

## Governance Strategies that Restore Human Dignity: Few Observations

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### Abstract

*The neo-liberal economic project has fundamentally altered the living conditions of millions of people across the globe. Its relentless profit-seeking progress has destroyed commons and natural resource-based livelihoods, alienating communities from their habitats, and stripping people of dignity. In this worsening context, there is a crying need to reflect on the purpose of people's institutions and their actions and intervene to ensure universal human rights, equity and justice. These people's institutions must not only act proactively to enable self-determination but also act as critical determinants of standards of public and civic governance. The various institutions of the State, market, family and community must remain responsible for securing and honouring the rights, livelihoods and dignity of human beings. In this essay, we explore the current context of human existence and sketch the transformative potential of people's organisations and networks at the local, national and global levels.*

**Keywords:** Globalisation, Neoliberalism, Development, Peer-Sharing, Digital Citizenship

### Introduction

The impoverishing impact of the neo-liberal economic model on the lives of people who have already been marginalised by globalisation processes cannot be overstated. Much has been written on this in the vast social science literature. The impact has been more severe on the living conditions of millions of people across the globe. The neoliberalist ambition to marketise not just the economy but the entire society through its relentless profit-seeking progress has destroyed commons and natural resource-based livelihoods, alienating communities from their habitats, and stripping people of dignity. It has cunningly shifted the burden of mitigating the deleterious impact from the state to the victims themselves, through a process of 'responsibilisation' using its glorified devices such as self-help and entrepreneurship. In this worsening context, there is a crying need to reflect on the purpose of people's institutions and their actions and intervene to ensure universal human rights, equity and justice. These people's institutions must not only act proactively to enable self-determination but also act as critical determinants of standards of public and civic governance. The various institutions of the State, market, family and community must remain responsible for securing and honouring the rights, livelihoods and dignity of human beings. This paper benefits from listening to select people in poverty and

studying people's organisations and micro-level efforts that have made lives bearable and respectable for people. The qualitative data collected from the narratives of people in poverty and organisational structures are interpreted to make the following observations.

### Seeds of Solutions

Faced with these monstrous forces ordinary people have not remained mute. In small yet significant ways, they continue to engage and intervene with these systems as collaborators, resisters and as dissidents etc. However, very few such interventions to address the widening resource gap and deteriorating human condition have transcended personal and local contexts to initiate systemic change. On the face of it, the exploitative forces seem to gain upper hand.

However, in complex systems, the seeds of the solution lie embedded in the same context that created the problem. In keeping with this fact, there have also been simultaneously emergent processes of creative, new ways of engagement at many levels: the individual, the local and the global.

People continue to make meaning of their existence and restore their purpose and dignity. They resist the stripping of their humanity and their reduction as either machines or raw bodies. They seek justice for the

deprivations and damage that they have undergone so that these violations do not continue. They relate with each other and evolve ways to imaginatively express their humanity to other significant people that they select. They seek self-validation through this relatedness and simultaneously express concern for collective living. Even when crafted in silence and alienation, their efforts to reclaim their humanity are loud and clear; and there are a million remarkable testimonies to human creativity and capacity in their daily existence. In this struggle, if large numbers of people who have been impoverished have not taken to the same unethical and violent means that they are subjected to, it is because of this desire, intent and effort.

While many of these strategies are of immense personal significance, such emergent processes rarely receive recognition, nurturance and support. Hence not all of these actions transcend personal courage into structural transformation. Hence their self-determination remains limited. To enable this self-determination, people have to be empowered to act as critical agents who assert their rights while holding the governance of their institutions accountable for the collective well-being. For this, they must be willing to be subject to self-regulation, a process of personal determination of values within the context of the well-being of others (Pollis, 1992; Baxi, 2003).

### **Reclaiming The Global Citizen**

Till now, for the most part, the notion of the 'global citizen' has been mediated by a select few global elites, through a series of boundaries and rules, over which the exploited and the excluded have little decision-making authority. Economic globalisation forces have also unleashed a bewildering array of institutions and alliances across local and global boundaries. For the most part, these institutions have widened the gap between the rich and the poor.

