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Poverty reduction and sustainable development goal in India

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Abstract

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. It not only indicates the lack of income or access to resources but it also manifests in the form of hunger & malnutrition, diminished opportunities for education, social discrimination and the inability to participate in decision-making processes. Eradicating poverty in all its forms remains one of the formidable challenges before the mankind. No poverty was adopted as the first Sustainable Development Goal by the United Nations in September 2015. India has been playing a prominent role in defining the contours of the 2030 agenda and is committed to achieve these goals in a time bound manner. SDGs are the blueprint for achieving a better and sustainable future for all. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and associated 169 targets. The SDGs are a comprehensive list of global goals integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions of development. The agenda 2030 intends incorporating every aspect of society, taking everyone and leaving no one behind. This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and environment. We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. This new universal agenda seeks to build on the Millennium Development Goals and complete what they did not achieve. They seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Millennium Development Goals, United Nations, Integrated child development services (ICDS), Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM) Employment through Skills Training and Placement (EST&P)

Introduction

How can we define poverty?

Poverty means hunger and lack of shelter. It also is a situation in which parents are not able to send their children to school or a situation where sick people cannot afford treatment. Poverty also means lack of clean water and sanitation facilities. It also means lack of a regular job at a minimum decent level. Above all it means living with a sense of helplessness. Poor people are in a situation in which they are ill-treated at almost every place, in farms, factories, government offices, hospitals, railway stations etc. Obviously, nobody would like to live in poverty. One of the biggest challenges of independent India has been to bring millions of its people out of abject poverty. Mahatma Gandhi always insisted that India would be truly independent only when the poorest of its people become free of human suffering.

Reason behind poverty in India

There were a number of causes for the widespread poverty in India. One historical reason is the low level of economic development under the British colonial administration. The policies of the colonial government ruined traditional handicrafts and discouraged development of industries like textiles. The low rate of growth persisted until the nineteen eighties. This resulted in less job opportunities and low growth rate of incomes. This was accompanied by a high growth rate of population. The two combined to make the growth rate of per capita income very low. The failure at both the fronts: promotion of economic growth and population control perpetuated the cycle of poverty. With the spread of irrigation and the Green revolution, many job opportunities were created in the agriculture sector. But the effects were limited to some parts of India.

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The industries, both in the public and the private sector, did provide some jobs. But these were not enough to absorb all the job seekers. Unable to find proper jobs in cities, many people started working as rickshaw pullers, vendors, construction workers, domestic servants etc. With irregular small incomes, these people could not afford expensive housing. They started living in slums on the outskirts of the cities and the problems of poverty, largely a rural phenomenon also became the feature of the urban sector.

Another feature of high poverty rates has been the huge income inequalities. One of the major reasons for this is the unequal distribution of land and other resources. Despite many policies, we have not been able to tackle the issue in a meaningful manner. Major policy initiatives like land reforms which aimed at redistribution of assets in rural area effectively by most of the state governments. Since lack of land resources has been one of the major causes of poverty in India, proper implementation of policy could have improved the life of millions of rural poor. Many other socio-cultural and economic factors also are responsible for poverty. In order to fulfil social obligations and observe religious ceremonies, people in India, including the very poor, spend a lot of money. Small farmers need money to buy agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizer, pesticides etc. Since poor people hardly have any savings, they borrow. Unable to repay because of poverty, they become victims of indebtedness. So the high level of indebtedness is both the cause and effect of poverty.

The causes of poverty lie in the institutional and social factors that mark the life of the poor. The poor are deprived of quality education and unable to acquire skills which fetch better incomes. Also access to health care is denied to the poor. The main victim's practices are poor. These can be caused as a result of.

1. Social, economic and political inequality.
2. Social exclusion.
3. Unemployment.
4. Indebtedness.
5. Unequal distribution of wealth.

As over 70% of Indians were engaged in agriculture throughout the British Raj period, the impact on that sector was more important on living standards than anything else. British policies involved sharply raising rural taxes that enabled merchants and moneylenders to become large landowners. Under the British, India began to export food grains and, as a result, as many as 26 million people died in famines between 1875 and 1900. Even today agriculture is the principal means of livelihood and land is the primary asset of rural people; ownership of land is an important determinant of material well-being and those who own some land have a better chance to improve their living conditions. Since independence, the government has attempted to redistribute land and has taken land from those who have large amounts to distribute it to those who do not have any land, but work on the land as wage labourers. However, this move was successful only to a limited extent as large sections of agricultural workers were not able to farm the small holdings that they now possessed as they did not have either money (assets) or skills to make the land productive and the land holdings were too small to be viable. Also most of the Indian states failed to implement land redistribution policies.

