

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Poverty is an ubiquitous predicament depriving an individual of the basic opportunities of material wellbeing and stunting the attainment of his/her inner potentialities. Such an injustice is the product of failure of a collective human responsibility, its most visible manifestation being starvation, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy. Poverty in our country is related to insufficient ownership of income earning assets compounded by the lack of access of the poorest households to basic social services. This has the deleterious effect on household welfare. The poor thus rely on other non-productive activities rather than being engaged only in wage employment. Poverty conditions act as an insurmountable barrier to economic and cultural advancement and have immense damaging effect on the nation as a whole. Poverty in fact is a condition of life in which an individual or person may not have adequate financial resources to fulfil his basic human needs. The level of income may be so low that a minimum standard of living may not accrue to such a person. In the process a poor individual in the absence of basic goods and services meant for survival is compelled to compromise with his dignity. Pathetic living conditions with no assured security and being deprived of any opportunity to improve one's life are the associated attributes of our poverty. With the pace of India's economic development incapacitated to match with the demands of a steadily rising population along with insufficient agricultural output, poverty conditions in our country are here to stay and has trapped our growth process.

KEY WORDS:

Poverty, deficiencies, malnutrition, starvation, inequity, disparities, prosperous, agriculture, ownership, helplessness, intricate, sustenance, demography, unemployment, powerlessness, entitlements, inflation, expenditure, calorie, community.

INTRODUCTION:

Poverty stands for a condition of life in which a person lacks adequate resources to sustain a standard of living sufficient to guarantee one's physical and mental efficiency and conduct one's activities beneficially in tune with the demands of society of which one is a member. It is in fact the outcome of the inability of a national economy to make optimum utilisation of its human and material potential and bring about a reduction, if not complete abolition, of the vast disparities that exist in the economy. Poverty is a complex phenomenon which exists in both the developed and developing worlds, the difference being only of degree. It is thus prevalent almost everywhere, the root cause being the unequal distribution of income which in turn has its roots in the unequal distribution of sources of income. The most visible manifestation of this inequality are starvation, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy. The poor are thus those who do not have sufficient means to lead an independently decent life.

Unskilled labour is the only labour endowment of the poor which obviously do not fetch them adequate wages. Poverty conditions in India is inevitably associated with malnutrition leading to ill-health, low standards of living, insufficient work capacity, minimum occupational adaptability and a small amount of savings. The Indian poverty is thus regarded as a condition of absolute deprivation where the poor are incapable of leading a decent independent life.

AIM OF STUDY:

Poverty in India is an ubiquitous phenomenon. It is an important indicator of a nation's capacity to march ahead in its goal of achieving rapid economic progress. In spite of India making sufficient strides in agricultural and industrial growth, but the pangs of poverty continue to haunt its very existence. Poverty in India is particularly acute in the rural areas, but the urban areas are not spared even though the nature and extent of urban poverty may vary. Any attempt to gain knowledge about the success or achievements of our government would be meaningful only when we study the nature of our poverty as it has the potential to impair economic progress. Economic growth remains stunted when poverty-stricken population which is substantial in our country cannot afford to buy goods and services. Poverty also has a social dimension as it creates social problems. Thus, poverty in India has socio-economic and political repercussions because of which the concept becomes significant.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. Bardhan Pranab, "The Political Economy of Development in India", (Basil Blackwell Publishers Ltd., London, 1984)

The above book by Pranab Bardhan discusses the distribution of political and economic power in a society and how this distribution along with social and economic divisions play a crucial role in the development of policies. He also suggests that unless there is a democratic formulation and implementation of policies actual progress is not possible.

2. Barlingay S S, "Poverty, Power, Progress" (Panchsheel Publishers, New Delhi, 1988)

As the name of the book suggests, the author not only discusses the issue of poverty and how it hampers progress in any society but at the same time the power factor which plays a crucial role in the effective determination and execution of public policies has also been discussed.

3. Glider George, "Wealth and Poverty", (Basic Book, New York, 1981)

The above book seeks to put forth a whole list of social and economic causes of poverty in some pockets of the United States of America and seeks to work on conditions that would help to overcome them. The author also seeks to highlight the practical merits of capitalism.

