

The Gandhian Movement of Empowerment: Revolutionary Acts at the Community Level

Leprosy: empowering some of India's most disadvantaged

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Like many other writers, much of my own writing is concerned with exposing the lies of imperialism, neo-liberalism and the globalist agenda. At times, such writing may appear to be laden with gloom and doom. However, social change is often incremental and revolutionary acts can often be small scale and at the community level. Such acts, instigated by ordinary folk, can impact people's lives directly. Whether it's the Occupy Movement, the Navdanya movement in India that seeks to support traditional agriculture and resist the influence of agri-business or the various community-based Transition Initiatives, all have the same goal - to ensure that people secure dignity and independence and freedom from exploitation.

While it would be extremely amiss to ignore the existence of state machinery and corporations and the apparatus they use to execute their enormous power, people throughout the world are realising that action at the community level goes some way towards developing self-sufficiency and taking power back.

Chengalpattu, 55 kms south of Chennai, may on the surface appear to be just another small, dusty south Indian town with its 'meals' restaurants, temples and concrete box buildings. But it's not. There is something special about this town. Close by is Bindu Art School, and it's not just any old art school.

Bindu Art School was set up in 2005 in the Bharatapuram leprosy colony. It was started by Austrian artist Werner Dornik and Padma Venkataraman, an activist who first brought the concept of microlending to leprosy colonies.

Although there are estimated to be over 1,000 leper colonies in India, the forced segregation of people is unnecessary in places where adequate treatments are available. Leprosy is primarily a disease of the nerves and mucosa of the upper respiratory tract. Left untreated, it can be progressive, causing permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. Although leprosy is caused by a microbacterium, not by the wrath of God, in India people with leprosy are stigmatized, stuck at the bottom of a caste system that technically no longer exists. Contrary to what many may believe, the condition is not contagious after treatment and there is no need for segregation.

I first met Werner Dornik six years and a half ago, and he invited me to visit the art school. Werner, a multimedia artist from Bad Ischl in Austria, was 18 on his first visit to India in 1977, when he saw lepers begging on the streets. Unfortunately, on the streets of this aspiring global superpower, you can still see that today.

After his first visit to India, he began to send donations to a leprosy home and, in 1981, contributed the proceeds of his photo exhibition in Austria to other leprosy homes in India. A chance meeting in 1995 in Vienna with Padma (daughter of former president of India, R Venkataraman) eventually set things in motion.

On one of his visits to the Bharatapuram colony, Werner was very impressed with the traditional Indian 'kolams' (drawings) that were being drawn by people whose fingers were deformed and reduced to stubs. Werner thought that using art as a therapy would be a good idea. But, as some of the elderly residents of the colony had hands that looked like claws, Werner taped paintbrushes to their fists and started them out with just two colours, black and blue. At first, the general mood of the painters resulted in art that was dark and depressing.

Werner told me:

"There's no teaching here. The aesthetics are all their own. Students start with black and white, before they move on to colours. When they finally get to use all the colours, there's an unrestrained explosion of life: forests, pink sunsets and even a hospital lined with patients that's a kaleidoscope of colour and honesty, but no pain. There were no rules or any such thing as good or bad. Nor did I go into any technical details of art. The students were free to paint anything."

In March 2006, some paintings were exhibited in Chennai. One of the students, former handloom worker Armugam, who was forced to take to begging when he contracted leprosy, says:

"I am so happy today. I realise I can also be creative. And at night when I sleep I dream of colours."

Things have moved on since that first exhibition. The 27 painters have subsequently had their work shown in galleries from Vienna and London to Washington and Tokyo. Some of the paintings have sold for 200 euros. One of the four painters who made the trip to Vienna told an interviewer that he had received so much love and respect there that he almost forgot he had leprosy. Quite a statement for someone who had lived most of his life as an illiterate 'untouchable'.

The project aims to be self sustaining. All money from the sales of the paintings goes to the artists and the project: one-third to the art school, one-third to the artists (divided equally among all 27), and one-third to start art schools in the other leprosy colonies. Another similar school has recently been set up in Varanasi.

The results have been so impressive that it is supported by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, the Austrian government and the Nippon Foundation in Japan. Reputed Indian artists including S.H. Raza, Aparna Caur are also involved.

On visiting the school, it was clear that the artists are their own teachers, learning from one another and themselves. Over time, the art has acted as both a medium for self expression and as a social catalyst. As the artists began to change, their art has become more whimsical, more joyous, and, instead of not even talking to each other, they now laugh and

play games. They've also stopped asking for so many pain pills.

The art school really has had a deep impact on people who for too long have been socially excluded and placed at the very bottom of the heap in India.

The ethos of Bindu Art School is that of communal living, self help, fellowship, dignity and independence. There is a definite whiff of the Gandhian tradition in the air, and much of Werner Dornik's personal outlook and his own art projects seek to make people aware that capitalism, crass materialism and consumerism are a deadening and ultimately self-destructive burden for humanity.

The Bindu Art project has revolutionized the lives of a few of the world's most disadvantaged people. And that does not surprise me because Werner says his politics is 'love'. That's not a bad starting point as revolutionary acts take many forms, and the most effective ones often stem from a feeling of empathy not anger and camaraderie not hate.

To those who may ask what real impact do such projects ultimately have? I respond: look around India and witness the poverty, the overstretched infrastructure and the sheer neglect and then think how many rupees have ended up in Swiss banks, robbing folk of a quality of life they can now only but dream of.

According to some estimates, it could be over Rs 72,80,000 crore (1.5 trillion dollars) since independence. Data from the Swiss Banking Association in 2006, indicated that India had more black money than the rest of the world combined, or 13 times India's total national debt. And then there is the UP rice scam, direct theft from the poor, involving some Rs 2,00,000 crore. Astronomical figures were also involved in the 2G Spectrum scam. And so on.

Global Finance Integrity has reported such acts have widened the gap between rich and poor and suggests the main guilty parties have been private organisations and High Net Worth Individuals.

It is therefore of little use in waiting around for India's ruling elites to do much positive any time soon. They seem too preoccupied with lining their own pockets and have capitulated to the global neo-liberalist agenda whereby the speed at which they suck at the US corporate teat is all that seems to matter. Grass root action at the community level is what is often required. The example set by Bindu Art School is just one very small example. There are thousands of others too.

Link to Bindu: <http://www.bindu-art.at/>

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