However, the notion of the global citizen has also come to mean more and more, the increasing consciousness of inter-relatedness between human cultures in real time spanning the world. This sharing of values, symbols and perspectives has been particularly instrumental in challenging localised, exploitative relations within people's institutions [for instance, the global feminist and environment conservation movements, the universal human rights framework]. The rapid shifts in alliances and

formations at many levels are also forcing more and more people's institutions to find purpose and relevance for their existence.

How the local and global meet will determine the nature of the global citizen. If the exchange between the two is based on respect, dignity and equity, and balances individual self-determination with collective well-being; human existence can be transformed radically for the better. (Abrahamian, 2015)

### **Revisiting Intent, Purpose and Standards**

Responsible self-determination and accountable public governance are the fulcrums around which processes that impoverish people can be transformed. Increasingly, human self-determination is seen as integrally connected with entitlement to human rights [economic, social, cultural and political] and the dignity of all people; particularly those who have been systemically exploited, excluded or impoverished. It is based on the inalienable, universal human rights standards; integral to being human and innate to every person.

Accepting that most people on the planet are not able to exercise their human rights, necessitates personal and collective reflection: a re-examination of intent, purpose and standards. To be fruitful, this re-examination must be grounded in human ethics, be rigorous and transparent rather than tokenistic or opportunistic, with genuine intent to identify personal and systemic factors that impoverish people. It has to forefront issues of personal and collective accountability. People, particularly the resourceful population, will have to transform their behaviour, while simultaneously seeking methods to increase and support the agency of people that have been affected (Falk, 2000).

Such re-examination cannot be nostalgic, glorifying the past; or indifferent and apathetic to the human condition. This scrutiny need not be violent or guilt-ridden; instead, can be creative and celebratory, finding ways to restore relevance without stripping people of perspective and dignity.

For example, the 'Where do You Keep Your Racism' Campaign by the Diálogos Contra o Racismo (Dialogues Against Racism) group is one such innovative strategy used by the black movement in Brazil aimed to start discussions about thoughts, habits and attitudes that encode racism and reveal the diverse nature of racist expressions and re-examine them; to surface

unconsciously held racist positions. The Dialogue Against Racism is a platform of over 40 civil-society organisations, most of which do not belong to the black movement. The initiative was to visibilise racial prejudice, particularly to those who do not suffer its effects, so that racism as an issue becomes a concern not just of black people but the entire society.

### **Critical Citizen's Collectives**

Critical, transparent and accountable governance systems are essential, benchmarked against universal human rights; to actualise the idea of a critical, global citizen. For this, people's institutions must function in the 'public sphere' as critical opinion-making bodies as characterised by Habermass (1981)[1]. In his understanding of these critical citizen's collectives, reference is not made only to their participation in electoral politics. This is still an ongoing endeavour, with democracy still to mature. What it instead refers to is the active debate and action in the public sphere, least controlled by sentiments and bonded by the desire to evolve public opinion from below.

In the current scenario, there have been some collectives that have played this critical role. Many of these make decisions on egalitarian principles. They undertake honest, courageous, self-correcting reflection on their reality. They integrate the interrelatedness fostered by traditional institutions, and fraternity promoted by modern institutions. Hence, they have been able to transcend their purpose to determine the public sphere [caste, gender, ethnicity, and race] to enable human well-being. Often these collectives have emerged spontaneously, and are reflective and creative, rather than target-driven and instrumental.

These collectives have been embedded in different contexts to varying degrees creating affirmative institutions: the state with its welfare function; the development sector with its focus on people's participation; people's movements with their focus on human rights and empowerment; voluntary social organisations with concern for the well-being of humanity; traditional institutions of relatedness, nurturance and equity, as well as respect for their environment and nature; modern institutions' emphasis on the spirit of fraternity, particularly among strangers; peer networks that emphasise inclusion in new ways and egalitarian decision-making; and civil society

groups demanding accountability from state and market as citizens and consumers.

