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PEOPLE FIRST

Justice in a Global Economy

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The rules about what one can and cannot own are fundamental to the way an economy operates and determines the kind of society that results. The economies of indigenous people are based on a concept of no ownership. How can you 'own' the land, the water, the forests, the birds, the animals?

Stan Thekaekara was born on his family's farm outside Bangalore and has a degree in English Literature from Bangalore University. He first became involved with tribal groups through AICUF, an all-India student organisation, and between 1974 and 1977 lived in a tribal village in Bihar. Between 1979 and 1983 he started a rehabilitation centre for people with alcohol and drug problems on the family farm and founded the Bangalore Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Centre. In 1984 he became Community Development Officer with the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association, a small NGO in the Nilgiri Hills of South India. In 1986 Stan and his wife Mari set up ACCORD to help tribal people reclaim their land. He is a Trustee of Oxfam GB and has worked as an adviser to Oxfam on its UK Poverty Programme.

I was lying in a hospital bed in Chennai when the invitation to deliver the Feasta Annual Lecture arrived. A very sudden and totally unexpected illness had left me fighting for my life. When my wife Mari told me of the invitation, my first thought was 'Why me – what have I got to say?' But when I started wondering about this I found that there was actually quite a lot. I don't know how important or valid it is but, yes, years and years of working to protect the rights of indigenous people in different parts of India had taught me a great deal.

And so my second reaction was 'Well, why not?' And suddenly I began looking forward to it so much that I am sure it made a significant contribution to my recovery. So you see this opportunity to stand here before all of you and deliver the 2002 Annual Feasta lecture is much more than just an honour, it is something I have looked forward to with, I must admit, quite a bit of trepidation as well. I thank all of you assembled here for making this possible.

On the 28th of February, 1984, my wife Mari and I along with our one-year-old daughter got on a bus in Bangalore to begin a 7-hour journey to the Nilgiri Hills in Tamil Nadu to throw in our lot with the adivasi or indigenous people of the area. We never imagined for a moment that this journey would one day lead here to Ireland.

Let me warn those of you who expect me to present a cutting edge analysis of the global economy and its impact, you may be disappointed. I am not an economist, much less a theorist. I don't pretend to understand all the shenanigans of the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF any more than most ordinary people. But from the little that I have read and understood, I know one thing – these global economic institutions and the many treaties and agreements they have engineered have *not* added one cubit in value to the social and economic well-being of the people I work with. If anything they have drastically taken away from it. They have not contributed in any way to the eradication of the poverty and deprivation of the adivasis and similar disadvantaged communities across the globe – they have aggravated it.

So what I intend to present today is a view from the ground. A view rooted in the everyday reality of scores of people trying to find enough to feed their children for the day. The reality of people to whom economic well-being is not measured by graphs and curves and indices but by whether there is enough rice for the night meal.

I would like to present this in three parts. The first part is a brief history of our work with the adivasi people of the Nilgiri Hills of Southern India. The second part is the lessons we have

learnt from this experience, which I believe can contribute to finding solutions to the problems of a globalised economy. And the third part will put forward a proposal of what can be done.

Part I – The Journey into Tribal India

This journey actually began in 1974 when I, fresh out of university and quite wet behind the ears, marched into a tribal village in rural Bihar armed with little else than a mix of Marxian analysis and liberation theology. Unjust economic structures had to be changed, wealth re-distributed, poverty eradicated. The revolution seemed to be lurking around the corner.

In the 28 years since then, this struggle against poverty and its root causes has continued. And though there has been no revolution, differences have been made to peoples' lives. Especially in the last 16 years after we set up ACCORD, a voluntary organization to work with the adivasis in the Gudalur Valley of the Nilgiri Hills. When we arrived in Gudalur in 1984, the majority of adivasis were working as daily wage earners inextricably trapped in a web of deprivation and poverty. It quickly became evident that the root cause of their poverty and exploitation was the loss of control over the land and forests their ancestors had held sacred since time immemorial. British India nationalised their forests. Colonial economic interests then took them over and converted huge areas of centuries-old forests into tea plantations. Post independence India continued the trend with land-hungry colonisers from the neighbouring state, Kerala, flooding the area in large numbers. They grabbed, through fair means and foul, whatever land they could and in the process enslaved the adivasis, luring them with alcohol and trapping them in debt.

