

FIGHTING RACISM

Enough Talk, Time for Action

The world will be looking to the delegates who will meet in South Africa next year to go beyond the all too predictable and perfunctory condemnations of racism. The World Conference will have to harness a renewed collective commitment to implement what was promised in those early post-war years.

by Mary Robinson

THE rise in Europe of a far right nurturing nostalgia for the Nazi past; the recent attacks on migrants in southern Spain; anti-foreigner attitudes in several of the economically better-off African countries; institutionalized racism in some police forces and prison systems; this grim and, sadly, incomplete list is a stark reminder that bigotry and bias are alive and well as we prepare to mark on Tuesday the first International Day against Racial Discrimination of the new century.

the Universal Declaration. One conclusion they will inevitably draw is that 50 years after that hopeful time, racism and xenophobia are again on the rise. In the past decade alone we have seen genocide in Rwanda and "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia. And today, a number of crises that challenge principles of equal treatment continue to burn slowly.

Indigenous peoples have been marginalized and pushed into the more inhospitable parts of their territories. Their rights to land and natural resources are tenuous or not recognized. United Nations human rights bodies are elaborating standards for their protection and remedies against violations, but there is a long way to go before members of these groups can obtain equality in fact.

Tackling racism and xenophobia must be one of our top priorities. It is clear that the affirmation in the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — "Everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights" — has not become a reality, where one is born and one's status often determine the rights one can effectively claim and the dignity one enjoys. International standards have been set for the prevention and elimination of discrimination, but social and political realities undermine the promise of human rights law.

Migrant workers are often subjected to exploitation and xenophobia. They are welcomed when there is a shortage of labour, but are the first to be fired when unemployment sets in. The international instrument drafted to ensure their rights — the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families — has not been ratified by a single industrialized country and has not entered into force. Undocumented workers smuggled or lured into a country on false promises are especially hard hit because of their "illegal" status. Many women end up in forced prostitution, not daring to denounce

The Roma community (Gypsies) are the subject of social discrimination in many countries. Europe in particular is at a loss to deal with this issue. Well-intentioned but paternalistic efforts to assimilate them to the dominant Western cultures have failed, and European states face the delicate

task of ensuring conditions under which the Roma can retain their identity and dignity without being subject to discrimination.

Hate speech is on the increase. Racists have discovered a new tool by which they can spread their virulent and destructive prejudices. Hate speech is disseminated through the Internet at little financial cost and, in some countries, without the risk of penal consequences. In Europe there is a particular fear of this new avenue for racist propaganda, and efforts are being made to bring it under control. But racists can now disseminate their hateful material through United States-based sites, protected by the country's application of the provisions of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

The world will be looking to the delegates who will meet in South Africa next year to go beyond the all too predictable and perfunctory condemnations of racism. The World Conference will have to harness a renewed collective commitment to implement what was promised in those early post-war years. The outcome should be a practical plan of action to fulfill the pledge to promote and encourage universal respect of human rights for all without distinction as to race, colour, gender or ethnic or national origin.

The author is United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Secretary-General of the World Conference against Racism.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Pardon Me, Your Gene is Showing!

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

In the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote, he wanted to free the slaves. Under pressure from the Southerners, Jefferson withdrew the passage. Declaring that "some truths are self-evident," Jefferson defined the American creed as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson's immortal declarations are etched on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.

THE President of the United States is having an affair with a young woman who works for him. Newspapers publish rumours of their romance, which the President denies. Members of the Congress call for the President's resignation. A scandal engulfs the White House and the nation.

Sounds familiar? However, the President in question is not William Jefferson Clinton. It is Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd President of the United States (1801-1809). (Jefferson could easily have been elected to a third term. But he followed the nation's founder George Washington's example in stepping down after two terms.) President Thomas Jefferson was rumoured to have had a 38-year relationship with Sally Hemings, a beautiful, light-skinned woman who was both his slave and his deceiver. The story was first published by Jefferson, the purchase of Louisiana for the United States in 1803 during his Presidency diverted people's attention away from the scandal.

