Persistent Levels of Poverty in India: Urgent Action Needed to End Suffering

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This policy brief is addressed to the Government of the Republic of India and outlines and addresses causes of poverty. Poverty is highly cyclical and transferable across generations if nothing is done to prevent its spread. The national- and state-level governments have attempted to tackle poverty with many different policies and interventions, with varying levels of success. This brief identifies *gross wealth and resource inequality*, *low literacy levels and food insecurity*, and the *caste system* as the main causes of poverty in India and clarifies ways in which to increase the efficiency of government interventions to better address the current levels of poverty in India.

Introduction

India is the world's most populous democracy, with a staggering population of over 1.2 billion people. Ethnic lines can be drawn down India's 22 national languages, and also by caste. It has a history of colonisation by the Britain from the mid nineteenth century and ending approximately a century later. As of early 2012, it boasts the world's third-largest economy, and a GDP of US\$1.85 trillion.¹ The vast growth witnessed by India was triggered by the economic liberalisation reforms of 1991. Though these reforms brought India back from the brink of fiscal collapse, they also spurred the high levels of poverty and inequality existing in India today.²

Although it is estimated that there is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in India for every 400 people,³ and despite the rapid economic growth the nation

1 Devika Banerji & Rishi Shah, 'India Overtakes Japan to Become Third-Largest Economy in Purchasing Power Parity', *EconomicTimes.com* <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-04-19/news/31367838_1_ppp-terms-india-s-gdp-power-parity> (19 April 2012) accessed 4 April 2013; World Bank, *Country Overview India*, <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/india>> accessed 15 April 2013.

2 KN Ninan, 'Economic Reforms in India: Impact on the Poor and Poverty Reduction', *Institute of Development Studies Working Paper 102* (January 2000) 20; Utsa Patnaik, 'Neoliberalism and Rural Poverty in India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42:30 (July–August 2007) 3133; Pundarik Mukhopadhaya, Shantakumar G & Bhanoji Rao, *Economic Growth and Income Inequality in China, India and Singapore* (London: Routledge, 2011) 121.

3 Archana Shukla, 'First Official Estimate: An NGO for Every 400 People in India', *TheIndianExpress.com* <<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/first-official-estimate-an-ngo-for-every-400-people-in-india/643302/>> (7 July 2010) accessed 4 April 2013.

has enjoyed over the last three decades, poverty has been widespread, persistent and extreme, creating issues of alarming levels of hunger,⁴ high rates of child labour,⁵ high levels of unemployment,⁶ and other such poverty indicators. The situation is critical, since almost one-third of India's total population lives at or below the national poverty line.⁷ This equates to over 350 million individuals, in both rural and urban environments. Identifying causes of this extremely extensive social problem is challenging, as causes and consequences of poverty universally tend to be highly interlinked. This highlights the cyclical nature of poverty and how complicated it can be to break out of this loop. Some evident causes do, however, include gross wealth and resource inequality,⁸ low literacy levels, food insecurity,⁹ and the caste system.¹⁰ The extreme effects of such factors include exclusion from social, political and economic participation, starvation, low life expectancy, high infant mortality, and low literacy rates.

Gross Wealth and Resource Inequality

India is home to more poor people than Africa, but more billionaires than England.¹¹ The towering economic growth of India has vastly increased levels of inequality, and they continue to rise.¹² This has prompted the observation that there are 'two Indias, one shining and the other bleak'.¹³ Inequality is a cause of poverty even during periods of economic growth, as not only do the poor have the smallest share in resources, they are also excluded from benefiting from the gains of growth.¹⁴

On 1 January 2013, the Indian Government instituted the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), which is a targeted cash transfer system designed to assist India's poorest.¹⁵ Such redistributive measures are effective in reducing poverty,

4 International Food Policy Research Institute, '2011 Global Hunger Index', (October 2011).

5 World Bank, <<http://www.worldbank.org/>> accessed 15 April 2013.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 Aasha K Mehta & Amita Shah, 'Chronic Poverty in India: Incidence, Causes and Policies', *World Development* 31:3 (March 2003) 505.

9 *ibid.*, 492–96.

10 Vani K Borooah, 'Caste, Inequality, and Poverty in India', *Review of Development Economics* 9:3 (August 2005) 411.

11 Gideon Rachman, 'India is Part of an Upside-Down World', <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8684fb7a-0630-11e2-bd29-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Qs6I2rVu>> *Financial Times News* (24 September 2013) accessed 19 April 2013.

12 Sadiq Ahmed, *Job Creation and Poverty Reduction in India: Towards Rapid and Sustained Growth* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007) 17.