A large section of the rural poor in India is the small farmers. The land that they have is, in general, less fertile

and dependent on rains. Their survival depends on subsistence crops and sometimes on livestock. With the rapid growth of population and without alternative sources of employment, the per-head availability of land for cultivation has steadily declined leading to fragmentation of land holdings. The income from these small land holdings is not sufficient to meet the family's basic requirements. Most members of Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes are not able to participate in the emerging employment opportunities in different sectors of the urban and rural economy as they do not have the A large section of urban poor Poverty is, therefore, also closely related to nature of employment. Unemployment or under employment and the casual and intermittent nature of work in both rural and urban areas that compels indebtedness, in turn, reinforces poverty. Indebtedness is one of the significant factors causing poverty.

A steep rise in the price of food grains and other essential goods, at a rate higher than the price of luxury goods, further intensifies the hardship and deprivation of lower income groups. The unequal distribution of income and assets has also led to the persistence of poverty in India.

All this has created two distinct groups in society

Those who possess the means of production and earn good incomes and those who have only their labour to trade for survival. Over the years, the gap between the rich and the poor in India has widened. Poverty is a multi-dimensional challenge for India that needs to be addressed on a war footing.

Although economic growth is important for any country, it is critical only to the extent that it helps bring about a qualitative improvement in the lives of the people when the benefits of globalisation and development are actually transferred to all sections of the population. Through the process of globalization the dominance of a few powerful people has not been beneficial for the marginalised in India. Government policies and programmes must be backed by the mobilisation of marginal groups as well as the building and training of human capacity. Economic growth is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The end is and must be quality of life and human wellbeing. The effects of globalisation and the benefits of India's economic growth have been unequally distributed and the problems of the marginalised and poor need to be urgently addressed. The contrasting fates of the rich and poor challenge the belief in the centrality of government to society as the custodian of social justice. India's success is due to its democracy and democratic institutions and the processes that have empowered a majority of its citizens to realise their capabilities and entitlements. Amartya Sen has redefined the concept as the expansion of freedoms, including political freedoms. Globalisation could contribute to the project of development as the expansion of freedoms. India however has yet to achieve the expansion of positive freedom as envisaged in Sen's conceptualisation of development. Politics, political mobilisation, political institutions and policy frameworks intervene to refract the condition of the marginalised. The central policy challenge for the Indian government is to sustain social gains while ensuring that the marginalised participate more meaningfully in the economy, by sharing in the fruits of economic growth and contributing to it as well. In an address to the nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his intention to "take a solemn pledge of working for the welfare of the poor, the

oppressed, the Dalits, the exploited and the backward people of the country". The precise implementation of this social justice vision in practice must promote a need based justice on the Rawls and Sen Models. Economists may recommend a more passionate embrace of neoliberalism as a solution to India's poverty, but the poor appear to have plenty of reservations about economic reforms-and they have voting clout in India's democracy. One can therefore see why elite-oriented reforms (making investment in real estate easier, deregulating the stock market, liberalizing civil aviation) have continued under the current government in India, whereas more radical reforms (changing labour laws, privatizing public enterprises, eliminating agricultural subsidies) have stalled. The latter have run into what might be called a mass-politics constraint. As a result, it is now customary to argue that India has a "strong consensus on weak reforms." Three factors are typically critical in determining whether any particular policy enters the arena of mass politics: the number of people affected by the policy, how organized those people are, and whether the effect is direct and immediate or indirect and over a long-time horizon. The more people affected by a policy choice, the more organized they are, and the more direct the policy's effects, the more likely it is that a policy will generate mass concern. By this logic, some economic issues are more likely to arouse mass opposition than others. Inflation, for example, quickly becomes a contentious matter in mass politics because it affects most segments of the population. A financial meltdown has a similar effect, because a large number of banks and firms collapse and millions of people lose their jobs. In comparison, stock markets directly concern mainly shareholders, whose numbers are not likely to be large or very organized in a poor country such as India. Since poverty has many facets, social scientists look at it through a variety of indicators. Usually the indicators used relate to the levels of income and consumption. But now poverty is looked through other social indicators like illiteracy level, lack of general resistance due to malnutrition, lack of access to healthcare, lack of job opportunities, lack of access to safe drinking water, sanitation etc. Analysis of poverty based on social exclusion and vulnerability is now becoming very common. Poor people also face unstable employment. Malnutrition is alarmingly high among the poor. Ill health, disability or serious illness makes them physically weak. They borrow from others. In India the poor lack basic literacy and skills and hence have very limited economic opportunities.

