

SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN ASIA AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

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Since the Asian region is immense, its peoples so diverse, and social conditions vary from country to country, it would be impossible to define social problems in Asia and propose solutions that would be applicable to individual countries. Obviously this will be the task of the assembly through its group discussions and studies.

My immediate assignment is to help initiate fruitful discussions by bringing into focus certain major issues, principles and goals pertaining to the subject matter.

I. STANDARDS AND YARDSTICKS

When we speak of social problems in Asia, we must have in the back of our mind certain standards or yardsticks according to which social conditions may be defined as either ideal or short of ideal.

Such standards are found in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in December 1948, and subscribed to by all the U.N. member nations. The international body proclaims this declaration as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. For the first time in human history the organized community of nations has issued a Magna Carta of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and it has the authority of the body of opinion of the United Nations as a whole, and millions of men, women and children all over Asia are now turning to this document for help, guidance and inspiration. Pope John XXIII in his Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* called this declaration "an act of the highest importance performed by the United Nations Organization" (n 143).

The first two articles of this document lay down the fundamental principles of human rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights... Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other states..."

Articles 3 to 21 deal with personal, civil and political rights, which have long been recognized in the constitutions and laws of the majority of the countries in the world. In articles 22 to 27, the

Declaration sets forth the essential economic, social and cultural rights to which all human being are entitled. The enjoyment of civil and political freedoms and that of economic, social and cultural rights are interconnected and interdependent, and man is not free if he is deprived of economic, social and cultural rights.

Such standards are also found in the U.N. Declaration on Social Progress and Development, adopted in December 1969. The following summarizes the major concepts and points of this important document:

- Development should be founded on and promote human dignity, human values, human freedom, human rights and social justice.
- Development should aim towards continuous raising of the material and spiritual standards of living of all members of society in compliance with human rights and fundamental freedom.
- Development should attain the following basic goals:
 1. The assurance of the right of work and the right of free choice of work; promotion of full productive employment and elimination of unemployment and underemployment; establishment of equitable and favourable safety conditions of work; assurance of just remuneration for all labour as well as sufficiently high minimum wages to insure decent standards of living.
 2. The elimination of hunger and malnutrition and the guarantee of the right to proper nutrition.
 3. The elimination of poverty; the assurance of a steady improvement in levels of living of a just and equitable distribution of income.
 4. The achievement of the highest standards of health, and the provision of health protection for the entire population.
 5. The eradication of illiteracy and the assurance of the right to free compulsory education at the elementary level and to free education at all levels; the raising of the general level of life-long education
 6. The provision for all, particularly persons in low-income groups and large families, of adequate housing and community services.
 7. The protection of the consumer and rationalization of consumption.

Such standards are finally found in the great social encyclicals especially in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. For the sake of brevity, let us mention only *Pacem in Terris*: In par. I, *Order Between Men*, the Pontiff declares that "Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle: that every human being is a person; his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. By virtue of this, he has rights and duties of his own, flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature, which are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable." (n 9)

This declaration of principle is followed by an enumeration and affirmation of basic human rights which coincide with those proclaimed by the United Nations and which we may call the Church's Declaration of Human Rights.

These are the standards we all recognize, accept and proclaim; these are also the standards solemnly set forth in the constitutions of all the free countries of Asia. But, *alas*, to proclaim lofty ideals is one thing, and to fashion realities according to ideals is another thing. If we look at the social scene of Asia today, we find that more often than not the realities do not measure up to the standards.

II. SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN ASIA

Although socio-economic conditions in Asia vary from country to country, a quick survey will reveal the following general picture:

In most of our countries, a clear distinction can be made of roughly three categories of people:

- The peasant mass, still constituting around 60% of the total population, living in the rural areas and scraping a living from agriculture, livestock raising, fishing, and small-scale agro-industries.
- the growing urban-industrial mass including factory workers, service workers and all the small people who live in the urban areas and earn their living in a hand-to-mouth fashion.
- the elite which includes government officials, businessmen and professionals.