4. Holman Robert, "Poverty-Explanation of Social Deprivation", (The Chaucer Press, London, 1978).

In the above book the author attempts to elaborate on social deprivation as one of the most important manifestation of poverty. In fact he defines poverty as a social phenomenon where the deprived sections of the society are the main sections who are inflicted with poverty and poor living conditions.

5. Landes David S., "The Wealth and Poverty of Nations", (Little, Brown Publishers, US, 1995).

David Landes an economist and historian in the above book tries to analyse as to why some countries and regions experience an explosive growth rate while others experience stagnation. An important aspect of this book is that the author takes into consideration even the non-tangible assets to determine a country's growth rate. He also was of the view that industrial development in the European world was because of certain inherently progressive qualities of Europe.

6. Sundaram I.S., "Rural Poverty and Area Planning (B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1989).

The above book on rural poverty and area planning takes a micro-view of the issue of

poverty. This book not only discusses in length the nature, causes and conditions of rural poverty in our country but it also highlights the importance of area specific planning process to deal with the process. It is in fact an open case in support of local area development planning process or decentralization.

MAIN TEXT:

Poverty is an extremely complex phenomenon. It defies clarification even when explained in terms of simple cause and effect relationships. It can and does exist in two types of setting in areas which are prosperous but where wealth is distributed unequally, and in poor regions where adequate wealth is not available for distribution. Poverty cannot be fully and precisely defined. There is no fixed criteria to define the concept. It is always relative to some other situation. There are two factors that determine the level of poverty in any country. One is identified with the ownership of income generating assets and the other includes factors which affect one's reach to the minimum bundle of goods and services without necessitating any alteration in the ownership of assets. A fair distribution of assets leads to sustained economic growth providing jobs and better economic condition to the poor. The incongruous situations resulting in poverty have displayed a vicious circle of cause and effect relationships. Such intricate interlinkages have led to the conclusion that the poor are poor simply because they are poor. "The forces responsible for poverty have a web-like structure".¹ An individual when becomes a victim of any of these forces get entangled in the web and is placed at the mercy of the other adverse forces as well, one by one. Gradually he is drawn to its centre where the impact of the adverse forces are felt the most. In case of utter deprivation he is rendered destitute much before reaching that limit, thus reflecting the extent of his helplessness. In any country there are four primary modes of impoverishment (a) geographical - where a natural or ecological process becomes the main cause of poverty (b) economic - where pauperisation results from the inter play of the market forces (c) social - where it results out of the established ground prescription of the society and (d) political - where it is deliberately thrust upon by the misuse of state power, state bias and state privileges. These are the principal mechanisms which in most situation work together and generate conditions of deprivation and destitution.

There are multiple number of variables that characterise people living under poverty conditions. The rural poor are mainly agricultural and the urban poor non-agricultural wage labourers. A small proportion among them is self-employed. Vertical occupational mobility among the poor is non-existent. The spatial mobility for the poor involves heavy costs. The only asset of the poor is their labour power, as such they are unable to produce their sustenance directly. Not only do they lack the means to manipulate nature in the process of production, but the distribution system also do not favour them. The mechanism by which their wages are determined is arbitrary. Low earnings lead to low savings and frequent rise of indebtedness. Land is the only tangible reproducible wealth which some of the rural poor possess but the control over their land is insecure. Gradually they are being displaced rendering them landless agricultural wage labourers and share croppers. Fundamental to the generation of poverty has thus been the lack of assets. Assets among the poor in terms of education, skill and abilities is also negligible. The consumption pattern of the poor reflects the low nutritional content of their diet. This is because of their low income resulting from their low occupational status. Low food consumption leads to ill health. Besides lack of proper clothing, the poor also lack proper housing facilities which has hazardous results leading to their social degradation and low status.

