

Penniless¹ but by no means poor

Mari Marcel-Thekaekara thought she knew about poverty after working in India. Then she visited Glasgow.

Years ago I heard someone say "I'd rather be poor in India." I thought: "What utter crap²." Typical Western romanticisation of India, poverty and all.

Then, in 1994, after 10 years working with the Adivasi (indigenous tribes people) of the Nilgiri mountains in Tamil Nadu in India, my husband and I came to Britain as part of an exchange to visit housing estates³ in the inner cities⁴ of England and Scotland. The idea was to bring over ideas about social change in India and also to reverse the stereotypical image of the West always sending aid workers to help the Third World. Throughout our visit, our concepts of wealth and poverty were continually challenged.

We were told that Easterhouse housing estate in Glasgow is Europe's worst slum⁵. We thought this was ludicrous⁶ – these people had assured housing, electricity, hot water, refrigerators, gas or electric cooking ranges. By Indian standards this was middle-class luxury. I could picture anaemic, emaciated Adivasi women carrying water in pots from half a kilometre away; huts without electricity and women searching for firewood every day, thankful if they had a kilo of rice to feed their families.

Then suddenly we were hit by the reality of the poverty in Glasgow. Most of the men in Easterhouse hadn't had a job in 20 years. They were dispirited, depressed, often alcoholic. Their self-esteem had gone. Emotionally and mentally they were far worse off than the poor where we worked in India, even though the physical trappings⁷ of poverty were less stark⁸.

We'd fallen into the trap of looking at poverty only from the point of view of material benefits. The Easterhouse people

looked better-off than the Asian poor, but in reality they suffered as much social deprivation. The men who'd been jobless for 20 years felt far more hopeless than people in India who scabbled in garbage heaps to sell scrap metal, paper and rags⁹ to feed their children. Both groups were at the bottom of society. [...]

Bob Holman, writer, social worker and our host in Easterhouse, had shown us underdeveloped Scottish children – a whole generation were a head shorter than their parents and grandparents. Malnutrition in Britain! Even we were amazed. Lack of protein was a Third World problem, surely. Yet the examples were there, but to pass these perceptions on to people who were determined not to see them was incredibly difficult. [...]

It occurred to us that even people working in development talked about wealth and poverty using a very narrow definition. We use cash as the sole measure. Most of us fall into the trap of working towards alleviating¹⁰ physical poverty, thinking this is the solution to all ills.

In 1995 the Adivasis took the challenge further. At a meeting to look critically at the past 10 years, they were clear about their own notions of wealth: "Our community, our children, our unity, our culture, the forest." Money was not mentioned at all. We were stunned¹¹. As we discussed concepts of poverty further, we realised that the Adivasis didn't see themselves as poor. They saw themselves as people without money. It took some concentrated thinking for me to absorb that this was not necessarily the same thing.

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1. **penniless** (adj.): having no money

2. **crap** (n.): nonsense (*fam.*)

3. **housing estate**: cité, lotissement

4. **inner city**: a low-income neighbourhood, usually near or in a large city's centre

5. **slum** (n.): taudis, quartier déshérité

6. **ludicrous** /'lʊdɪkrəs/ (adj.): ridiculous

7. **trappings** (n.): attributs, signes extérieurs

8. **stark** (adj.): severe, unpleasant

9. **rags** (n.): chiffons, haillons

10. **alleviate** /ə'li:vieɪt/ (v.): soulager

11. **stunned** (adj.): extremely surprised