13 *ibid.*

14 Akhter U Ahmed, Ruth V Hill, Lisa Smith, Doris M Wiesmann & Tim Frankenburger, 'The World's Most Deprived: Characteristics and Causes of Extreme Poverty and Hunger', *International Food Policy Research Institute 2020 Discussion Paper* 43 (October 2007) 61.

15 Kim Iskyan, 'Cash Transfer Program Heralds A New Dawn', *Global Finance* 27:3 (March 2013) 10.

as has been seen in the successful Brazilian *Bolsa Familia* program, which is a conditional cash transfer scheme implemented to give poor families financial aid in return for keeping their children in school and acquiring basic health care. *Bolsa Familia* covers one-quarter of the Brazilian population, and has contributed significantly to the large drop in inequality. A major foreseeable issue for the Indian program, however, is outright corruption preventing funds from reaching the actual beneficiaries.¹⁶

The state of Kerala has performed exceptionally well in the social sector. It has the highest Human Development Index (HDI) value of all the Indian states, and the lowest inequality.¹⁷ Its human development achievements have been credited to the active intervention of its government and good public policy.¹⁸ An aspect of Kerala's success has been based on decentralising the provision of social services, which has been effective in two ways: it has enhanced service delivery by increasing transparency through local monitoring, and improved beneficiaries' participation.¹⁹ When beneficiaries assist in executing social services, they have vested interests in improving the services' efficiency and coverage. In this way, the Indian Government must work on decentralising the provision of DBT in the footsteps of Kerala to lift other states to its position.

Low Levels of Literacy and Food Insecurity

Low education levels are a 'maintainer'²⁰ of the poverty cycle, by keeping individuals dependent upon irregular, low-wage, high-risk employment. A lack of education also decreases people's political capacity to demand rights or have their voice heard.²¹ Much literature has been devoted to showing that education has a tremendous impact on enabling individuals to raise themselves out of poverty.²²

16 Mihir Shah, 'Direct Cash Transfers: No Magic Bullet', *Economic and Political Weekly* 43:34 (August 2008) 77.

17 United Nations Development Program, 'Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index for India's States', (2011) 8–9.

18 Pinaki Chakraborty, 'Intra-Regional Inequality and the Role of Public Policy: Lessons Learnt from Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly* 44:26/27 (June–July 2009) 279–81.

19 *ibid.*, 276; Shrikant R Kokare, 'Poverty Breeds Poverty', in *Human Rights and Poverty In India: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidences — Vol. I*, ed. SN Chaudhary (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2005) 173, 177–78.

20 Andrew Shepherd & Aasha K Mehta, 'Chronic Poverty in India: An Introduction', in *Chronic Poverty and Development Policy In India*, eds Andrew Shepherd & Aasha K Mehta (New Delhi: Sage, 2006) 23, 35.

21 Mehta & Shah, 'Chronic Poverty in India', 494.

22 Ahmed et al., 'World's Most Deprived', 46; Shenggen Fan, Peter Hazell & Sukhadeo Thorat, 'Government Spending, Growth and Poverty in Rural India', *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 82:4 (November 2000) 1050.

Figure 1: Average weekly real wage by education level

Source: Angelique Chettiparambil-Rajan, 'INDIA: A Desk Review of the Mid-Day Meals Programme', *World Food Program* (July 2007).

The right of children to free and compulsory education is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, but one-third of Indian children do not attend school.²³ A national government Mid Day Meal scheme (MDM) has been operating since 1995 to provide primary school children with 100–150 grams of food grains per day.²⁴ The scheme has '[improved] enrolment, attendance and retention' of children,²⁵ and the likelihood of girls finishing primary school is 30 per cent higher in areas where the local school supplies a midday meal.²⁶ Regarding nutrition, MDM could decrease the daily protein deficiency of primary school

23 Jean Drèze & Geeta G Kingdon, 'School Participation in Rural India', *Review of Development Economics* 5:1 (February 2001) 1.

24 Indian Government, Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 'Mid Day Meal Scheme', <<http://mdm.nic.in/>> accessed 11 April 2013.

25 Manju Singh & Niharranjan Mishra, 'Evaluation Study on Mid Day Meal Programme in Meghalaya', *Council for Social Development* (July 2010) 58; Donald Bundy, Carmen Burbano, Margaret Grosh, Aulo Gelli, Matthew Jukes & Lesley Drake, 'Rethinking School Feeding: Social Safety Nets, Child Development, and the Education Sector', *World Food Program and World Bank Group* (2009) 5; Farzana Afridi, 'Child Welfare Programs and Child Nutrition: Evidence from a Mandated School Meal Program in India', *Journal of Development Economics* 92 (2010) 162.