Where such affirmative institutions and nascent processes exist, they do so despite the norm. One reason for this is that they are emergent, filled with subjective and diverse stories of personal symbols and transformations. The dominant western, rational approach with its models of cause and effect remains ill-equipped to understand or value these diverse perspectives and is threatened by them. Hence these processes tend to be regarded with suspicion, and are ignored or poorly supported. If enabled and supported these affirmative acts hold within them the real potential of rejuvenating human well-being.

### **Restoration of People's Institutions**

In the new context of economic globalisation, people's institutions (family, State, etc.) are being forced to revisit their purpose in their search for continued relevance. This provides an opportunity to rejuvenate traditional institutions and humanise modern ones.

### **Rejuvenation of Traditional Institutions**

The rejuvenation of people's institutions has to be on several levels – family, community, nation, and the globe. There are many proximal traditional institutions in the lives of the exploited and the impoverished that are badly wounded, discredited and destroyed currently. Old women gatherings, caste groups, youth gatherings, friendship networks, indigenous kin-based groups in tribal belts, religious groups, women's networks, and livelihood sects are a few such instances that hold deep potential for individual and societal transformation.

These institutions must be examined for their relevance in the current scenario, by revisiting their intent, purpose and values through the human rights framework. They must also transform inherent hierarchical, discriminatory and exploitative tendencies [such as gender, caste, and race; as well as impoverishment and exclusion]; that are embodied in their members. This transformation requires sensitive and patient iterative engagement to repair the damage, regain trust, build *métis* and restore morale.

The wisdom of traditional institutions must be revalidated and reaccredited. The pride in their functioning must also be restored, while simultaneously releasing them from self-serving and opportunistic positions. In this

rejuvenation, form and function must be given equal importance; so that there is no nostalgic attachment to old and sometimes irrelevant forms; with the focus remaining on the rejuvenation of their original functions of inter-dependence, nurturance and relatedness.

### **Humanising Modern Institutions**

Modern institutions have come under increasing scrutiny (Kothari, 1988) in current times, particularly around issues related to people's participation in governance. This along with the demands of economic globalisation has forced these institutions to seek their relevance and revisit their purpose.

There is increasing recognition that modern institutions are rapidly becoming unaccountable to the people and civil society who belong to them. Often, their development agendas are more geared towards profit for a few, rather than collective human well-being. It is also recognised that to remain relevant to their members, these institutions must humanise their perspectives; acknowledge that complex human systems cannot be reduced to mechanised systems alone. As a result, there is an increasing focus on people's participation and decision-making; and dialogue and partnerships across sectors.

The focus on people's participation has engineered a wide array of community institutions that have often been self-organising [such as savings and credit groups, and people's co-operatives]. When these groups address issues of discrimination, they have aided the transformation from traditional hierarchical exploitative structures to horizontal networks of peers or interest groups that share knowledge and resources for a common purpose.

For instance, increasingly, there is recognition that cash economies dehumanize people and decrease community solidarity. This recognition has led to the re-personalisation of money through community currency initiatives across the world. To counter the loss of relatedness and the insecurity of working in an international market that undervalues local produce, local communities in Thailand organized themselves into an alternate, local economy creating a community currency called Bia Kud Chum. The Bia is just one example amongst several other nascent community currency efforts across the world: for instance, in Japan, LETS (Local

Exchange Trading Systems) and HOURS; in Mexico, the Tlaloc mutual credit system.

The Bia (local currency) is equivalent to the Thai Baht, and cannot be used outside its network of groups and communities. This very insularity of the currency ensures that local resources remain within communities and ensures their self-sufficiency. This effort emerged from a larger trend of community-based initiatives and "self-sufficiency groups" around several livelihood activities: a rice mill supporting chemical-free rice production, cooperative shops, and women's groups producing soya milk, herbal shampoo and dishwashing liquid. This currency has been condemned by national financial bodies that see such efforts as a threat to their existence and functioning. As a result, communities in five villages have been accused of breaking the law.