And so we started the Tribal Land Rights Movement through which we grabbed – no, we prefer to call it 'reclaimed' – hundreds of acres of land that had once been in adivasi hands. And we helped them to plant tea on those lands. While tea did wonders for the tribal economy and radically changed some of the local power equations, it also meant that we had catapulted the adivasis from a local daily wage economy into a global market economy over which they had absolutely no control. At least in the wage economy if they did not get a decent wage we could mobilise hundreds of people to challenge the landlord and demand a fair wage. But when

the price of tea crashes as it has done over the last few years, whose collar do we catch? We are told it is market forces – faceless, conveniently anonymous forces which we cannot control. And suddenly our years of empowering one of the weakest communities in India is rendered futile as powerlessness in the market economy overwhelms us all.

the root cause of their poverty and exploitation was the loss of control over the land <<<

At least so we were told. But chose not to accept. We decided we would fight back and seek to gain power even in this new market economy. And so we dug deep into the history and culture of the adivasi people in an effort to find insights and signposts that would lead us to discover new and untrodden paths. In the process we have discovered that for centuries these people have had social, political and economic systems that would serve us well.

So in the next part I would like to share with you some of the concepts, which lie at the heart of adivasi society.

Part II: Ancient Concepts for a Modern World:

Ownership

The capitalist economy is rooted in the concept of individual ownership and enterprise. In the socialist economy, state ownership and collective enterprise is supreme, even if it means coercing people into working in the collective mode. The collapse of the socialist economy seems to have vindicated the American view that the capitalist economy is the only viable one. And because of a warped media bias, the focus of attention has always been only on the socialist and capitalist economies. An either/or scenario. But both these economies are still founded on a concept of 'ownership' – where the individual in one and the state in the other has the fundamental right to 'own' and use the earth's resources as they will. What no one has talked about are the economies of indigenous people, which are based on a concept of NO ownership! How can you 'own' the land, the water, the forests, the birds, the animals. If I were to walk around the streets of Dublin with a plastic tent around me

and sign that says 'this air is private property – trespassing not allowed' and was surrounded by armed guards that ensured my private airspace was protected from encroachment by others, I am sure you would all laugh at this crazy Indian and his strange foreign customs!! To the adivasi the air is no different from the land, or the water, or the forests – we did not create them, we cannot own them. To them these are common property resources to be used by all – you can have usufruct rights, which are collectively regulated but not ownership rights. So what happens when these two differing notions of the right to ownership come in contact with each other?

Let me tell you the story of Subramanian - a young Moolakurumba tribal who started ACCORD with Mari and I. His father, Kappala Thambi, was revered as a hard-working and skilled farmer. One day when Subramanian was still a child, a young pioneering family from the neighbouring state of Kerala came in search of land in the Nilgiri hills. Thambi welcomed this young family, sheltered them, fed them and offered land that he had cleared the previous year saying 'It is too difficult for you to begin with clearing land – use this land this year and grow your food.' But George, the young Syrian Christian from Kerala, quickly put up a fence around this land and when questioned said it was to protect his crops from cattle and wild animals.

