waiting six months after returning to give this "final" presentation. I suppose I have to accept that it's time to move onto that list of "old" fellows.

I've been given half an hour to talk to you today, and given everything that I saw in the past two years, I feel like I'm trying to stuff an elephant into a rickshaw! I can't possibly cover everything I want to, so I'll just share with you a few issues that I found particularly interesting in this changing modern India.

India is truly a society in transition right now. As you probably know, President Kocheeril Narayanan just dissolved the Parliament and called for mid-term elections in March. This is the third coalition government that has collapsed in less than two years, and it presents an enormous challenge for the country. Economically, the process of economic liberalization started in 1991 remains controversial; and socially, Indians are battling, in many different ways, the effects of tradition colliding with the modern world. The three faces of India's transition are not easily separated. The politicians who deny their constituents the right to basic education, for example, propel the poor — who are most likely to be left out of a modern, liberal economy — further into the abyss of unemployment and poverty. Where spirituality and community used to provide a base for people that carried them through difficult times, these values are now being spurned, leaving many Indians without an anchor.

I'll start by talking a little about economic liberalization. There has been plenty written about liberalization from the macro-economic policy standpoint, but I want to say a few words about the impact of liberalization on societal development and the daily lives and views of the masses.

What struck me the most in returning to an India that has joined in today's global economy was the expansion of the middle class. By this, I don't mean just the numbers of people who "fit" into the middle-class category because of income, but also the number of people who are striving to be middle-class and have adopted middle-class values, which often include embracing consumer products or economic and social mobility, for example. In many ways, liberalization has helped promote a set of values that are very different from traditional Indian values. Last year's controversies over Kentucky Fried Chicken and Coca-Cola are not just about chicken and soft drinks, but about what they symbolize of a changing culture — the "Coca-Cola culture," as social scientist Ashish Nandy calls it. The Coca-Cola culture, in Nandy's words, is "the homogenization of the diverse Indian

people who have grown mad with consumption.”

This consumption frenzy is clearest in large cities like Delhi and Bombay, where people shell out thousands of dollars for expensive foreign cars (which, by the way, don't handle the Indian roads nearly as well as the old Indian Ambassadors) and luxury hotel-club memberships. Holidays like Deevali — traditionally a more religious holiday — have turned into massive advertising and promotion campaigns, commercialized along the same, if lesser, lines as Christmas in America. But the consumption craze is also visible in smaller cities and even in villages. I felt like I actually saw, before my very eyes, many small examples of the transition taking place. When I arrived in India, there was essentially one “internationally-branded” shampoo — Sunsilk, priced quite high at about \$1 for a small bottle. Almost overnight, a dozen international brand shampoos — from Revlon to Estee Lauder — appeared, priced anywhere between \$2 - \$3. A 5-pack of Gillette razors costs \$6 while a can of Kraft parmesan cheese costs \$5. To put this in perspective, the poverty line is fixed at \$7.50 per month in urban areas and \$6.50 per month in rural areas.

The proliferation of these high-priced consumer products is, to me, a telling indication that the agenda of liberalization will never be focused on the economic or social priorities of the common person. Multinationals are going to continue to invest in high-profit-margin ventures like soft-drinks or better cars for an elite market, rather than safer drinking water or better buses. In fact, liberalization is poised much more to marginalize the 400 million people living below the poverty line than to include them. The government needs to pay equal or more attention to the social and economic upliftment of India's 400 million poor people as it pays to liberalization — but unfortunately, that's just not the case today.

The issue to me is not whether liberalization is necessary, but rather whether it is sufficient in addressing India's societal development issues. Certainly, liberalization has provided a stage for a necessary new dialogue between the West and India; it has provided job opportunities for some Indians — albeit mostly in the elite and middle classes; and it has allowed Indians to gain access to new ways of thinking about issues, values, opportunities. But by and large, these benefits don't accrue to the 80-85 percent of India's population that lives below or not far above the poverty line. I have often wondered whether even the middle class benefits from changes that provide a glimpse of a dream that may, in the end, turn into a nightmare that strips them of their traditions and support structures. Time and time again, I saw people's ideas about what their life should look like change, often as a result of TV, advertising or other influences, without an ensuing change in their circumstances. In the changing of one and the stagnation — sometimes even deterioration — of the other, there is a huge gap, a gap that causes, in its best times, hope and determination to strive for a better life, and in its worst times, sadness, discontent and an ero-

sion of self-confidence. A man in a city slum may now think more about different styles of life, perhaps be transported there by watching the “The Bold and the Beautiful” on TV or buying soft drinks that cost ten times more than his cup of tea would, but he's still working for minimal wages and living in a shack. In cities, people endure incredible suffering in order to turn their lives into some vague shadow of what they might have seen on television, or spend enormous sums of money on consumer items that they never would have perceived they “needed” just a few years ago. In villages, the young men (in particular) are bored with life. The bright lights of the city seem exciting; the stability of their families more like chains than support structures. People describe themselves as poor now because they have been told they are. The word has become equated only with economic poverty, nothing else.