Resource Component of poverty primarily include health and education. Most of

the poor go in for cheap medical and low cost physicians. Ill health adversely affect participation in the labour force and further reduces their income. This is also the result of being negligent towards preventive measures. As far as education is concerned majority of the poor are illiterate. Not only is there a lack of educational facilities in the areas where the poor reside but educational motives among the poor are also low. Educated unemployment besides low income, affects the aspirations of the poor for education. This includes the demographic features, like values, interests, activities and politics. Majority of the poor belong to the backward classes who have no access to assets and skills. Large families imply low per capita income. The probability of dependency among the poor is increased by the probability of high incidence of mortality among them. As such the poor goes on reproducing labour instead of reproducing capital as they feel more children would add to family income. Inability to control the size of the family thus becomes a component of poverty. Some values and interests are common to all classes of society and some are solely shared by the poor. There is a high degree of religiosity among the poor. Their primary concern is their problem of survival and they restrict their activities to their family and neighbourhood. Another socio-cultural component of poverty is power and politics. Poverty and powerlessness go together. The poor do not own the means of production, as such they lack the power to influence policy decisions. The organisational participation of the poor is also low. Their right to franchise however ensures their passive participation in politics. Thus the powerlessness of the poor also helps to compound poverty.

Poverty in India is an all pervasive predicament but it is a well-known fact that poverty in our country is largely prevalent among the rural households, hence the need to deal with rural poor in an individual manner. A substantial section of the poor households in the rural areas are those who are asset-less, for instance the agricultural labour households. They are either denied of any land or the size of their holdings are too small for any consideration. Another constituent of the rural poor households are the self-employed agriculturists, majority of whom are small and marginal farmers. Still another feature which characterises the rural poor in our country is their caste composition. In all the states the scheduled castes and tribes disproportionately constitute a large chunk of the rural labour households or those households who do not have any productive assets. Rural poverty in India can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the economic condition of the rural labourers is characterised by a high degree of unemployment and under employment. The casual labourers suffer the pangs of unemployment the most. Even when they are employed, they are not in a position to bargain which results in inadequate wages being paid to them. Moreover the strong market forces inhibits the implementation of minimum wage legislation much to the disgust among the poor. Secondly poverty among the rural labour household is also the result of insufficient asset base of the poor. It is significant to note that most of the rural poor continue to thrive under conditions of poverty not only because they have limited assets but because of the very nature of the structure of their assets. Majority of the assets of the poor are in the form of durable consumer goods which do not increase their productive capacity like their huts, some household items and the like. Majority of them lack productive assets such as land, farm implements etc the use of which could have augmented their income.

There are three main factors that accentuates or reduces rural poverty in India and across different states. Agricultural sector is the most important component of the Indian economy (providing sustenance to more than two thirds of its people). As such it is but obvious that the fortune of the rural poor households would be intricately linked with that of the agricultural sector. Studies have shown that there is a close negative linkage between the incidence of rural

poverty and that of agricultural development. Agriculture influence the living standards of the poor in two distinct ways. An increase in agricultural output reduces the prices of food and improves the availability of food both of which are beneficial for the poor. This will not only increase the employment opportunities in the agricultural sector but via its linkage effects it will also provide a boost to the non-agricultural units, thereby creating additional sources of earning income. This means that any improvement in the agricultural sector will result in overall economic development including a rise in agricultural incomes. However if agricultural growth rests on the cultivation of labour saving crops and not labour-intensive crops it would prove to be detrimental for the poor because a major part of the incomes of the rural poor come from wages from agricultural employment. Population growth, the incidence of poverty and environment are closely linked to each other. A rapid increase in population leaves its impact on poverty in a number of ways. It dilutes the beneficial effects of economic growth and the importance and positive impact of anti-poverty measures. In addition to this, rapid population growth when takes place under conditions of poverty exercises immense pressure on limited environmental resources leading to a degradation of the environment through an excess exploitation of the fragile or already used resources. All of these have a negative bearing on rural poverty. Still another factor which influences the incidence of rural poverty is inflation or price rise. It is the poor who are hit the hardest because of inflation, leading to a lowering of their real incomes and a deterioration in their entitlements. Of the total consumption of the poor, food constitute the major item and when the food prices too rise due to inflation it greatly affects them. It is also important to note that agricultural growth within it has an in-built inflationary or deflationary effect. A bad harvest pushes up prices and a good harvest on the other hand depresses prices. Some other factors like import / export policies, rate of demand and supply etc. also affect prices. This is how 'price' as a factor influence rural poverty.