Rural Conditions

In spite of the fact that the rural sector is still the most important sector in Asia, it is however generally the most neglected and depressed sector. Land reform, long overdue, has yet to be adopted or adequately implemented in many Asian countries. As a result, the majority of the peasants are deprived of incentives as well as of the means to improve their farming methods and increase their income.

The main problems, as stated by the Asian Ecumenical Conference for Development, are:

- "Semi-feudalistic agrarian relations and uneconomic holdings which keep agricultural incomes at subsistence level, and socio-political structures which perpetuate the depressed conditions of the peasantry;
- Lack of farmers' organizations of various types;
- Increasing unemployment and unsystematic migration in urban areas;
- Lack of credit on easy terms, low prices of agricultural crops, and lack of storage, processing and marketing facilities;
- Lack of suitable educational facilities and technical extension services;

- Lack of adequate housing;
- Malnutrition and lack of health and sanitation facilities;
- Insufficient transportation, communication, electricity, irrigation, recreational and cultural facilities." (AECD p.8)

Labor Conditions

With the growth of industry, an increasing number of rural people are moving into the cities. Unplanned internal migration creates problems both for the rural communities and for the city centers. While migration causes labor shortage in the countryside and dislocation of family life, it aggravates living and working conditions for the low-income urban dwellers.

The migrants to the cities are mostly young and unskilled. Asian cities lack organized employment services and educational and training facilities to prepare these migrants for, and provide them with, gainful employment. Uprooted from their rural home communities, these people are left completely on their own. Many are underemployed and have to eke out a marginal existence with all sorts of odd jobs.

Fully employed factory and service workers fare no better. Antiquated or weakly enforced labor legislation and lack of labor organization leave the workers without protection and expose them to unscrupulous exploitation especially in small factories: low wages, long working hours, miserable housing conditions, lack of insurance and security. Many of our cities are characterized by a striking contrast between gleaming skyscrapers and shabby shantytowns, between acute poverty and lavish and extravagant living.

Elite and Power Establishment

In many Asian countries, education is only "an escape mechanism by which the bright and vigorous few among the masses go away from the lowly classes in which they were born to join the elite of the nation." (The Social significance of the Cooperative Movement p.8). The privileged few control and manipulate the machinery of power for their own good instead of the common good. They are the ones who know how to take advantage of democracy. They know how to participate in the national affairs while the masses don't; they are eternally vigilant in guarding their rights while the masses are not; the result is that democracy becomes the democracy of a few, not of the masses; by a few, not by the masses; for a few, not for the masses.

Social Structure

The entrenchment of power and vested interests on the part of the privileged few, and ignorance, apathy and resignation on the part of the masses have rendered "the present social, economic and political structures and institutions in most Asian countries incapable of eradicating prevailing inequities and injustices and of promoting

a just social order where man will be able to realize his full potential. The existing structures tend to preserve the status quo where the rewards of individual and group efforts to achieve economic and social progress are enjoyed by a few, while the many continue to live in misery, wanting even in the bare necessities of life-food, clothing and shelter". (AECD p.34)

Concentration of political power in the hands of a few has led to corruption, misuse of power and oppression, and has made a mockery of democracy in the eyes of the majority of people.

III. BASIC SOLUTIONS

The basic solution therefore lies in changing and reshaping existing social structures and institutions. Now, structures and institutions are created by people, they work through people and are nothing but patterns of human interactions. To change structures and institutions we must begin with changing the people themselves. The salvation of the Asian masses must come from the people themselves. It is the role of the Church to help them start the process.

Most of the Asian countries have adopted a democratic constitution and democratic system of government. If democracy has not yet worked, it is clearly not the fault of the constitution or the system itself, it is because democracy has not been applied as it should be. Democracy can only be as good as the people who make it, and the cure of the ills in a purported democratic society is more democracy, not less.