There was a hope in the early years of liberalization that somehow opening up the economy to multinationals, privatizing important enterprises and reducing the bureaucracy of doing business in India would help bring in jobs and raise living standards for the masses — the Indian equivalent of the famous “trickle-down” theory. In some ways, disillusionment with the government (particularly among the elite or middle classes) led to a complete faith in liberalization. But it's a mistake to think that liberalization is the ultimate panacea for India's problems. Necessary in some areas, yes, but a substitute for government action on important societal issues, no. For example, the liberalization-reform agenda makes no mention of education or human-resources development, in spite of the fact that globalization requires competitive levels of education and skill formation. Some people will get higher-paying jobs, but remember that 40 percent of Indians are illiterate. These people do not benefit from liberalization; their needs are still the ones that the government *must* focus on if India, as a country, is to improve. The final proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say. Recent statistics, almost seven years after the first liberalization reforms were undertaken, show that since the mid 1980s, the percentage of people living under the poverty line has increased, not decreased, in real terms.

The second area I want to talk about is the role of non-governmental organizations or NGOs in development. In the early 1980s there were few NGOs in India. Caring for the less-fortunate was, with some notable exceptions, either left to the government or done on a very personal, individual level often closely tied to religious obligations. When NGOs first began emerging in the mid 1980s, they were an extremely powerful force. They provided new energy to a society that struggled with problems that seemed only to get bigger. NGOs offered hope that enormous national problems could be tackled by breaking them down into local problems with local solutions.

Then came the early 1990s, when governments and international donors suddenly latched on to the NGO movement and declared their support for it. For interna-

tional donors, NGOs were a way to circumvent government corruption and bureaucracy, and also a way to restore their own flailing reputations by supporting something that was more of a "people's movement." For governments, NGOs were either helping arms or, from a more cynical perspective, scapegoats to accomplish work that the government had been unsuccessful at.

In India, money began flowing in from outside and from the government to support NGOs. Today, the Indian government alone provides somewhere between \$60 million and \$70 million per year to NGOs. Add money from foreign agencies, and the amount is probably triple that. Unfortunately, the huge jump in funds available for NGOs and the push by government and donor agencies to distribute money to NGOs led to an enormous rise in the number of "sham" organizations formed merely on paper to collect funds. Interestingly, many NGOs are now headed by retired government officials who have realized that it's a pretty lucrative business to run an NGO.

When I first went to India, I truly believed that NGOs held the promise of an answer to India's poverty. By the end of my two years, I had become very disillusioned by the work I saw done by many NGOs. Many had become "co-opted" by the government, and were essentially extensions of government rather than the independent voices they started out as. It became easy for the government to essentially wash its hands of certain issues by saying that NGOs were now in charge. Even earnest NGOs were given little support from the government, and yet were required to fulfill all the government bureaucratic requirements that ended up robbing them of the very spirit and responsiveness that made them successful in the first place. There was no system to monitor organizations, and only recently has work been done to establish a national database that would track the formation and work of NGOs. As a result of this lack of monitoring, thousands of NGOs formed all over the country, coincidentally in those areas that were getting the most funding. In Bihar, for example, there are 17,000 registered NGOs — and few know what exactly they are doing to reduce poverty in the state.

Unfortunately, many of the large international funding agencies have also indirectly contributed to the corruption of the NGO movement. Many of these agencies don't take the time or trouble to understand the capabilities of the NGO sector in a particular area before pouring money into that sector or area. Caught up by the idea of using NGOs to channel money, these agencies often require the government to direct funds to NGOs. Even if there are no NGOs working in the area, rather than give up the money the government will set up "shell" NGOs that look good on paper but don't actually do anything. I also found that larger agencies had to comply with pre-written guidelines or criteria for a project, whether or not the NGOs — supposedly their local guide — agreed that these were appropriate criteria. Finally, many of the NGOs funded with international money don't have real standards of account-

ability. It is very appealing for NGOs and for those who work for them to get international funding. The conventional wisdom about this is that you can get money without producing many results, you get to work in nice offices, meet with international personalities, possibly go on trips abroad. Best of all, monitoring is from far away, and an endless stream of paperwork requirements can cover up even the most inefficient of programs.