The symptoms of poverty arises from lack of access to natural resources and the means to benefit from them. The internal as well as external factors account for poverty conditions but it is the latter that has the upper hand for it usually sets the agenda within which the internal factors operate. Poverty in India is a social product which has always been with us. The British rule smashed the nation's social and economic structure and accentuated the problem. Large scale proletarianization and deindustrialisation reduced Indian people to extreme poverty. The persistence of wide spread poverty after independence was the result of a policy of self-aggrandisement followed by our elites. The socialist ideals enunciated in our constitution has not been made legally enforceable because they are included under the Directive Principles of State Policy. The very essence of our development strategy since independence has been economic growth rather than distributive justice. India is a characterized with having a dualistic economic arrangement whose two major components are the organised urban and big farmers on the one hand and the rural unorganised and urban poor on the other hand. This has resulted in distortions in the distribution pattern. Such an economic dualism is also responsible for blessing those who have been destroying the have nots. The fruits of the organised and urban sectors are monopolised by the higher castes. Priority in the agriculture sector has been to promote capitalist farming, yielding handsome dividends to big landlords and substantial farmers. Another cause of poverty may be attributed to adverse physical and climatic conditions. However climate and physical environment comes in the way of continuous and sustained work be it mental or physical. Agricultural production as well as industrial manufacturing are made more difficult by climate disadvantages as it renders human toil and exertion very onerous. High rates of population growth do not directly result in

impoverishment but it exacerbates difficult situations relating to one's livelihood. There are however two opposing views with regard to the relationship between high population growth and poverty. One view holds that poverty results in the rapid rise of population and not vice versa. In other words an increase in the number of members of a poor family would mean more sources of income and not an additional burden. Accordingly it is felt that the position of savings would not change even if the number of children that they have is reduced because the savings of the poor families are always negligible. It is also felt that in some countries population increases may promote more efficient use of capital and provide larger markets as well. The second view point holds that higher population growth results in poverty. This means that more is the rate of population growth, the more is the extent of poverty. This is because as population increases the pressure on the concerned economy to feed the additional mouths also increases. This problem becomes all the more acute for a developing country where the rate of population growth generally exceeds the pace of economic progress. However looking from an objective point of view the impoverishment of countries like that of India can solely be attributed to high rates of population growth. Values and attitudes in India as in other third world countries are not anti-development. Given the appropriate economic opportunities the poor demonstrates simple initiative and are prepared to work hard even though in some situations the poor appear to accommodate to their impoverished conditions. Another disheartening fact of our social life is that the active working members in each family are few while there is a good number of dependents. Social factors perpetuating poverty in India operates in an implicit mode as they are interlaced in to the very societal network, These includes inhibitions arising out of caste and religious considerations. A peculiar factor that act against greater production in our country is the culture of poverty. It refers to a kind of mental attitude which includes feelings of marginality, of helplessness, of inferiority, of low level of aspirations and the like. These tendencies are perpetuated from generation to generation with the result that the poor becomes psychologically handicapped to take full advantage of the changing conditions. Hence the problem of poverty persists. Indian poverty is also rooted in the operational value structure of our society. Promotion of self-interests and maximization of private profit are the leading ethics of our socio-psycho and economic behaviour. The elites who hold the reins of power are busy promoting their own material gains. The overall impact of such material and moral poverty is alienation and dehumanisation in individual character and personality.

Close interaction of India with the rest of the world as demanded by the terms of international trade has rendered notable changes in the economic life and organisation of our people. This has been facilitated all the more by modern means of communications. It is generally accepted that trade between countries of unequal economic and political power under present rules and regulations increases income inequalities between countries. For numerous reasons the prices of primary commodities vis-a-vis manufactures tend to decline, with the result that the third world countries miss out to the developed world. India is still in a period of transition and is having to confront all its disadvantages. The internal adjustments which are being carried out has its own peculiarities which are not always in the interests of the people of the country. Financial flows from the rich to the poor countries has direct effect on poverty among the latter. Aid is primarily given with the economic and political interests of the donor countries in mind and is being given to promote their interests. Aid not only undermines the local initiative of the recipient nation but it also seeks to preserve the capitalist system on a world scale. Aid projects often have no bearing on economic development and lack co-ordination. As such they