>>> *the air is no different from the land, or the water, or the forests – we did not create them, we cannot own them*

The next year he started tilling the land again and when Thambi questioned him and said 'You must not cultivate the same patch of land, you must let it rest otherwise it will not yield,' George said 'Don't worry, there are new chemicals and fertilisers that will feed the earth and it will yield year after year'. A year passed and another and another and the fence kept getting moved as George brought more and more land under cultivation and finally when ten years had gone and Subramanian was a young boy, his father asked George for the land. And George produced a paper with official-looking stamps and signatures and said 'This land is mine – I have title to it.' This story was repeated to us in village

after village and many were less fortunate than Thambi and his people. Because in many villages the colonisers took over the entire land and the adivasis, in order to survive, were forced to accept wage labour on land that once was their own. So, finally, not only does the coloniser own the land, he also owns the labour of the adivasi.

This concept of the right to own is fundamental to how an economy operates and will determine the kind of society that we have. The pioneers of the American Wild West epitomised the right of the individual to own whatever he was physically able to take, protect and control. Over the years this right to take and own is no longer based on individual effort – but on the ability to pay for what we desire to own. So I can take as much of the earth and the oil and minerals below it, the water and forests on it, the birds and the air above it as long as I can pay for it.

In what is common wisdom to them, bewildered indigenous people have asked over the centuries 'How can you pay for the earth? How can you own the earth?' But we have been too busy in our quest for economic growth and ownership to pause and try and answer their questions. We are only now beginning to wake up to the fact that there is a limit to what one can take from the earth, what one can own of the earth. But we do not know how to stop this cannonball we have set in motion.

Distribution of Economic Benefit

Another very different concept is one that has to do with how the fruits or benefits of economic activity are to be distributed. In 1997, an adivasi group was invited to Germany to be a part of the Protestant church's Kirchentag, a celebration that takes place every alternate year. At one service, there was a gospel reading, the parable of the labourers who worked different hours but were all paid the same wage. As kids we had debated the justice behind it.

The adivasis however, had no problem with this biblical concept at all. They couldn't figure out what there was to debate. They told us how at the end of the hunt, a share of meat was sent to every family in the village, regardless of whether they had participated in the hunt or not, even adding a portion for guests who were visiting at the time. There was no question of calculating any individual's labour or input! But this was not all. Even stray passers-by were given a share to take home, and apparently knowing this, many opportunistic non adivasi neighbours would

ensure that they 'happened' to pass by when the spoils were being divided. The adivasis just laughed. They bore no ill will towards the uninvited guests.

Yet another story comes from the Boran tribe in Kenya and Ethiopia. The Borans are basically pastoralists. Cattle – camel, cows and goats - are the backbone of their economy. They have a system called *buusa gonofa* that ensures no one ever falls below a collectively-defined poverty line. There is a committee whose task it is to keep track of the cattle population of each and every family of the tribe. If for any reason the number of someone's cattle falls below the minimum required, the committee orders someone who has more to hand some over to this person. 'What happens if everybody in the village is below or close to this minimum?', I asked. 'Then we go to the committee at the next level which is of the region and they will call on some other village to give their cattle and there is finally a still higher level of the entire tribe or nation'. I am told that this system still continues in many of the villages of the Boran tribe.

What is the purpose of economic activity – to acquire and hoard more wealth? If the creation and acquisition of wealth is the primary purpose of the economy, then the distribution of wealth becomes secondary. Distribution ceases to be the concern of the economic system and becomes the responsibility of the political system. And if we fail to achieve an equitable distribution of wealth, we believe the fault lies not in the way we conduct our economy but in the way we conduct our politics. So we continue to battle with the political system, bringing in new schemes, new programmes, new deals for the poor while we allow the economic system to continue unbridled and roaming free, seeking new pastures in faraway lands.

Whereas if the well-being of all people is the primary purpose of the economy, then distribution of wealth becomes an integral part of the economic system – like the *buusa gonofa* of the Boran. Our politics, our beliefs and our values should direct and control the economy and not the other way around.