There are several examples of international funds being thrown at problems without an understanding of what the problems are or who is best suited to tackle them. I am going to tell you about a few examples, but I'm doing so warily — partly because I don't want you to take these words to mean that there isn't a role or a need for international funding, especially when this kind of funding is so scarce and becoming scarcer in our current US political climate. International donors can contribute much, both in funding and expertise — but their contributions need to be appropriate for the area, and targeted to real problems and solutions identified by local groups. I hope that the examples I'm going to give you serve, in some small way, a constructive purpose.

I was once called by somebody at the World Bank to go with their women-in-development person (who was, incidentally, actually a water-resources person drafted into the role because there was no-one else to do it) to some villages to visit some newly formed self-help groups that were going to be a significant part of a new water-resources project. The government-partner agency proudly announced that they had met the Bank target of forming some 100 self-help groups over a certain period of time. When we arrived at the village, the women seated in front of us were quiet and subdued, very different from the kinds of women I had met before who start self-help groups and who can't wait to get up and tell you about what they've been able to accomplish. At the end of the meeting, I talked to some of the women, and it turned out that they had no idea what the groups were that they had formed; they had just been told by the government person that if they formed groups, they would get money. It occurred to me that setting such high targets for the formation of self-help groups ran counter to the very idea of a self-help group — formed by the people and in response to their needs.

In another World Bank water project in the Uttar Pradesh hills, the Bank had told their partner NGOs to rank villages that needed the water the most, but according to criteria that the Bank had already determined. One of the criteria was that the village had to be able to put up 10 percent of the project cost. However, the poorest villages that needed the water the most could not come up with this sum. The only villages that could were those that were larger, closer to cities and roads, and not in the greatest need. One of the partner NGOs was an excellent organization that we knew very well. They told us and the Bank that if they agreed to choose these larger and wealthier villages, they would not be fulfilling their objec-

tive of helping the poorest of the poor, but rather would be forwarding an agenda not designed to address the realities of the situation. The NGO resigned from the project very disillusioned; "Who are they really trying to help with these projects — those who can pay or those who really need the help?" they asked us. We did not have a good answer.

Just to ensure that I'm not accused of picking on the World Bank, I'll briefly mention another amusing NGO experience I had with USAID. AID funded the formation of a quasi public-private NGO in Uttar Pradesh to work with family planning. It has been an extremely controversial project — among the NGO community, there is a widespread belief that this USAID-formed organization has a big budget, people want to work for it because it pays well and is connected with high-powered state and foreign officials, but that it has not been particularly effective or innovative in its approach to family planning. I went to visit the NGO to try and see for myself if this was true. I can't say that I was given enough information to make a judgment on the organization's effectiveness, but I will say I was shown many graphs and charts. When I tried to probe and get more specific information about projects and results, the reception got decidedly cooler. I got the distinct impression the NGO was rarely pushed to describe their results or question their approaches beyond their impressive charts. After about an hour of my questioning, someone came in the room, and the director of the organization with whom I had been chatting, said, "This is Pramila Jayapal. She is just leaving." It was probably the cleanest send-off I've ever received!

There are still many NGOs that do address important development issues effectively, appropriately and innovatively. One organization in Lucknow, funded both through UNICEF as well as by domestic funds, is developing a very unique program that pushes bank officials — who are now responsible for dispensing credit to the poor — to actually examine their own beliefs about consumption, spirituality and poverty. Another organization in the Uttar Pradesh hills funded by Save the Children-UK centers its programs on the concept that attitudinal change is essential to any other type of development program. This organization is also developing a very interesting idea of creating a rural-management school that would provide a curriculum that encourages youth to stay in their villages and farm, rather than migrate to cities. Another organization has helped over 50,000 women gain access to credit across India. These and many other NGOs are working with the original combination of rebellion, enthusiasm and intelligence that created important and positive change. Many of them have far more technical, political and social expertise than NGOs that I have seen in other parts of the world. However, the idea that there is a very successful NGO "movement" in India is probably no longer true. Today the outstanding NGOs are more of an exception rather than a rule.