Over the last two centuries, Jefferson-Hemings relationship has been a hot topic of gossip, discussion and controversy among historians. There were speculations, without proof, that

they were lovers, and that Jefferson fathered Hemings's six children. Some of the children were lily white and blonde. Nevertheless, when one of the children claimed to be Jefferson's son in the 1860s, he was roundly ridiculed.

A DNA analysis published in the prestigious British scientific journal Nature in 1998 indicated a perfect match between Jefferson's Y chromosome and that of a male descendant of Hemings's youngest son, Eston. Researchers concluded that in all probability Estlin's father was Jefferson himself. Thomas Jefferson's other descendants accepted the findings and their new relatives, and gathered for a reunion in 1998 at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, which Thomas Jefferson had founded.

Although it was acceptable for a white master to rape the slave girls he owned, tender and consensual love between the master and the slave was unthinkable. Jefferson did not go to the slave quarter to rape Sally repeatedly. Indications are that Jefferson and Hemings were in love.

History supports this view. Although Jefferson never acknowledged Sally publicly, he had her educated as thoroughly

as her own daughters. They wrote love letters over decades. And Jefferson freed Hemings's children when he was destitute — although he sold all other slaves. Historians believe that this was further evidence that the children were his. Hemings remained devoted to Jefferson even after his death in 1826. Until her own death ten years later, Sally tended Jefferson's grave every day.

An extraordinarily learned man both in the humanities and in the sciences, Thomas Jefferson was nevertheless a bundle of contradictions. On one hand he believed that the whites were physically prettier and mentally superior to the blacks, on the other he wanted to abolish slavery as unjust. In the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson even wrote, he wanted to free the slaves. Under pressure from the Southerners, Jefferson withdrew the passage. Declaring that "some truths are self-evident," Jefferson defined the American creed as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson's immortal declarations are etched on the walls of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC. He is one of the three US Presidents to have a Memorial/Monument named after him in the nation's capi-

tal. The other two are Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.

It has to be said in all fairness that Jefferson had a job and reputation to protect. Interracial love was a taboo during his time. Things are not too much better today. Race remains an explosive issue in America. Nobody likes to talk about it, but it hibernates just below the surface. Sometimes, as in the Rodney King beating (1991), the O. J. Simpson murder case (1994) and the killing of three unarmed black men by white police officers in New York City over the past year, it explodes into public consciousness. More about that at a later date.

Yet, Thomas Jefferson, the American icon did not practice what he preached. He owned slaves, and at a time of financial crisis, rather than freeing them, had them sold. Poor Jefferson! As far as Sally Hemings was concerned, he thought he had taken his secret to his grave. Those men and women sowing their wild oats everywhere should be wary of Jefferson's fate. Whatever these men and women may be doing secretly, hundreds of years from now, new technology may divulge what they have been up to!

DISADVANTAGED WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Assessing Their Needs in Urban Areas

by Dr Rudaba Khondker

SOCIALLY Disadvantaged People's Programme of Concern Bangladesh, an Ireland based international NGO organised a dissemination seminar recently in Dhaka on "Need Assessment Survey of the Disadvantaged Women and Children in the Urban areas of Bangladesh. The survey was conducted by Research Evaluation Associates for Development (READ) to have an insight into the conditions of sex workers, street children and persons with disabilities in eight urban areas of the country.

Socially Disadvantaged People's Programme (SDPP) of Concern Bangladesh started in 1975 through responding to the needs of the residents of seven vagrant homes of the country. The vagrant homes are government institutions and run by the Department Social Services.

It has been found that most of the residents who are brought and kept in the vagrant homes are sex workers and street children. For many years Concern has been supporting these centres and the supports were mainly in the form of providing health, nutrition, hygiene and structural upgradation of the vagrant homes. Over the years, through working in this area, Concern has realised that the residents who live in these homes belong to a much bigger community who operate outside the vagrant homes. And any intervention planned targeting the needs of this group would remain incomplete if the needs of this bigger community outside the centres were not addressed.