represent a drain on the resources of the recipients. All such constraints lead one to conclude that aid can have only a marginal impact on the reduction of poverty though its effectiveness is also determined by the internal government policies and the type of aid being extended. Increasing poverty of the third world countries including India have also affected the economic growth of these nations adversely. Governments in developing countries is overcommitted to increase public expenditure for a variety of reasons, as such borrowing becomes indispensable. With an increase in the need for, borrowing the interest rates of the industrial countries also increase. This makes borrowing an expensive affair. As the debtor countries are required to pay their debts to the international financial institutions in instalments, they have to indulge in huge cuts in their living standards. This has proved to be disastrous as the debtor countries are then required to pay far more than they had received by way of loans or aid from the industrialised world. Such unfavourable external economic climate proves that the impoverishment of the developing nations could be lessened if they improvise their economic fortunes substantially by adopting a self-reliant path. This would make available sufficient economic resources to meet the basic needs of everyone. Macro-economic imbalances in India have over the years resulted in persistent fiscal and balance of payment deficits and an increasing level of external and domestic debt.

One way of looking at the problem of poverty is to set some absolute level to designate either poverty or affluence, or both, and to determine the aggregate and proportion of the population below the poverty level and or above the affluence level. The established proactive now is to fix some absolute and empirically verifiable tool for determining poverty, making use of it to draw a 'Poverty Line' and then determining the proportion of the population below that line. Such a measure provides for comparisons to confirm whether the level of poverty is decreasing or not over a period of time. An Expert Committee set up by the Indian Government in 1962 set a norm for the identification of poverty. This norm as officially recognised is described as "the minimum level of consumer expenditure."² The Committee after an exhaustive study arrived at a figure of Rs.20/- per head per month at 1960-61 prices as the cut-off point. This figure was perhaps related to the calories necessary for an average human being. Thus 'Poverty Line' is to be found at the level of income at which an individual or a family can barely manage to thrive. With the inception of the seventh five year plan the criterion for determining the poverty line has undergone a change, with the minimum of Rs.500/- from Rs.300/- per month for qualifying it to be classified as being below the poverty line. Other alternative methods can be used for the identification of the poor. One is to identify the set of people whose consumption pattern happens to leave some basic needs unfulfilled. This is called the direct method. But in the absence of direct information regarding the satisfaction of the specific needs an alternative method called the 'income method' is used. In this method the first step is to calculate the minimum income which allows the satisfaction of all minimum needs. The next step involves the identification of those whose actual income is much below the poverty line. This method takes into consideration individual idiosyncrasies without upsetting the notion of poverty having deprivation as its base. It not only predicts an individual's actual level of consumption but also determines a person's capacity to meet his minimum needs within the behavioural constraints of his community. Three different models have been used to determine the extent of poverty and its trends in different States of India. The Fixed Expenditure Method rests on the assumption that the poverty line for all the States is identical to that of India as a whole. Under this model a profile of poverty is estimated for different states, separately for rural and urban areas in the context of percentage of people below the poverty line. A fixed per capita

expenditure per month is assumed for both the rural and urban areas which are adequate to satisfy the minimum calorie requirements. The basic postulates of this model includes

- (a) The all-India pattern of population, distribution of age, sex, activity etc. are followed by the states.
- (b) States do not vary among themselves as far as age, sex, activity, specific calorie allowances are concerned.
- (c) There exists a unique consumption basket that fulfils the average calorie requirements, and
- (d) The basket consists of an identical cost structure as well.

Thus the above model seeks to measure the extent of poverty by assuming that poverty line for all the states is identical as with for all India.