26 Drèze & Kingdon, 'School Participation in Rural India', 18.

students by 100 per cent, the calorie deficiency by almost 30 per cent, and the iron deficiency by nearly ten per cent.²⁷ Evidence suggests that a school meal improves the recipients' intellectual abilities, which can translate into greater earning potential and therefore assist in fracturing the intergenerational transfer of poverty.²⁸ Only 50 per cent of eligible schoolchildren receive midday meals, however, totalling about 50 million students.²⁹ The main problems with MDM are lack of funding and monitoring provisions.³⁰

The Indian Government is the main body that can effectively create higher levels of literacy.³¹ Funding should move from higher and technical education to supporting MDM in primary schools, as higher education funding benefits the poor less than primary education funding.³² Accountability must be preserved to monitor the provision of school meals. State governments responsible for the final delivery of MDM supplies should install inspection and monitoring apparatus at all levels, and computerise records to maintain transparency.³³

Low literacy levels are also inextricably linked to perpetuating food insecurity. Food security is defined as access to enough food for an active healthy life for all people at all times.³⁴ In contrast, food insecurity propagates the cycle of poverty, as malnutrition at childhood translates into impaired physical and mental development, lower educational attainment and higher levels of illness and disability, which eventually leads to lower adult earning.³⁵

The right to food is constitutional in India.³⁶ However, India is facing alarming levels of hunger, with one in three of the world's malnourished children living

27 Afridi, 'Child Welfare Programs and Child Nutrition', 153.

28 *ibid.*, 162.

29 Sushma Sharma, Santosh J Passi, Salila Thomas & Hema S Gopalan, 'Evaluation of Mid Day Meal Programme in MCD Schools', *Nutrition Foundation of India Scientific Report* 18 (2006) 36.

30 Angelique Chettiparambil-Rajan, 'INDIA: A Desk Review of the Mid-Day Meals Programme', *World Food Program* (July 2007) 32.

31 Angus Deaton & Jean Drèze, 'Poverty and Inequality in India: A Re-Examination', *Economic and Political Weekly* 37:36 (September 2002) 3743–744; Chakraborty, 'Intra-Regional Inequality', 276; Amitava Mukherjee, *Structural Adjustment Programme and Food Insecurity* (Vermont: Avebury, 1994) 273; Mukhopadhyaya et al., *Economic Growth*, 111.

32 Mukherjee, *Structural Adjustment Programme*, 272–73.

33 Singh & Mishra, 'Evaluation Study', 63.

34 World Bank, 'Poverty and Hunger: Issues and Options for Food Security in Developing Countries', *World Bank Policy Study* 9275 (February 1986) 1.

35 Ahmed et al., 'World's Most Deprived', 27–28; Mehta & Shah, 'Chronic Poverty in India', 496.

36 Government of India, 'Constitution of India' (1950) Article 21, affirmed by the Supreme Court in *Kishen Pattnayak & another v. State of Orissa* (1989) and *People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) v. Union of India and others* (2001).

in there.³⁷ The ability of the poor to buy food is highly dependent upon food prices, which in turn are affected by the availability and production of food, and inflation.³⁸

The Indian Government has provided subsidised food grains for the last 70 years, with the aim of maintaining the minimum nutritional standards of the poor and shielding them from the impacts of food price increases.³⁹ The current system — the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) — provides the poorest families with up to 35 kilograms of either rice or wheat per month at heavily subsidised prices of three and two rupees respectively (approximately five and four Australian cents). Unfortunately, TPDS has a number of faults, such as targeting errors, ghost cards, unidentified households, narrow coverage and leakages/diversions of food grains.⁴⁰ Only just over half the households below the poverty line are covered by TPDS, and in 2004, just six out of 14 million tonnes of food-grains released from the Central Pool (the food grain bank) were delivered to families.⁴¹

TPDS can be improved by launching a nationwide survey to identify which households are food-insecure. The delivery system for food grains must be made more efficient and transparent by computerising all records and making them accessible to communities for monitoring.⁴²

The *National Food Security Act*, which passed into federal law in September 2013, also advocates these measures, along with decentralisation by moving power to local institutions such as *panchayats* (local governments of villages and small towns) to run the shops at which grains are sold.⁴³

Caste System

The caste system in India is a historically and structurally ingrained system of social stratification that organises individuals into hierarchical categories based on the caste of one's family. It has been and continues to be the basis for social discrimination, though outlawed by the Indian Constitution.⁴⁴ The main

37 UNICEF, 'India — The Children', <http://www.unicef.org/india/children_2356.htm> accessed 15 April 2013.

38 Mukherjee, *Structural Adjustment Programme*, 60; Ninan, 'Economic Reforms in India' 13; Mehta & Shah, 'Chronic Poverty in India', 494.

39 Government of India, Planning Commission, Program Evaluation Organisation, 'Performance Evaluation of Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)' (March 2005) 1; Mukherjee, *Structural Adjustment Programme*, 79.