With this realisation, SDPP started its new dimension of work since early 1999. Here the wider objective is to contribute to the process of bringing positive changes in the lives of the disadvantaged section of people, especially the children and women, who live either in institutional care or in the marginalised social situation in Bangladesh. The programme aims at bringing positive change in the laws, policies, systems and services for protection and promotion of human rights for this group.

The whole area of working with sex workers and other marginalised section of people is relatively new in the country. Moreover, Concern Bangladesh's experience of working with sex workers and floating children is limited. In order to have an in depth knowledge about the target population, extent and types of major problems they face, facilities they avail, the NGO decided to conduct this study to identify the strategies and areas of intervention for these groups.

Critical Findings Surprisingly, almost none of the sex workers (brothel or floating) claimed any place within Sylhet Division as their place of birth. Most of them are from regions abounding with lures that of a modern city, like Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna in that order. Districts under Rajshahi and Barisal divisions have also been identified as the place of birth by a large number of the disadvantaged population. Although majority of the population are originally from the rural areas, but a comparable proportion were also born and living in the smaller urban areas prior to their movement to cities and bigger district towns.

Apart from the brothel based sex workers, the study has identified 33 per cent of the floating women primarily engaged in sex work as a means of livelihood. The estimated number of such floating sex workers according to the study would range from 83,000 conserva-

tively, according to estimates of qualitative study (16%), to 171,000, according to estimates of quantitative survey (30%). The lower estimate of the study compares with that of a study conducted by CARE (75,000) and VHS (100,000).

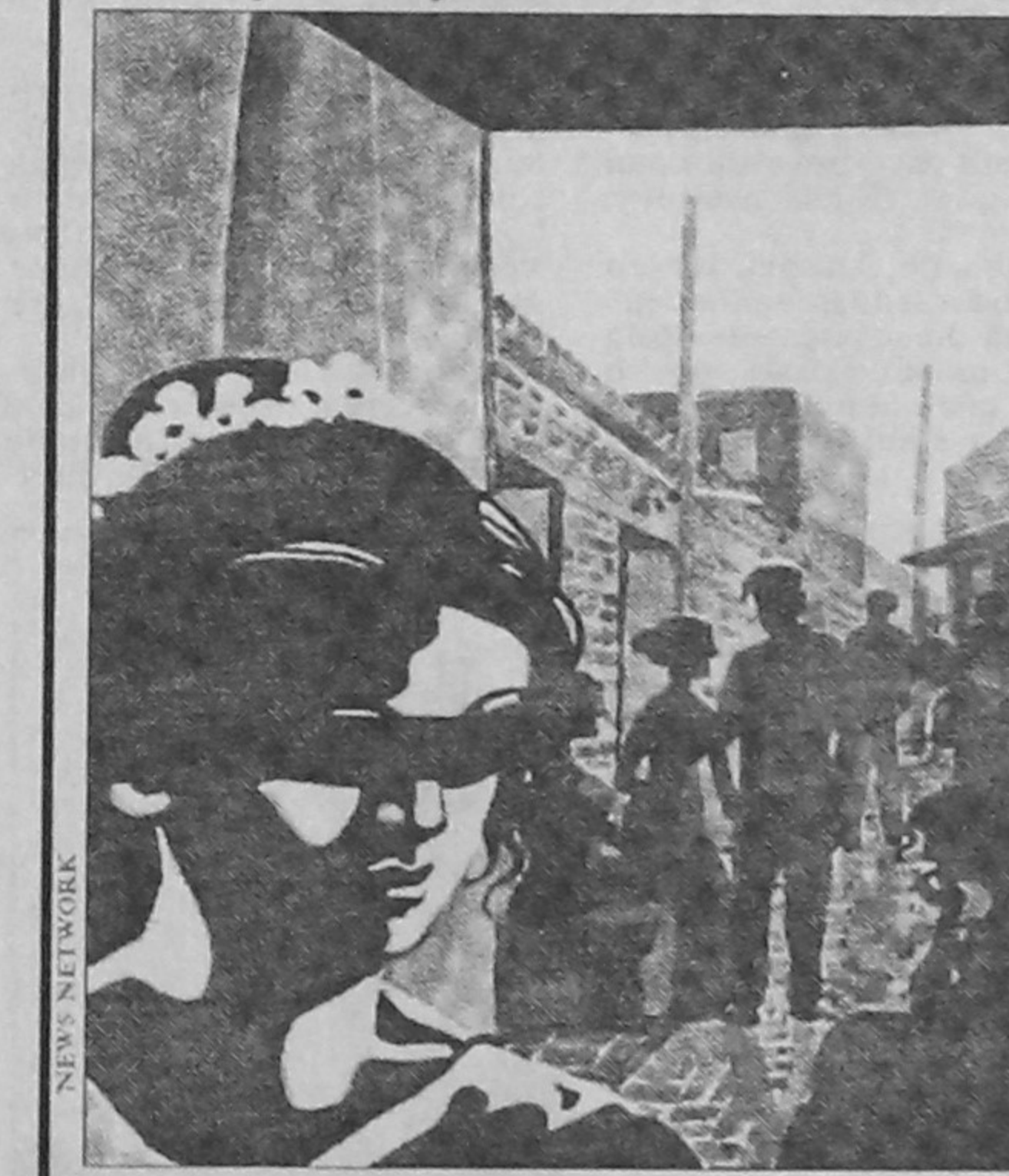
Among the 'Disadvantaged Women' the Brothel Sex Workers (BSW) are observed to be the youngest (mean age 25 years), followed by the Floating Women Sex Workers (FWSW);