The Meaning of Wealth

In 1995, after ten years of work with the adivasi people of the Nilgiri Hills, we undertook a massive exercise to evaluate what had happened over the last few years in order to determine the future course of our work. A crucial part of this exercise

was to understand whether we had succeeded in bringing about a redistribution of wealth. This led to inevitable questions about the meaning of wealth. Hundreds of meetings were held in hundreds of villages. And in every one of them wealth was defined as the earth, forests, water, our culture, our unity, our songs, our children. But not one village – not one single one – mentioned money!! When we heard this in the first few villages, steeped in our superiority we thought what simple, naive and adorable people. And we gently prodded them to understand that the world had changed, the economy around them had changed – and that today wealth did mean money. But in village after village people said, No! money was not wealth but a means to create wealth. Nobody denied the importance or the need for money – how could they since it was their daily earning of money that put rice in the pot? – they simply challenged the role of money in society.

These differing notions were put to an interesting test when the group of adivasis visited Germany. We wondered about plunging them from what we considered their abject poverty into the overflowing wealth of the West and the impact it would have on them. All our fears were put to rest and one incident clearly showed us that their notion of wealth remained with them even in Germany.

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Let me share that story. We were in Hamburg and our hosts, who took great pains to show us different aspects of German society, arranged for a visit to an old people's home. A very well-to-do one. And when they were told that there were many such homes, the adivasis were truly amazed – what a wonderful society that cared for its lonely old people so well. But they were surprised that there were so many old people without families, without children and grandchildren to look after them and who were so poor that they had to have special homes for them. Our German friends were quick to correct them – these old people were in fact quite wealthy. They did have children and grandchildren but these were sometimes too far away or too busy to look after their old people. And so they paid from their life's savings to be

looked after in these homes. The adivasis were silenced – they could not comprehend. And one of the adivasis, Chathi, finally expressed everyone's feelings when he said, 'What poor people – in spite of all their money, they have to live their old age away from their children and grandchildren'.

But sadly, living in the hills of South India, I see this notion of wealth being steadily eroded as it slowly becomes more and more synonymous with money. When our economy is divorced from our culture, our politics, our social relationships, wealth simply means money, money and more money.

The Concept of Money

One of the things that has never ceased to intrigue me is how money in one person's hand becomes capital – a means for investment and the generation of more money - while in another person's hand it is only cash to be spent. One person's money grows and grows while the other person's is lost and gone forever and he or she has to begin another day struggling to ensure that they have earned enough to meet that day's expenses. How and why does money change its nature so? When a labourer is paid why do we call it a wage, but when a shareholder or investor is paid why do we call it a dividend or returns on the investment? Why is a wage fixed irrespective of the profits made on the labour while the dividend or returns on investment is directly related to the profits made on the investment? Why does money have the capacity to be an investment and earn more money while labour is only a commodity that can be purchased with money? Why does money mean different things in different circumstances? Why is ownership determined not by the amount of participation in the economy either in terms of time or human effort but by the investment of money in these special situations called capital? Why do we know the same thing by two different names?

Wasn't money created as a counting mechanism invented to keep track of complex economic exchanges? As a symbol of value? Why have we over time allowed the symbol to become the real thing?

A few days ago I overheard my two teenage sons arguing with each other. Tarshish, the older one, said 'You owe me three shirts' and Tariq, the younger one, replied 'No way. I owe you only two because you owed me five and then you won three yesterday and four today.' Intrigued, I enquired what was going on. Apparently over the

last month they had started challenging each other on various things and whoever was proved wrong would have to iron a predetermined number of shirts for the other. What a nice idea I thought – their cupboard would be tidy at last. 'So are all your shirts ironed now', I asked and they said not one. Though they started off thinking this was a good way to get through a chore they both hated doing, they were no better off than when they started. Because the promise of ironed shirts became a value in itself. And their game continues but the shirts remain unironed!

Another thing that I find intriguing, especially when I travel, is the differing values of money. Why is an English pound worth 70 rupees or an American dollar worth 50 rupees? And worse why was a pound worth 60 rupees only a few months ago and even less a year ago and was only worth somewhere around 40 rupees a couple of years ago? Who is counting, who is keeping track, who is making these decisions?