Sustainable Development Goal

In September 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on the principle of "leaving no one behind", the new Agenda emphasizes a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development for all.

The SDGs also explicitly include disability and persons with disabilities. Disability is referenced in multiple parts of the SDGs, specifically in the parts related to education, growth and employment, inequality, accessibility of human settlements, as well as data collection and the monitoring of the SDGs.

Although, the word "disability" is not cited directly in all goals, the goals are indeed relevant to ensure the inclusion and development of persons with disabilities. The newly implemented 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

holds a deep promise for persons with disabilities everywhere.

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to transform our world

- **Goal 1:** No Poverty.
- **Goal 2:** Zero Hunger.
- **Goal 3:** Good Health and Well-being.
- **Goal 4:** Quality Education.
- **Goal 5:** Gender Equality.
- **Goal 6:** Clean Water and Sanitation.
- **Goal 7:** Affordable and Clean Energy.
- **Goal 8:** Decent Work and Economic Growth.
- **Goal 9:** Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure.
- **Goal 10:** Reduced Inequality.
- **Goal 11:** Sustainable Cities and Communities.
- **Goal 12:** Responsible Consumption and Production.
- **Goal 13:** Climate Action.
- **Goal 14:** Life below water.
- **Goal 15:** Life on Land Goal.
- **Goal 16:** Peace and Justice Strong Institutions.
- **Goal 17:** Partnerships to achieve the Goal.

The Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) are successors to the 'Millennium Development Goals MDGs'. The MDGs were adopted in 2000 by governments to make global progress on poverty, education, health, hunger and the environment. The MDGs expired at the end of 2015. During 25-27 September 2015, the member states of the United Nations converged in New York for the United Nations (UN) Summit on Sustainable Development and adopted the new global goals for sustainable development. The world leaders pledged their commitment to the new '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', encompassing 17 universal and transformative SDGs. The United Nations General Assembly has taken the resolution, for adopting 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 169 targets and 304 indicators, on 25th September, 2015 under the official agenda "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

The SDGs are a universal set of goals, targets and indicators that all UN member states are expected to use to frame their development agendas, socio-economic policies, and actions towards low carbon pathways for the next 15 years, in order to achieve a sustainable world where 'no one is left behind' without compromising sustainability of the planet. These new global goals are much broader and comprehensive than the outgoing MDGs, as they attempt to address all three dimensions of sustainable development- economic, social and environmental.

Sustainable development goal Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets were announced in 2015 at the UN summit. They indicate the scale and ambition of this new universal Agenda. These goals pursue to build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and complete what these did not achieve. All the 17 goals are interrelated but we concentrate here on Sustainable Development Goal 1 "No Poverty". Eradicating extreme poverty for all people everywhere by 2030 is pivotal goal of the 2030 agenda for sustainable Development. Extreme poverty, defined as surviving on less than \$2.15 per person per day.

As a result, under MDGs, India is an early achiever in reducing income poverty and achieving the goal. India can achieve SDG targets provided appropriate policies are

undertaken. Although World Bank estimates show that India has 12% poverty ratio, the estimates based on national poverty lines are much higher. The country still has nearly 300 million people below poverty line. Moreover poverty is concentrated in few states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. It is also concentrated in a few social groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. SDG approach in India should be not only to reduce the goal on national poverty but lessen poverty in some of the poorer states and SCs and STs and provide equality of opportunity. The Government of India has conducted Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) in 2011. SECC used multi-deprivation criterion for identifying the poor. According to SECC data out of 17.97 crore rural households after accounting for automatic exclusion and automatic inclusion, 8.72 crores households had at least one deprivation. In other words, 48.53% were estimated as poor in rural areas if we consider SECC 2011 data. Thus, SECC data shows much higher poverty ratios than those of Tendulkar and Rangarajan Committees. State level rural poverty estimates based on SECC data for the households with at least one deprivation out of the seven deprivations show that poverty was the highest for Chhattisgarh (70.0%), followed by Odisha (66.0%), West Bengal (63.8%), Bihar (60.1%), M.P. (59.8%), Jharkhand (53.4%). Thus, India has lot of challenges if we consider SECC data.

What are the policy challenges for reduction in poverty? Policy makers must continue to follow the two-fold strategy of achieving high economic growth and direct attack through social protection programmes. Focus should also be given to increase in urban growth and incomes as urban poverty will rise with urbanization. Some of the determinants of poverty reduction are agriculture and wages, productive and quality employment, low food prices, social protection.