not, show a marginal difference (Tk 20-25). Analysis of the savings by sample groups reveal interesting trends: savings of the children is proportionately the highest among all the sample groups combined. They save about one fourth of their income even though their earnings are much less, it is only because their motivations to support their families and also to save for their future is possibly intense, as many of the children

person physically (disability). Social factors included: tortures by husbands and other family members; tortures (including rape in some cases) by miscreants at the community level; deceptions regarding property by relatives, neighbours and influential; deception by lovers and agents (dalals); remarriage of husband/wife; pressure of dowry; and infertility including birth to daughters only. Economic

Efforts to bring sex workers out of prostitution have always failed in Bangladesh. The usually conservative society offers an inherent resistance against the rehabilitation of the "fallen women." Even their families don't accept them. As a result those who tried to change their lives, have been forced to return to prostitution.

The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association is one of several human rights groups that are trying to provide sex workers with decent jobs. In the past few years BNWLA rescued dozens of women from the country's brothels. But only one percent of them could be returned to their families, says BNWLA.



What has happened to the 267 sex workers who were picked by police during a controversial raid on Tanbazar brothel last year? Almost all of them are back to prostitution after authorities failed to keep them in state-run rehabilitation centres. According to social thinkers and women rights activists, taboos, misplaced moral values, religious constraints, lack of sympathy, sincerity and security work against the sex workers. Families don't welcome them for fear of shame and social backlash. Sex workers are considered untouchables also because many think they are unclean and afflicted with sex-related diseases, including fatal AIDS.

The alternative jobs that are available for rehabilitated sex workers pay much less than prostitution. "We need security and good jobs," said sex worker Selina, who has been sent to her family at Jhikhana slum in Narayanganj from the Kashempur Rehabilitation Centre.