The Constant Calorie Model assumes that calorie norms in all States are same as that for all-India but the corresponding poverty lines are dissimilar. This model no longer accepts the existence of an unique consumption basket that satisfies minimum calorie requirements. It accepts the reality that the same expenditure which meets the required calorie norms in various states do not exist at an all-India level. States cannot be expected to conform to the all-India level of expenditure because of several well-established reasons like diversity in consumption habits, in prices etc. While poverty line is determined by this model, one can conclude that some states in rural areas and some in urban areas need less monetary expenditure to achieve the specified calorie norms when compared to the all-India level. This demonstrates that the food habit of these people involve the consumption of such food stuffs whose cost of calorie content is lower or they pay low prices when compared to all-India prices. In the Variable Calorie Model the calorie norms of each state is determined by using the age-sex-occupation structure of the population of the concerned state and thereby the poverty line corresponding to the norm is worked out separately for rural and urban areas. An estimated age-sex occupation structure of population as weighting diagram is used to determine the average of age-sex-activity, specific calorie allowances. It allows for differentials in calorie needs because age groupings are made for different calorie allowances. Non-working male and female and non-adult population are also studied to take care of the entire population. To simplify the process of calorie determination the entire working force is grouped into heavy workers like those engaged in mining and construction, moderate workers include those engaged in forestry, fishing, manufacturing etc. and such people who are involved in trade and commerce, transport etc. are grouped as sedentary workers. The weighting diagrams derived separately for rural and urban areas are then used to determine the per capita daily calorie requirement. "Then applying the same method as adopted in the Constant Calorie Model, per capita monthly expenditure to fulfil the calorie norms i.e. the poverty line is estimated".³ The poverty line is then ultimately used to determine the percentage of people living in poverty.

CONCLUSION:

Poverty which acts as an insurmountable barrier to economic prosperity has immense damaging effects on the nation as a whole and on human capital. There is always the possibility of a poor family to remain poor indefinitely. Low rates of income makes them targets of poor health and impairs their capacity to fetch out a living for day-to-day survival. Poverty acts as a formidable barrier to the progress of the poor as they are denied all opportunities to realise their potential. They are thus pushed into a state of never-ending hopelessness and scarcity. Poverty hampers prospects for investment which is the key to economic development. It inhibits the adoption of new techniques thereby impairing the economic efficiency of the nation. Paucity of capital for investment prevents a

poor country from strengthening its infrastructure. This is also contributed by the fact that when the poor constitute the bulk of the population, their propensity to save is very low. Education also cannot be promoted which is one of the most ideal and profitable of all investments in human capital. A poverty stricken nation also cannot afford welfare programmes. Efforts to minimise the prices of goods and services which consume a large chunk of poor peoples' budgets often prove self-defeating and are inimical to production. Poverty reflects a pattern of despondency and helplessness. The poor are economically handicapped. They do not get the real value of the very little which they spend. They mostly buy goods on credit and are forced to compensate the interest of the money by way of higher prices. Poverty entails immense loss for the nation as it accelerates infant mortality caused due to inadequate nutrition and fatal diseases. Poor health not only reduces the working time and production of the workers, but it also makes them less receptive to new ideas and innovations. Poor families, unable to make both ends meet compel their children to enter the labour market at an early age, thus thwarting their potentialities and inflicting immeasurable loss to the economy.

FOOTNOTES:

1. B.D Sharma, 'The Web of Poverty' (North-Eastern Hill University of Shillong, 1989), p1
2. C.T. Kurien, 'The Economy - An Interpretative : Introduction, (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1992), p. 351.
3. R.K. Sinha (ed). Economic Development Planning and Policy in India - Poverty and Development, (Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1989), p. 83.

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- 3 M.S. Ahluwalia, 'Policies for Poverty Alleviation', Asian Development Review, 1990, Vol. 8, No. 1, p 113.
- 4 J. Townsend (ed). The Concept of Poverty, (London, Heinemann, 1971), p. 143.
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- 7 V.M. Dandekar, 'On Measurement of Poverty', Economic and Political Weekly, July 25, 1981, p, 1243.
- 8 U.N. World Bank, The WB Support for Alleviation of Poverty, (Washington, 1988), p 4.
- 9 Sundaram, no. 1, 77-8.
- 10 Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines - An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation'
11. The Statesman, April 24, 1991.
- 12 C.T. Kurien, No. 24, p. 351.
- 13 R.K. Sinha (ed)., n 25, p. 81
- 14 Ibid., p. 83
- 15 K.V. Vaighese, n,16 p. 11.