

SWARAJYA

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Mr. McNAMARA ON URBAN POOR -II

R. VENKATARAMAN

THAT THE urban poor are denied equitable access to water, sanitation and health services, that they sometimes pay for the water supplied by street vendors as much as 20 times the price paid by the middle and upper classes for the water piped into their homes and that the modern well-equipped hospitals are beyond the reach of the poor add to the misery of slum dwellers. Lack of educational facilities is synonymous with denying opportunities for earning higher incomes. Mr McNamara pointed out that while city authorities were pouring money for subways and express ways, very little of this heavy investment benefited the poor. The pitiable lot of the slum and pavement dwellers is a blot on our civilization and the longer we delay the solution, the nearer we are to an explosion.

The magnitude of the problem of education can be understood only if it is realized that the child population in less developed coun-

tries during the 70s will be between 40 and 45 per cent of the total population, while the ratio will be around 30 per cent in developed countries and that during the decade 1970 to 1980, the number of children of school age (5 to 14) will increase from 640 million to 822 million. In India, primary education is free

and the percentage of children of school age (6 to 11) attending schools has increased from 42.6 per cent in 1950-51 to about 82 per cent in 1972. The Fifth Plan target of increasing it to about 97 per cent, is a stupendous task calling for massive investment and determined effort, persuasive or otherwise.

VICTIM



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The United Nations had estimated in 1960 that as many as 10 dwelling units per thousand of the population had to be built in all developing countries in order to cope with the growth in urban population and offset obsolescence. In many countries, hardly one-fifth of the target had been reached and the housing situation has deteriorated and is almost on the verge of disaster in some others. According to the 1971 census, the shortage of housing in India was 1.45 crores, of which 29 lakhs were in urban and 1.16 crores in rural areas. The National Building Organization has estimated housing shortage on the eve of the Fifth Plan (1974) at 1.56 crores, 38 lakhs in urban and 1.18 crores in rural areas. Mr McNamara stressed rightly that the tenements and other constructions made by municipal and government authorities are too expensive for the poor and observed that "surveys indicate that up to 70 per cent of the poor cannot afford even the cheapest housing produced by Public Agencies. Mr McNamara's solution to the problem is twofold. One is to upgrade the slum settlements with infrastructure like water, roads, drainage, lighting and sanitation services and provide secure tenure for these quarters. During his term of office as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1952-53, Rajaji had actually

initiated improvement schemes on the lines now suggested by Mr McNamara. In a strongly worded article, Rajaji said: "The idea of dealing with these slums by way of clearance, as we must take it with mosquitoes and rats and vermin, i.e., to get rid of them because they are not wanted, is totally wrong."

The other scheme, namely, provision of "sites and services" formulated by Mr McNamara provides for the land to be developed with roads, water supply, drainage, sewerage, electricity, etc., and then divided into small plots and leased or sold to the poor so that they may construct their own dwellings on those plots. This has also been tried in several places in Madras, the most notable instance being the Namasivayapuram scheme. There, after providing minimal amenities, sites were allotted. Building material worth Rs 150 were provided for the slum dwellers to enable them to build their own homes. Unfortunately, owing to the limitation of land and the difficulty of moving the poor to the outskirts of the City far away from their place of work, the tenements scheme has to replace the site and services scheme in India. As the allottees had no means to pay the rent, most of these tenements have been let out to others and the poor have gone elsewhere and created new slums. Thus, the

tenements have not solved the housing problem of the urban poor to any appreciable extent.

While the remedy suggested in the brilliant address of Mr McNamara is undoubtedly valuable and should be given the highest consideration by the governments of the developing countries, we feel that the measures should be supplemented by action in other directions as well. Primarily, the rate of growth of population should be checked, so that whatever little progress is achieved by the developing countries is not eaten away by the growing population. Secondly, the poor are attracted to the cities not by their riches and luxuries, which, in any event, are beyond their reach, but because of the opportunities of employment. A well-planned dispersal of industries, sufficiently away from towns and cities but near enough to facilities for transport of goods to the industry will go a long way in relieving the increasing pressure on the cities and reducing the sordid condition of existence. New cities, which develop around major industrial complexes, can start with a clean slate and provide the amenities to the poor on the lines suggested by Mr McNamara. The problem is undoubtedly urgent and requires immediate attention.

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