Prof. Hamida Akhter Begum, who teaches Psychology and Clinical Psychology at Dhaka University, said "The sex workers get mentally sick by perpetrating commercial sex day after day. So, they need counselling and psychological treatment."

mean age 28 years), and the Other Floating Women (FWO; mean age 30 years), while the Floating Disabled Women are the oldest (FDW; mean age 34 years). The brothel sex workers are not only comparatively young, they are also more literate, of whom 15 per cent went to school, followed by FWSW (11%), FWO (6%) and the least literate are the FDW (3%). Among the children both the groups (FDCHs and OFCHs) are of comparable age 13 to 14 years, but as regards literacy rates there exists a wide gap between the Disabled Street Children and those other street children (not disabled).

Floating Women Sex Workers (FWSWs) earn the highest median income of Tk. 121 daily, which is almost double than that of the Brothel Sex Workers (Tk. 70). However it should be noted that majority (all in Dhaka) of those identified in this study as Brothel Sex Workers are no longer (since last six months or more) residing in the brothels as they have been recently evicted. This dislocation might have affected their daily income level. The Other Floating Women and Floating Disabled Women do not have any difference in their daily average income (Tk 40). Similarly, the daily average earning of the children, irrespective of being disabled or

are also attending schools currently. Of the rest i.e., among the women, the sex workers of both categories are saving one sixth of their income and they also have a motivation, for they are not certain about the continuity of their profession. Both floating disabled and the other floating women on average do not save at all.

Acute poverty influenced universally in rendering a person floating, but the degree of influences somewhat differed between economic and social factors by varying sample categories. Majority of the sex workers, either from brothel or from the street, were influenced more by the social factors (BSW: 62% & FWSW: 51% than economic factors (BSW: 38% & FWSW: 45%) prior to leaving their place of residence and became absorbed in their current status, while majority of the disabled and the other floating women were rendered floating more because of economic factors (FDW: 53% & FWO: 64%) than social factors (FDW: 23% & FWO: 27%). In case of the children again economic factors were influencing predominantly with almost comparable influences of social factors. Remaining per cent of the disadvantaged population are influenced by natural calamities (River Erosion), which caused damage to property and to the

factors included: temptation of jobs, financial crisis/acute poverty/starvation, no land/no property/no shelter/no income/no job/no savings/no support. Natural factors include: river erosion, destruction of homestead and accidents.

Specific Recommendations Recommendations specifying interventions have been outlined to redress the grievances and alleviate sufferings of the Disadvantaged Women and Children in order to bring about qualitative changes in their lives. However the policy level interventions are not underscored assuming that interventions on consciousness raising, enhancing knowledge and skills and providing basic necessities like shelter, security, access to education and health care are immediate priorities. Policy level interventions will emerge if the interventions to change and improve life of the disadvantaged population are addressed and implemented effectively.

The recommendations for interventions have been suggested generally for all the groups of sample population, more specifically for the sex workers. The writer is Co-ordinator, Socially Disadvantaged People's Programme (SDPP)

Land Reform Wins Applause — and Call for an Encore

The controversy over squatters' raids in Zimbabwe has prompted people in the Indian state of West Bengal to take stock of their own land reforms. One man who fostered the movement in the Seventies wants a fresh shake-up as he reflects on the peasant push for fairer farming.

Bishakha De Sarkar writes from Calcutta

THE man who played midwife to land reform in West Bengal more than 20 years ago is now calling for a fresh phase in the local farming revolution.

At a time when moves to redistribute farmland in Zimbabwe have stirred heated international debate, the issue is still very much alive in this east Indian state, which is held up by many as a good example of land reform. It boasts the country's best annual growth rate in agricultural production.

"Reforms are a continuing process," says Debabrata Bandopadhyaya, who was West Bengal's Land Reform Commissioner in the Seventies. "The government must look at Agrarian reform."

Now that large swathes of rural land have been redistributed to millions of peasants, he believes that further changes could enhance economic yields from scattered plots. He has called on the state's authorities to support measures to encourage the setting up of co-operatives and related agro-industries.

Looking back on the achievements so far, Bandopadhyaya feels that, given the right factors, land reform is feasible anywhere.

"It was a combination of political will, bureaucratic effort and popular participation that ushered in reform in West Bengal," he says.