### **Reformulating the Nation-State**

Given that the nation-state has actively partnered in the economic globalization process, its governance functions are now being determined increasingly by global, private capital forces; often at the cost of its welfare functions. When confronted with complex challenges, the state has been indifferent to most people's experiences and concerns or incapable of responding to them, resulting in growing societal discontent, as well as inequity and injustice.

The State even while largely failing in its social welfare function, yet came into being mostly with promises of democratic equality and human rights. These aspirations, it reflected the collective aspirations of their citizens.

Observing that the state continues to deeply concern its citizens, John Harris (2002) states "the state in India might indeed be rotten, but it is not accurate to say that ordinary men and women have lost faith entirely in the idea of the state" (page 2-3). Even others who are severely critical of the state agree that the state is still a critical mobilizing agency (Dipankar Gupta, 2002) and is yet to exhaust its possibilities for releasing the poor from poverty.

To fulfil its promise, the democratic nation-state has to base all its actions on the realisation of universal human rights and entitlements. It must move beyond its economic agendas to a genuine concern for people's well-being and dignity. It must accord respect to people's intelligence and self-determination and must renew its pact with its citizenry

to realise their individual and collective aspirations and well-being. For this, it must be committed to people's participation and decision-making. Its public governance must remain pro-people (for instance, pro-poor). In particular, people who have been exploited or excluded must be included in public governance: by honouring their human rights; reviving their institutions; ensuring enabling their self-determination; supporting them conserve their environments and their valuing their *métis*; and restoring respect and faith in their intent, purpose and values. Finally, it must establish transparent government practices to continue remaining accountable to its citizenry.

In recent times, there has been increasing questioning of the state's role, authority and accountability, particularly by people's movements and critical, citizen groups across the world.

As a result, people who have been exploited or excluded are directly beginning to hold the State accountable for its actions on several standards.

The rapid global-level changes in the last few decades years have forced the state itself to reinvent its relevance in ways not fully understood. The state's response to this call for reformulation has been mixed; though largely discouraging, not entirely without its positive elements.

For instance, even as the welfare state has devolved its responsibilities (creation of user fees for instance for basic services such as education and health), it has also engaged in decentralisation processes to local governance institutions. The 73rd and 74th amendments of the Indian constitution are two such examples.

In other instances, the state urged by civil society and enlightened leadership has shown concern for its citizens. In India, the introduction of the NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in August 2005 is a landmark social security policy. This differs from other past employment guarantee schemes in three important ways: guaranteeing employment could not be terminated by administrative decree; employment would not be restricted to applicants holding Below Poverty Line cards, and the schemes would be implemented through local governance bodies. These progressive measures were introduced despite considerable internal opposition from various government bodies, because of several reasons: national movements to end hunger, the electoral imperative to

introduce the pro-poor public policy in a country where more than half the population is poor, and sensitive and intelligent political leadership aware of the reasons and consequences of failure.

In Brazil, the re-democratisation efforts and the constitution reformulation in 1988 propelled by demands of the people's movement in the country set forth measures to ensure people's participation in public policy as well as recognised the role of civil society in the political systems resulting in it being called the 'citizen constitution'.

The role of collegiate institutions of Public Policy Councils to actively determine public policy was a revolution in the country's governance where public policy decisions were not restricted to just the State Executive but also extended to civic society representatives. They have already been significant in determining national policy regarding health, and social work policies for children and adolescents.

Between 2003 and 2006, about 40 national conferences were attended by over two million people (union members, NGOs, social movements, professional and corporate associations, churches, etc.) and representatives of municipal, state, and federal agencies. In the national phase of these conferences alone, about 5,000 public deliberations were held. The inputs from these deliberations were incorporated into different sectoral public policies. In this instance, conferences as a medium of people's participation have enabled people's contribution to determining public policies.

Again, in many instances, the nation-state is also recognising the importance of the representation of traditionally exploited and excluded people in decision-making through its reservation policies. For instance, during the administration of President Lula in Brazil, more black men and women were included in high-ranking positions; where previously it was markedly absent. Again the reservation for women in governance systems in India, while largely being symbolic, also has positively impacted people's perspectives about gender in some instances.