40 Program Evaluation Organisation, 'Performance Evaluation', ii-x.

41 *ibid.*

42 *ibid.*, xi.

43 *National Food Security Act* (2013) sections 18 (2)(b), 18 (2)(e).

44 Constitution of India (1950) Article 15.

categories of castes are Forward Castes (FC), Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBC) (the social hierarchy is ranked FC, OBC, SC then ST).⁴⁵

More than four in five people in ST are multi-dimensionally poor and approximately two thirds of people in OBC and SC have low incomes.⁴⁶ This is due to widespread and ongoing social and economic discrimination and consequent inequalities between those of higher and lower castes. For example, SC and ST people are more likely to be in bonded or casual labour, more likely to be ill and less likely to be educated.⁴⁷ Their participation in the economic, political and social life of their community is inhibited due to prejudices in castes of higher standing. The hereditary nature of the caste system and its entrenchment in Indian social structures make it a difficult barrier to overcome.

In 2000, only 1.4 per cent of SC and ST people aged 24–29 had a tertiary qualification, whereas 9.1 per cent of individuals in the same age bracket from FCs were so qualified.⁴⁸ The main affirmative action taken by the Indian Government has been the reservations system, by which 27 per cent of government jobs and places in government educational institutions are reserved for those in SC, ST and OBC castes.⁴⁹ Job reservations has increased the representation of SC/ST people in regular salaried work by five percentage points.⁵⁰ However, drop-out and failure rates in education are higher for SC and ST students than those in other general categories, keeping poverty rates high among the lower castes.⁵¹

This happens because of the low level of basic primary and secondary education received by lower caste children.⁵² Thus, governments should focus on the early education of lower castes to create long-term sustainable growth in the number of people from lower castes in secure and high-wage employment.⁵³

At a grassroots level, social education from an early age must be instituted in primary schools to eradicate this social impediment. For this to occur, teachers must first be educated on the backwardness of the caste system. This will lead to changes in norms and values, which could lead to a decrease in the social and

45 Chandra Pal Singh Chauhan, 'Education and Caste in India', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 28:3 (September 2008) 217.

46 United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report 2010, 99.

47 Mehta & Shah, 'Chronic Poverty in India', 502; Borooh, 'Caste, Inequality, and Poverty in India', 412.

48 Mukhopadhyaya et al., *Economic Growth*, 118.

49 Chauhan, 'Education and Caste in India', 218.

50 Vani K Borooh, Amaresh Dubey & Sriya Iyer, 'The Effectiveness of Jobs Reservation: Caste, Religion and Economic Status in India', *Development and Change* 38:3 (2007) 443.

51 Chauhan, 'Education and Caste in India', 224.

52 Borooh et al., 'The Effectiveness of Jobs Reservation', 444; Chauhan, 'Education and Caste in India', 233.

53 *ibid.*

economic exclusion of lower castes. As this is an ongoing cause of poverty, such social education may contribute in the long-term when addressing poverty in lower castes.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Poverty can be highly resistant to eradication, especially in a country as large and diverse as India. The number of people it affects makes it difficult to envisage the struggle individuals face every day. Poverty has a vast number of interlinked causes, making eradication or alleviation a complex task for governments, NGOs and other local and international bodies. Apart from the endogenous factors described in this brief, there are also a number of exogenous factors involved in poverty creation and maintenance in India. Governments, however, play the largest role in poverty reduction, as they are responsible for public policy, which extends to the largest number of people. Causes of Indian poverty, such as gross wealth and resource inequality, low literacy levels, food insecurity and the caste system must all be addressed immediately and simultaneously to instigate a comprehensive reduction in national poverty. Policies to tackle these issues must be transparent and participatory in order to engage the sectors of society who are benefiting from the public services provided. Poverty should be everyone's problem, and economic growth is only a means to reduce hardship in countries. India must rid itself of debilitating and persistent poverty in order to decrease suffering for its people and ensure sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

Some recommendations to assist in Indian poverty alleviation:

- Move funding from higher and technical education to supporting the Mid Day Meal Scheme in primary schools.
- Install inspection and monitoring apparatus for the Mid Day Meal Scheme at all levels, and computerise records.
- Decentralise the provision of the Direct Benefits Transfer scheme.
- Improve the Targeted Public Distribution Scheme by launching a nationwide survey to identify food-insecure households.
- Make the delivery system for food grains more efficient and transparent by computerising all records and making them accessible to communities.
- Decentralise the provision of subsidised food grains by moving power to local institutions to run the shops at which grains are sold.
- Focus on the early education of lower castes.

54 Shepherd & Mehta, 'Chronic Poverty in India', 47.

- Institute social education from an early age in schools by firstly educating teachers.

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