

**REPORT OF THE
INTAF-ORISSA STATE CONFERENCE ON POVERTY
5th and 6th November 2005**

On the 5th and 6th November, 2005, Neelachal Seva Pratisthan (NSP) and S.S.U.D., Balanga in collaboration with the Puri District Action Group, Orissa was host to a state conference on rural poverty held under the auspices of the International Task Force for the Rural Poor, an international networking organization that was set up in 1988 with the aim of identifying those policies, programs and projects of integrated education and development which contribute most to the all-round development of the rural poor and which are innovative and pioneering. INTAF's job is to publicize such policies, programs and projects and to help make them as effective as possible.

Following a successful international conference in London on 2nd and 3rd July 2005, INTAF was invited by members working with the rural poor in Orissa to set up a state chapter in this, the poorest state in India. Neelachal Seva Pratisthan offered to host the conference on its spacious campus, situated in the midst of waterlogged rice growing country. NSP is a well-established project which runs a range of activities for the rural poor, including schools for the deaf and blind, an orphanage for abandoned children, a short-term refuge for women, an old-age home, an intercollege and degree college, vocational courses in tailoring and computing, an anganwadi training center and integrated education for disabled children.

Participants came from the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar chapters of INTAF as well as from local projects. The international convenor of INTAF, Jyoti Singh, and the international co-convenor, Mukat Singh, S.C.Gajendra, Chairman of NSP, Ajit K Singh, co-convenor for Bihar, Dr Sankarsan Dash and Mr and Mrs S D Sharma from Ghaziabad were among those attending.

The opening session was chaired by S C Gajendra. Ajit K Singh spoke of the speed with which governments change, officers are transferred, panchayats elect new members – but poverty remains. He saw INTAF as a

voice, a power for the village poor. The government has many plans for the rural poor but these plans seldom reach them. The biggest weakness is corruption. Very few organizations are able to fight corruption but if INTAF is able to form a large, wide-ranging network of NGOs working in rural development, it can speak out against those forces working against the poor and support NGOs by giving them a voice of some authority and strength.

Both S.D.Sharma and Dr Sankarsan Dash pointed out that poverty is not just about income; it covers a great deal more, including health services, education, roads, electricity and water. Mukat Singh reminded participants how weak the voice of the poor is. They suffer alone. Only those who live and work among the poor understand them. There are NGOs that work with them but no one wants to listen to them. The Central Government is not interested in a direct dialogue with the poor and in any case does not speak their language. Out of all the funds supposedly earmarked for the rural poor, only 15% actually reaches them. Where does the rest go? As we all know, it goes into the pockets of those who are meant to be implementing the various schemes. Among the worst offenders are those whose job it is to compile local records of who are below and who are above the poverty line.

The truth of the matter is that a great many people do not want poverty to be reduced while some actively work to keep the poor poor. Poverty is hierarchical and those 5% at the top, in whose hands all real power lies, live in constant fear that if the bottom level becomes better off, they may topple off their pedestals and fall. Even our education teaches us that those with the most money are the most important. As Jyoti Singh went on to say, INTAF needs the involvement of NGOs actively working among and for the rural poor so that a strong, true voice can emerge, a voice that can be heard even on the international stage.

The afternoon session considered participants' expectations from the conference and consequently focused on the obstacles to reducing poverty, the formation of action plans and strong networks, the difficulty NGOs have in getting proper support from government agencies and how to involve people, especially the youth, in working to eradicate poverty.

Mukat Singh, speaking of the strong influence of the USA, informed participants that the biggest budget goes on defence and building up arsenals of weapons for which India is a large market. The biggest businessmen in the west are weapons traders and their biggest clients are the poorest countries. These days, everything is for sale in India – this is what our education has done for us. It has made us feel special if we are successful in graduating from the various levels of education even though the education we receive is of little use; we learn simply to pass exams. Education has taught us not to do any manual work but rather to look for a job paying as much as possible for the least amount of work.

The first day finished with a tour of the NSP campus and all its activities, followed by a cultural program in the evening. The audience was enthralled by the passion of the young students who danced to patriotic songs, the delightful Oriyan folk dance and the extraordinary professionalism of a young troupe from Raghu Rajpur, who gave an amazing display of classical dance mixed in an imaginative and entertaining way with gymnastics.

On the second day, four discussion groups that had looked at specific topics in detail on the first afternoon gave feedback. Group One had considered the role of financial institutions in reducing poverty. They found that beneficiaries were not selected properly, were not made aware of the benefits they were entitled to and were exploited by intermediaries. In particular, the lack of any proper follow-up, technical knowledge and marketing facilities made the contribution of banks and other financial institutions paltry, at best.

Group Two discussed the role of NGO networks in poverty eradication which they

felt was to gather information about the poor and to put their demands before the government; to make the poor aware of their rights; to identify relevant issues; to form and strengthen SHGs, grain banks and farmers' clubs; to identify likeminded NGOs at state, district and block level; and to encourage people to participate in the Panchayati Raj system.

The third group went on to look closely at Panchayati Raj Institutions and their role. They considered the many different programs that come under the auspices of the PRIs and felt that although these were usually well planned, their objectives were not often fulfilled. A key reason was the faulty selection of beneficiaries but interference by vested interests, lack of awareness, lack of motivation and the power of PRI and government officials all meant that programs were seldom successful.

The fourth and final group investigated the role of the media, both print and electronic. Their findings indicated that the media does not reach the poor properly, does not give sufficient information to the poor and basically, has no interest in the poor. One suggestion made was that NGOs should run their own television channel, newspapers and journals.

In summing up, Mukat Singh pointed out that those in whose hands power lies are the ones who make the rules that keep the poor poor and the rich rich. They control the resources and how they are used. All the 'weapons' are in their hands. They have no idea what poverty is for they have never lived or worked among the poor.

Combating this is not easy but not impossible. To help the poor, we need good quality research, a thorough understanding of the government's rules and a strong complaint system that will activate democracy. INTAF's role, as an international network *for* (but not *of*) the poor, is to represent them at international level and be their voice on the global stage.

The afternoon of the second day included a boat trip on Chilka Lake, the largest freshwater lake in India. This gave yet another perspective on rural poverty. Very

few homes lined the water-sodden banks and those few were starkly poor. A handful of fishermen worked their nets; most of the banks of the lake were just mud and water, impossible to cultivate for the lake and the river into which it flowed both flooded every year in the monsoon.

In the final session of the conference, the INTAF – Orissa chapter was formally constituted and S C Gajendra agreed to be its convenor. All participants from Orissa were voted onto the committee, including Dr Sankarsan Dash, Prados Pati, Ajay Penthoi, Kumud Behra and Chhabila Naik. NSP had been excellent hosts, providing first-rate food, clean, spacious lodgings and a warm welcome. It is very much hoped that the success of this conference will inspire further chapters of INTAF to form in India.