### **Holding Corporates Responsible**

Current global markets have forced individuals to work across diverse contexts, in time, space, values and culture. In this scenario, the very intent and nature of work have undergone massive transformations. This has fundamentally challenged the linear, instrumental

understanding of human work; and necessitated institutions to reflect on working in complex systems. This is most apparent in the increasing emphasis on human resource management and corporate social responsibility. Both these trends hold seeds for future change transforming negative impacts into positive ones on human well-being.

One consequence of the shift in the understanding of work and efficiency is the increasing relevance of human resource development, both as a science and practice. This relevance has been further increased by the burgeoning service industry. In some instances, this shift in perspective has created alternate spaces of individual and collective reflection, focused on personal and organisational development, and leadership. Even as many of these reflections challenge existing discrimination, their main purpose remains the generation of individual profit. Only a few of these reflections transcend this intent into structural transformation based on human rights values.

Called to be accountable by civil society groups, corporates are beginning to contend with the social and ecological consequences of their singular focus on profits. As part of this, they are beginning to not just invest more resources in development aid, but they are also creating communities of committed professionals and workers who are willing to volunteer their services for this. However, the intent behind such interventions is still not completely transparent; and often does not transform discriminatory practices within the institution. It must also be acknowledged that even their best intentions to contribute to development and welfare in the name of Corporate Social Responsibility, have been inadequate even in redressing the damages their profit-seeking activities have caused.

### **Support of Emergent Institutions and Processes**

In addition to the restoration of current people institutions, new forms of organising and formulations that are affirmative have to be supported. Three emergent people's institutions and processes are critical.

### **Movements and Campaigns**

People's movements and campaigns have played an integral role in causing systemic change for human well-being in current times. Some of these movements and collectives have shown tremendous unconditional support for the disempowered. Hence, in many instances, they

have created institutions that emphasise equitable decision-making and empowerment; restoring people's sense of control over their lives. This role rests as much on their taking unequivocal stances against injustice and violation; as on their willingness to take responsibility for and reflect on their experiences, and correct themselves.

Movements are organized around universal human rights values of dignity, equity, autonomy, community sovereignty, conservation, and justice. Many of these processes have been led by individuals who have been exploited or excluded. Since they are often immersed in the individual and localized experience and devote considerable effort to reflect on justice and equity, they address some systemic reasons that create discrimination. Since they place importance on self-expression, particularly by those who have been marginalised and silenced, they empower self-determination. They also recognize that interventions needed for human well-being cannot just be individualistic, but must be collectivist.

However, in their emphasis on collective change, they often neglect to address issues related to individual meaning-making and self-actualisation. These institutions are still embedded in the dominant western, scientific paradigms and suffer from the same maladies of a monocular rationalistic perspective. They fall into the trap that most modern institutions find themselves in: reduction of human experience, denying both the emotional and the reflective; and focusing inordinately on the material; fragmenting their perspectives and rendering them reactive. Further, their work is often at the edge of people's survival. The urgency imparted by the nature of this work does not permit time for personal reflection; aggravating their reactivity.

Some shifts are occurring in recent times in the purpose and intent of these people's movements, as a result of peer sharing across the globe. One is a shift from concerns about only the distribution of material resources, to concerns about identity and dignified human self-determination. Thus, even while recognizing the importance of material well-being, people's movements have begun to reflect on other aspects of the human experience. Second, since movements consider human collectivism as a foundation value of their work, social movements work in an inter-related manner, forming the basis of global movements – the labour movement, the

women's movement, the peace movement, the secular movement, the environment movement – complex layers that intersect each other. In the success of this inter-related work, their grounding in local realities plays an important role.

The impact of social movements is as yet unclear. When movements have been able to balance individual and collective demands, they have resulted in a significant transformation. One example is the effort on the part of the women's movement to examine gender role constructs, by reflecting on both individual and collective experiences.