The next issue I want to touch on is that of rural-urban

migration. I remember before I went on my fellowship, Mary Beausoleil, who was an ICWA trustee at the time, wrote me a letter saying that she saw a certain unity behind some of the issues she was most concerned about. I'm going to quote her: "Pushing rural people off the land and forcing them to relocate to cities where they often must endure a squalid existence seems bound up with the laying waste of resources, the decay of cities, and the erosion of rural life. This seems tangential at best to what you're proposing to study in India," she wrote to me, "but I suspect it will underlie some of what you see." In fact, this rural-urban migration was not at all tangential to my time in India. Mary was absolutely right — it not only underlies much of the problem in modern India today, but it does more than that — it actually encapsulates, on many levels, the changes that Indian society is going through. Possibly the most depressed I used to feel was when I went through urban slum areas. In Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, about 40 percent of the city's population lives in slums. There are over 200 registered slums and half that number of unregistered slums. From what I could gather, registered and unregistered just means that some politician has made a pay-back to a slum area by promising to register it for public services in return for vote-gathering. Most of the people in these slums have come from the villages, and are in search of the better life that they have heard so much about. Many of them have stable support structures in the villages that they have left. They live like ants, crowded together in rickety shacks covered with plastic. They have been lured by the promise of something more; a few get this something more — but most never do. Migration from rural areas leaves agricultural land wasted and eventually divided into plots that are too small to profit from, or sold to richer landowners or industrialists who bring in factories. It leaves women and children alone — because usually it is the men who migrate. It breaks up families, which have traditionally provided support on many different levels. And it takes away the anchor of stability that one's village, one's home, has provided.

People come to cities because they have heard of, or even know of, people who have "made it." They come to cities because they want to escape the very restrictive aspects of village India. They come to cities because they have tasted Coca-Cola, figuratively speaking, and want a different life. And, of course, many times they come to cities to achieve social mobility and escape caste. Caste is much more invisible in cities — if you eat at a restaurant, you don't know who is cooking your food. If you get on a crowded bus, it doesn't much matter who sits next to you or who sat on your seat before you. Urban living holds out the promise of social mobility like a golden charm. It's not surprising that villagers coming from a defined and restrictive social hierarchy would be attracted by this promise.

No one cares much about the slums. The government doesn't, the private sector doesn't, individuals don't. One enormous slum area in Lucknow is just in front of the cor-

porate offices of the huge Sahara conglomerate. Sahara contributed lots of money to put in a beautiful fountain at the intersection just 200 feet away from their building; it has a lighted fountain surrounded by flowers, and a big sign that says, "Our Bharat — county of which we are so proud." Just down the street, directly in front of the entrance to their building, I stood with several women from the slum around the single handpump that is supposed to serve the several thousand people in the slum area. They have to undress in public, though they are very discreet about it, in order to take a shower, and fights often break out over the very scarce supply of water.

In contrast to the despair I feel when I go into cities, I feel completely rejuvenated in villages. As I wrote in one of my articles, I am bound to romanticize village life since I don't live there permanently, and can come and go as I please. But there is no question that there is a stability and a connection to family and earth that permeates Indian villages even today. In a way, I suppose I am talking about the Gandhian Utopia that is based on certain traditional values of Indian civilization that are more humane, less materialistic, more egalitarian and less alienating than Western capitalism. Spirituality and the idea of an organic society filled with cooperation in contrast to excessive individualism and competition are essential to the idea of Utopia. But Utopia is not reality. The reality is that in rural India, caste and gender discrimination are also rampant. As the stature of agriculture diminishes and liberalization picks up even more steam, a massive shift from rural to urban seems inevitable.

This shift may be just part of a cyclical pattern. As cities get more crowded and more villagers begin to understand the difficulties of urban living and finding meaningful employment, villages may again begin to draw their residents back. An essential piece of this effort must be to develop appropriate education, education that prepares youth for rural living and gives them pride in an agricultural career. The success of village panchayats (local governance councils) is also critical in helping villages regain their dominance as a stabilizing force in Indian society. There is a long way to go, but if panchayats could really become democratic institutions that are grass-roots, local and powerful in ways that benefit, not rob, the societies of much-needed development, they could help undo some of the rural-urban inequalities that exist in infrastructure, education, employment, and other social issues.

The last factor I'll mention gives me great hope, though again, the results may be a long way away. It is the spiritual renewal that is just beginning to occur in parts of India. Now, I realize I just said that liberalization and TV and a host of other factors are robbing Indians of their spiritual base. However, what is happening almost simultaneously in some parts of India is that people *are* learning from the mistakes of the West and from their own experiences. Perhaps they have tasted materialism and turned away. Perhaps their convictions are so strong that they have managed to keep them

intact through the changing times.