One of the targets under SDG goal on poverty indicates that countries should have social protection programmes. India has many programmes like MGNREGA, public distribution system, mid-day meals for school children, integrated child development services (ICDS), old age pensions etc. These are important to take care of risks of the poor. There will be also risks due to climate change. One needs to have programmes, which can provide resilience to climate change and natural disasters. There can be several solutions, but let's focus here on the two important measures: creating productive employment and providing quality education for reduction in poverty. There is a feeling that we should have some flagship programmes like MGNREGA to reduce poverty. No doubt these programmes are important for protecting the poor. But productive inclusion in terms of generating quality employment should be the focus of any poverty reduction approach. Studies have shown that agricultural growth leads to reduction in poverty twice as that of non-agriculture. We need more diversified agriculture for raising the income of farmers. However, future employment has to be created in manufacturing and services. In this context, the Make in India initiative, focus on start-ups, Mudra, financial inclusion, etc., are steps in the right direction. Equally, service sector employment has to be promoted. Over time, the share of the organized sector has to be raised while simultaneously improving productivity in the unorganized sector. We have been witnessing agitations for reservations by Marathas in Maharashtra, Patedars in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh. Youth unemployment is high.

This is one reason for unrest and social tensions. The importance of education is well known. Equality of opportunity is important for reducing poverty and many other forms of inequalities. Access to quality education is an important indicator of equality of opportunity. Recently, the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore cautioned about school education in India. He says "schools are the biggest crisis in India today and have been for a long time. Schools are the biggest gap between India and East Asia. And it is a crisis that cannot be justified". Equity in quality education is the key for raising human development and reduction in inequalities in labour market and reduction in poverty. Gender equality in all its forms is equally important.

The new generation wants equality of opportunity rather than redistributive measures. Everyone irrespective of caste, class and gender should have equal opportunities in education, health, employment and entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

We have travelled about seven and half decades since independence. The objective of all our policies had been stated as promoting rapid and balanced economic development with equality and social justice. Poverty alleviation has always been accepted as one of India's main challenges by the policy makers, regardless of which government was in power. The absolute number of poor in the country has gone down and some states have less proportion of poor than even the national average. Yet, critics point out that even though vast resources have been allocated and spent, we are still far from reaching the goal.

There is improvement in terms of per capita income and average standard of living; some progress towards meeting the basic needs has been made. But when compared to the progress made by many other countries, our performance has not been impressive. Moreover, the fruits of development have not reached all sections of the population. Some sections of people, some sectors of the economy, some regions of the country can compete even with developed countries in terms of social and economic development, yet, there are many others who have not been able to come out of the vicious circle of poverty. Exposure to nature is beneficial and is important for the survival of living beings. It's high time to focus on protecting the natural resources and safeguarding the environment. The Government of India has done quite a remarkable job to combat the emerging deterioration in the conservation of nature but we still have to go a long way. India has a large working age population of 15 to 59 years of age which can make a significant contribution to the country's growth provided it is equipped to be productive. This working age population is estimated to rise by many times over the coming decades. This rise would escalate the number of people in the unorganised sector of work unless they are encouraged to acquire the right set of skills and knowledge and prepared for employability. Also this will ensure India's competitiveness in the global market. There are likely chances of more jobs being created in the future but definitely unlikely that the employers invest in skilling the employees. Also, the employees themselves are constrained to mobilise their own resources for up-skilling themselves. Further, if the current situation is any indication then there are very few job ready workers available in the market. So, it is not only the growing young workforce that needs to be trained with the market savvy skills but also the middle-aged who lack the require competency to move up the

ladder of growth. When these individuals are up-skilled in the current economic space their chances of acquiring better employment opportunity increase. It is in this context National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM) was launched on 24th September 2013 to cater to the needs of the vulnerable in urban areas so that they could access skilled employment opportunities and succeed in attaining better quality of life on a sustainable basis. Employment through Skills Training and Placement (EST&P) under NULM provides skill training to the urban poor so that they can set up self-employment ventures or secure salaried employment. EST&P also envisages increased participation of women, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged sections in the skilling programme. To conclude, India has challenges of significant regional and social disparities in poverty and in achieving improvement in quality of employment and education particularly for the poor and, efficient social protection programmes along with gender empowerment. All targets of SDG goal on poverty can be achieved if India can work towards fulfilling these challenges. The roles of both central and state governments are important in achieving these objectives.

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