To change the existing social structures and to make them truly democratic, we must transform the great majority of our population from ignorant, fatalist and passive pawns into well-informed, self-reliant and active participants of national life. The historic role of the Church in Asia today is to be especially mother and teacher of the poor and less privileged majority. To fulfill her role, the Church must work out ways and means, to educate the people, to help them develop themselves and to integrate them fully into the life and development process of the national community. In this regard, let us recall some of the proposals made recently by two Asian international gatherings of experts:

From the *Consensus Statement of MISEREOR FAR EAST COLLOQUY*: Priority should be given to all kinds of self-help projects with the aim of integrating the underprivileged masses into society and building up just social structures.

Wherever there is a lack of effective organization among workers, employees and the underprivileged in general, who form the majority of the population, these people are rendered defenseless against organized injustice.

The poor cannot bargain. The Church in all her members has a grave moral obligation in insisting strongly on the right of these people to organize and to bargain collectively." (p. 75)

From the *Recommendations of Workshop E on Influencing Structural and Institutional Change of the Asian Ecumenical Conference*

for Development: "The churches and church organizations should take the initiative and where possible collaborate with other existing organizations in."

- The mobilization of people in rural areas in organizations such as the peasants' and cooperative movements and the mobilization of the underprivileged with a view to redressing injustice and preventing exploitation.
- The strengthening of the churches' industrial and urban ministry with special emphasis on struggle against injustice, e.g. trade unions, labour movements, and the organization of the organ under-privileged.
- The greater involvement of the Christian student and youth organizations in the common struggle for justice and structural change. A new orientation and structure for these organizations would be necessary.
- The organization of women for their own rights and for justice in the rural as well as in the urban areas." (AECD p.38).

There are already hopeful signs in many parts of Asia where the Church has taken the initiative in promoting self-help and adult education movements among the less-privileged people. These movements are based on a sound philosophy that social reform and economic improvement have to come from education through which the quality of the people themselves is to be first improved, and that adult education should be designed to unlock life to the people, to train and equip them to cope with today's complex, organized and competitive society. Through meetings, study clubs, rallies, lectures, leadership courses and other apt methods and tools, people are taught to think about, to do things connected with, and to learn skills for, the necessities and problems of life. The fields to which the people are taught to direct their attention are: labor unions, credit unions, cooperatives, community development etc. Successful action by the people in these fields will help them regain control of their own destiny through ownership and voice in the local and national affairs leading to socio-economic reforms, economic and political democracy and a just society. We hope and wish that movements like these will further be strengthened and extended everywhere.

Before I conclude, there remain two problem areas to which I would like to call your attention: population pressure and the disintegration of the family.

Population Explosion:

The problem of population pressure is indeed complex both in its causes and its effects. We are familiar with the guidelines given by the Popes through their encyclical letters especially *Mater et Magistra* (185-211) and *Humanae Vitae*. Very recently, the Asian Ecumenical Conference for Development in its Workshop F on *Health Development and Population Growth* has stated the reasons for urgency to find solutions to the problem and made recommendations. We urge that the findings and recommendations of the Con-

ference be taken into consideration by this assembly and that a regional organizational mechanism be created to further study the problem in all its implications and prepare for actions toward its solution.

Disintegration of the Family:

We recognize, with the Second Vatican Council (G.S. 47-52), the vital importance of the family as a basic and permanent social unit. At the same time, we realize that, with changes, in other major social institutions into which the family institution is integrated, both family structure and functions are changing. The rapidity with which the family is subject to changes and is required to make readjustments causes dislocations and creates problems. To preserve its basic values and function the family today must be helped by the public authority, by scientist, by the Church and through various family organizations and association. Because of the vital importance of the family both for the Church and for the society, it is hoped that resources and efforts can be pooled to inquire into the problem on a regional basis.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten and inspire all of us in our search and quest for better ways to serve the great nations and peoples of Asia.

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