Before 1991, when India still had a fully protected economy, it was very clear – it was the government of India through its Reserve Bank that made these decisions. These were political decisions, taken under economic pressure no doubt, but political decisions nonetheless. After structural adjustment and the liberalisation of the Indian economy under blatant arm twisting by the IMF and World Bank, today these decisions are made by 'market forces' I am told.

If all this isn't madness, tell me what is? I won't even go down the route of stock markets and share prices, where something like an Enron share could be worth hundreds of dollars one day and nothing the next day. Where a shareholder is a millionaire one day and nothing the next. We are dealing with shadows. Imagined or notional wealth. Quite like the unironed shirts.

Co-operation or Competition?

The capitalist market economy reverses competition and upholds it as the cornerstone, the driving force of growth and development. So strong is the economy's hold on our values and beliefs that the spirit of competition has seeped into every part of our lives. But I suspect that deep down in our hearts we know that this is not right - that's why we invariably find that we qualify it by saying 'healthy competition'. Thereby giving competition a sense of goodness. But I have been privileged to be part of a society where the notion

of competition is very highly undeveloped. Competition does not dominate or control the way society functions. Co-operation does.

Take for instance, *pannathi uratal* or the rolling wild boar, a favourite sport and pastime of the Moolakurumba tribe during the hunting season. Young men and boys stand in a row girded in the fashion of hunters in the forest, bows cocked and arrows ready to fly. Somebody rolls a small wooden disc along the ground and everyone shoots at it. And it is rolled again and again till it disintegrates. Then coconuts are hurled along the ground and shot at and when everyone has their fill of shooting the broken coconuts are all collected and someone shoots an arrow high into the air. The coconuts are placed where the arrow lands and every one dances around and ends with a feast of coconut. The result? Winners: all. Losers: none.

In a competitive society, winners and losers are inevitable. And each win gives you an advantage, placing you that much more ahead in the next round of competition and then the next and the next – year after year, generation after generation. Advantage and privilege heaped upon advantage and privilege. While those who lose begin each round that much farther back and recede further and further. We applaud the winners and pity the losers – and, by making the winners the great of the earth and the losers the pitiable failures, we once again skilfully place the blame, not on the system of competition, but on the participants themselves. We delude ourselves that everybody can win if only they try hard enough.

There is yet another element to competition – especially what we all like to call healthy competition – there can be no end to it. If religion is no longer the opium of people, competitive success surely is. It dominates every aspect of life but nowhere does it cause as much harm and damage as in the economy. Where giant faceless transnational companies compete with another in a no-holds-barred fight for profits. Bribing, lying, cheating their way to an imagined pinnacle of success. By declaring Enron and its like bankrupt, have we cleaned the stables or is it only a whiff of a dung heap we are yet to uncover?

Part III: Is There Any Hope At All?

The vast majority of human rights activists who have worked at the grassroots for the last few decades are plunged into gloom as economic globalisation becomes the order of the day. The Bill Gateses of the world wield far more political

clout than rallies of millions of poor people demanding justice and human rights. Is this mindless, profit-driven, market economy inevitable? Are justice and human dignity no longer relevant? Will we remain helpless pawns moved about on an economic chess board in a game played by speculative gamblers and wheeler-dealers in the so-called market economy? Are there no other choices and options?

I believe there are – but we have to create them. We have to reclaim the political space that has been steadily encroached upon and is in danger of being completely usurped by economic interests.

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Our search for options has led us to develop an idea, which for the present we will call 'Just Change'. It is a concept intended to challenge the traditional notions of ownership in both the capitalist and socialist models.

Just Change is proposed as an alternative economic structure that will allow people to express solidarity in far more effective ways than has been done in the past. It is rooted in the concept of creating direct links right across the economic chain - from labourers and producers all the way through to consumers and investors. Thus enabling them to participate in the economy in a co-operative manner rather than a competitive one.