Although there are many small examples of this — including the popularity of Vipassana meditation or Reiki healing — one of the most compelling large-scale examples of this spiritual renewal is the Swadhyaya movement. As some of you may remember, I dedicated an entire newsletter to Swadhyaya. In March of this year, the founder of the movement, Pandurang Shastri Athavale was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, given annually to a living person who has shown extraordinary originality in advancing humankind's understanding of spirituality. Recently, the United Nations named Swadhyaya one of the most significant developments in the world, noting that Swadhyaya communities "are indeed more wholesome, better developed economically, cleaner and more efficient." The Templeton Foundation has estimated that Swadhyaya has directly benefited 20 million people, and is currently working in 100,000 villages across India.

Swadhyaya is compelling for me for several reasons. First, it is a model of truly sustainable, integrated societal development. For the past decade, we have been throwing around the terms sustainable and integrated without knowing or understanding what they mean or what it takes to make movements integrated or sustainable. In Swadhyaya, we see a movement that is sustaining itself economically without dependence on outside institutions. All its staff is volunteer and unpaid, and all funds for Swadhyaya efforts come from its "members." That it integrates so many aspects of societal development is all the more surprising because most of these efforts are actually just byproducts of a growing awareness of God, of self-worth and of connectedness to others. Interestingly, Swadhyaya has made the role of organizations like NGOs and even the government superfluous. Communities are handling their own problems in a way that I have never seen before. I am not going to go into the details of Swadhyaya, but I do want to emphasize that I see the success of Swadhyaya as an indication that people across India are interested in returning to some of the essentials of traditional Indian philosophy and spirituality, and away from some of the more political religious movements that are trying to put their mark on modern India.

Spirituality provides an anchor in the fast rush of modern, changing India. Interestingly, traditional Indian philosophy and spirituality emerge in unlikely places as important cornerstones of modern India. A month or so ago, *India Today* magazine featured an article about the "mega-rich" — on the cover was a modern rich Indian couple in front of a Rolls-Royce. In the most recent issue, letters to the editor decried the whole idea of luxury and super-rich tastes. For example, one letter said: "A Rolls Royce deserves to be on your cover but not the man who flaunts it. For our scriptures hold the man with inner contentment superior." At a time when almost all values, traditions and structures are either changing or being questioned, spirituality offers a grounding, a relief, a

fall-back. In India, it also offers a return, if you will, to India itself.

It is fitting that I should end this talk with the role of spirituality in today's changing Indian society. I went through a very interesting change myself during my two years in India. I went to India with several distinct goals: to understand Indian society, to understand what constitutes effective development efforts and, last but not least, to understand myself. Even though I saw understanding Indian society as being an essential part of understanding myself, I think I still separated them in my mind. If I look at the progression of my fellowship, I see that I started thinking about development in terms of issues, like child labor or AIDS. I then moved to thinking about development in terms of more holistic models — the Kerala model, the Ladakh model, all of which were integrating these individual issues into a more complete societal-development model. And then, finally with Swadhyaya, a trip to the pilgrimage site of Badrinath, and my growing understanding of Indian spirituality, I began to see development as beginning with the individual. I have come back to America believing that truly sustainable development cannot possibly happen without a focus on individual development. In saying this, I do not negate the role of government in development. In India, however, the ineffectiveness of government has led to others finding their own solutions. And in the end, it may be that if individuals and communities took responsibility for soci-

etal issues, the government would finally have a workload that was actually manageable.

In 1944, Jawarlalal Nehru wrote that the "real problems" for him remained "problems of individual and social life, of harmonious living, of a proper balancing of an individual's inner and outer life, of an adjustment of the relations between individuals and between groups, of a continuous becoming something better and higher, of social development, of the ceaseless adventure of man. We must always beware of losing ourselves in a sea of speculation unconnected with the day-to-day problems of life and the needs of men and women. A living philosophy must answer the problems of today." It is this balance that India — really, the world — is still seeking, and that will present an enormous challenge in these times of rapid change.

There are really no words for the way that these two years in India have changed Alan's and my lives. Thank you to the Institute for giving us this wonderful opportunity, and to all of you who read my newsletters and sent me your comments and perspectives. And I want to give, on behalf of all three of us, a special thanks to Peter, Gary, Ellen and the trustees for supporting us during our baby Janak's birth in so many ways. You allowed us to concentrate our energies only on Janak and not worry about anything else, and we can never adequately express our gratitude for that. Thank you. □

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