He recalls the peasants — some of them poor sharecroppers, often bullied by landlords — who helped to spearhead the movement under the slogan: "Land to the tiller."

"These were people such as Haradban Murmu, who had long tilled another man's land. When officials began setting up camps across the state to promote reform, they found few farmers ready to speak up for their rights.

Bandopadhyaya first encountered Murmu at one of the early camps in Hoogly, near Calcutta. The poor peasant stepped forward to point out that the officials were conducting their survey from a landlord's house.

"He told us that instead of waiting for the people to come to us we should go to the fields — to the people," says the former commissioner. So they moved on his advice, and received a much better response.

Land reform was conducted in two phases. The first was initiated by the United Front coalition government between 1967 and 1970, and was led by one of the coalition partners, the Communist party of India-Marxist. The then Land Reform Minister, Hare Krishna Konar, was himself a fiery peasant leader from the CPI-M.

Although the party calls itself communist, many Indian analysts liken it to European social democratic parties. The land reforms in West Bengal and a second Indian state, Kerala, were probably the most radical acts by CPI-M-led governments.

In the first phase of reforms in West Bengal, a million acres of land were seized and redistributed among two million peasant families. The government set a ceiling on the amount of land a person could own, and sent officials around the villages, asking peasants to identify surplus areas to be redistributed.

"We followed the dictum that the villagers know best," says Biplob Dasgupta, an agriculture economist and West Bengal MP. "There were some excesses, but in most cases, we got an accurate picture."

They assured the locals that the moves were all legally sound under Indian law. Some

court cases followed, but the peasants' claims were mostly upheld.

Bandopadhyaya recalls: "[Minister] Konar had taught me an important thing — the farmer is a conservative man. He won't come forward to take land until he is convinced that he is not doing anything illegal."

Reform ground to a halt in 1970 when the United Front government fell. Opponents of the changes sought to take back some of the redistributed land — sparking local clashes. Opposition to reform also came from the central government, which for many years delayed approval of state legislation.

In 1977, however, reform was back on track when a left-wing coalition won power again in West Bengal.

In the second phase, the government sought to give proper tenancy agreements to sharecroppers, so that they and their children had rights to the land they tilled and could not be evicted at will by landlords or have the bulk of their harvests taken as rent — as had often happened in the past.

A total of 1.6 million families were assured tenancy rights.

"With land monopoly gone, others' energies were unleashed," says Dasgupta, pointing out that the two phases spread earnings among previously poor farming families across the state.

Agricultural production quickly grew from an annual rise of less than one per cent in the late Seventies to more than six per cent by the mid-Eighties — a rate still being maintained today, compared with a national average of 3.9 per cent.

Economic prosperity has also brought political empowerment, with many peasants now standing in regular village-level elections to defend the gains of the reforms.

Meanwhile, thousands of landlords received compensation for their losses, though at well below the going market rate. Many turned to farming on their remaining plots, investing in machinery and intensive methods, and prospering as a result.

Some analysts now see land reform as underpinning a range of economic and social achievements both in West Bengal and in the southern state of Kerala, where great strides have been made in education, health and women's empowerment.

Can the Indian experience be replicated elsewhere? "India did not have the problems that Africa has faced where the richest land had been taken over by the colonial rulers," says Dasgupta. Barring some British-held tea and coffee plantations, the land remained with the people.

However, Bandopadhyaya maintains that the move can be a success elsewhere, provided farmers receive encouragement and support from the authorities and the banking system.

Whether West Bengal is now on course to take the revolution to a third stage remains unclear. While Bandopadhyaya — now retired but assisting in the social sector — is calling for further advances, Dasgupta maintains that the government is still consolidating the existing reforms.

Whatever happens next, the former commissioner is convinced that the face of rural Bengal has been changed for the better. "There is now a sense of dignity and respect," he says. "Our peasants know that they cannot be evicted from their land any more."

— GEMINI NEWS

by Jim Davis

Garfield ©



James Bond