Basically, the concept is to create a new marketing chain where the traditional links between investors, labourers and consumers can be redefined. In the present market economy, persons with capital are the ones who are seen as 'investors' and therefore gain ownership and control over the economic chain. Persons with labour are not 'investors' – labour is purely a commodity that can be purchased. Consumers are not investors either. Merely a 'market' that should be encouraged to buy whatever the economy can produce. Even with ethical investments, with Fair Trade, with aid, this basic relationship between capital, labour and consumers is not changed.

Hence we propose creating a structure where all three participants in the economic chain will be seen as 'investors'. A invests in the economic

process by providing capital. B invests by providing labour. C invests by consuming the product of A's capital and B's labour. If we have a structure that will enable all three to participate in the economy as equal partners then perhaps we have a possibility of a more equitable distribution of the fruits of economic activity.

How Can This Work?

Again going back to our experiences with adivasis as very marginal producers of tea, let us say that our 1000 families together produce one thousand kilograms of made tea every day. Each family requires Rs.100 a day – approximately €2 - to meet their basic needs including the cost of producing the tea. We would therefore need a 100,000 rupees (€2000) a day for these 1000 families to survive. Traditionally they therefore would 'sell' their tea at the 'market price' to whoever provided them this money and their involvement in the economic chain would stop at that point. The amount they receive would bear no relationship to their cost of living. The person who invested the capital to buy this tea then puts in more money to deliver the tea in a marketable form to 1000 more people. The investor therefore recovers his investment and profits, if any, from these 1000 consumers.

But let us say there are 1000 'investors' – persons who have money left over after meeting their basic needs and would therefore like to invest it. Let us say that these 1000 investors together can put up the €2000 required by the producers and also another €2000 to deliver this tea to the consumer.

Now let us say, there are 1000 consumers who are each willing to buy this tea at €6 a kilogram. That means a surplus of €2 per kilogram or €2000 for the whole lot.

The important point here is that these 1000 investors have not 'bought' the tea and the 1000 producers have not 'sold' the tea. Ownership has not changed hands – ownership is spread to include the persons who put a product – tea in this case – and the persons who put money into the economic chain.

In the present capital economy, ownership over this 'profit' of €2000 legitimately lies with the person whose capital was used to intervene and act as a link between the producer and the consumers. This single aspect in an entire

economic chain gives an unfair advantage to the person whose participation in the economy is the provision of capital.

So if we can create a structure where this 'profit' of €2000 is equally owned by all the three participants then we have an entirely new relationship between producers, investors and consumers. They can determine the terms on which this 'profit' will be divided (or loss shared!). The terms could be based more on equity rather than on traditional concepts of ownership.

This concept of Just Change was born not from a vague theoretical blueprint but from a critical reflection of the experiences of the last two decades. The challenge before us now is whether we can create a structure, which allows people to participate collectively? A structure, which is driven by values and not by mere profit? Where a just distribution of wealth is more important than the creation of wealth? The task before us is to see if we can link people with capital who care with poor people who produce and with concerned consumers.

Our many years of experience have led us to believe, as an article of faith, that there are millions of people who *are* more interested in a fair and equitable distribution of wealth than the market would like us to believe.

In conclusion, I would like to place before each and everyone of you a challenge – will we remain in our little boxes, separated by nationality, colour, religion, class and geographical distance or will we reach out and find people with similar values, people who believe justice and equality should be an integral part of society and not just words to adorn constitutions and declarations.

If globalisation is here to stay then let us together reach out and create a global village of our own making!

I thank Feasta for making it possible for a little voice from a remote hill in South India to be heard here in Ireland. For me today has been a privilege and an honour and I go away even more firmly convinced that it is possible to create a new world order where the desire for justice and the well-being of all people will triumph over greed, over the market economy and over the forces of a capitalist rather than a people's globalisation.