### **Open-Source Knowledge Banks**

In the last few decades, there have been radical transformations in how people across vast geographical differences know and relate with each other because of advances in digital information technology. Information is now more readily available and is more prone to accumulation and dispersal than ever before. One significant outcome of this is the World Wide Web. With the intent to remain autonomous, and following values of open access, the internet has offered unprecedented access to open-source knowledge repositories. Further, it makes this information available across geographical boundaries and cultures. More and more people are beginning to take part in this endeavour and grapple with the values underpinning the formation of open-source knowledge repositories and their networks of the transaction (Gergen, 2012)

### **Peer-Sharing and Communities of Interest**

One outcome of the transformation in global knowledge sharing is the strengthening of diverse voices with varying intent and perspectives in the public domain; with more and more people structurally exploited or excluded being able to articulate their reality. Attempts to control and homogenise these voices are becoming difficult.

There have also been unprecedented shifts in peer sharing across vast geographical distances, cosmologies and in real-time. These have resulted in autonomous, local and diverse forms of organising. Already across the globe, communities of interest [rather than just geographically proximal communities] are in communication with each other, often to serve a common purpose. These communities often structure themselves along the lines of

the horizontal network structure of the web that serves as the platform of their exchange. This horizontal sharing has altered traditional hierarchical and exclusive patterns of sharing knowledge and practice.

Even as it has deepened sharing within common interest areas, it also created interdependent relations with those from different contexts and perspectives. This has led to the emergence of new forms of communities based on interdisciplinary interests that offer solutions in complex systems. These new communities form networks that span the globe while remaining rooted in their local contexts. This has enabled led to the re-knitting of individual and collective meaning-making in new ways. In some instances, these citizens' fora have become locations of spontaneous transformative collective action that challenged exploitation and exclusion and restructured the public sphere.

Even as we celebrate these, we deeply recognise their limited reach, as these peer-sharing mechanisms and open-source knowledge banks depend on a certain degree of apprenticeship in using them effectively and on hardware, whose penetration is not widespread. The vast majority of the poor remain outside the ambit of digital technologies. In this context it would do well to remember Castells (2000) caution about placing too much faith in information networks, because it is, "characterised by a double movement: on the one hand, valuable segments of territories and people are linked in the global networks of value making and wealth appropriation. On the other hand, everything, and everyone, which does not have value, according to what is valued in the networks, or ceases to have value, is switched off the networks and ultimately discarded". (p.134)

Yet, this limitation or caution does not diminish the optimism we have about its potential for a positive transformative impact.

### **Conclusion**

The human condition is deteriorating rapidly for many people because of the fragmentation of their traditional institutions, the indifference of the modern ones to human well-being, the destruction of nature and commons, and the failure of the nation-state in its governance functions. As a result, more and more people are being impoverished and rendered dispensable, left to fend for their survival against insurmountable odds.

The urgency and scale with which the poor are being eradicated require us to respond urgently. This action cannot be reactive and fragmented. Instead, this action must be holistic and address systemic root causes of exploitation and exclusion. It must acknowledge the complex and intelligent nature of human and natural systems, their emergence and inter-relatedness. It must be committed to enabling an honest appraisal of the self and the context, revisiting intent, purpose and ethical standards. These standards have to be clear and steadfast. Guided by these ethical standards, action must aim to empower people and affirm their self-determination to enable their participation in public governance.

Even though the challenge faced seems insurmountable, in complex systems, solutions to current problems also lie embedded in this same system. Several seeds of action are emerging currently: restoration of current institutions, by rejuvenating traditional ones and humanising modern ones; formation of global and local collectivities, particularly people's movements in redressing justice and equity issues, and newly emergent peer networking and open-source knowledge repositories based on horizontal networks rather than hierarchical structures. These potential systemic solutions are now being recognised and articulated.

To meet the challenge posed by impoverishing processes, there has to be a collective shift in a critical mass of people about the purpose of their institutions; when people are no longer evoked to act for limited self-

gain, but also proactively act to critically determine public governance. Such critical citizen collectives may well be the pivot around which the cycle of poverty turns.

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