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Gopinath, Deepak; Nair, Murali

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POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN INDIA AND IN KERALA:
An overview

Dr. Deepak Gopinath*
Prof. Murali Nair**

* Lecturer, Town and Regional Planning, University of Dundee, Scotland, UK
** Professor of Social Work, Cleveland State University, Ohio, USA

Introduction

The aim of this working paper is to provide delegates attending the British Academy Dissemination event at the University of Dundee on 07 Sep 2011, a broad overview of how poverty is understood and engaged with in the Indian context in general and in the southern state of Kerala in particular. In the opening section, a brief discussion is carried out on the different institutions that are involved in poverty alleviation in India. The next section by tracing the various phases in the conceptualisation of poverty in India, shows how in spite of a predominant use of 'income-poverty' (i.e. families who do not earn enough so to buy food that would give them the stipulated minimum calorie in their diet) as the broad definition within the policy making arena, there has now been a gradual inclusion of a multi-dimensional definition of poverty. The third section takes the discussion further with a particular focus on the state of Kerala. The final section provides a summary of the various categories of poverty alleviation programmes that are formulated across India.

The Institutional context

Given that post-1947 India comprises different states, the Constitution described the Indian polity as a Union of states and laid down a federal structure for governing the nation. In this federal structure, the central government shares powers and responsibilities of governing the country with its many state governments; however, local governments (urban and rural) remained 'creatures of state governments' and did not have constitutional legitimacy at the time of Indian independence in 1947. As a result of this institutional structure, poverty programmes in India have been (and still are) managed and funded both by central and state governments although more recently following the recent Constitutional Amendments in the early 1990s, local governments are now starting to take on some of the responsibilities particularly in relation to implementation of poverty programmes.

The central government through its system of national economic planning or through the preparation of 'Five Year Plans', sets out its priority for public investments across the country notably in the infrastructure and social services sector. Such public investments as a proportion of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has been steadily increasing, e.g from 9.46% of GDP in the Tenth Five Year Plan period (2002-2007) to 13.54% of GDP in the Current Five Year Plan period (2007-2012). However, the proportion of public investments vis-à-vis the total investment figures have been decreasing over the last few decades, the current Five Year Plan (the Eleventh FYP) expects that the ratio between public and private investment to be around 22:78, assuming an average growth rate of around 8-9% in the plan period, i.e. 2007-2012 (Planning Commission 2006).

The public investments set out in the Five Year plans are usually a combination of schemes wholly funded by central government (such as the *National Programme for the control of Blindness*), central government

sponsored schemes where part of the funding comes from state and/or local governments (such as *the National Malaria Eradication Programme*), and state government funded schemes. However, the contribution from central government in public investments is very large. During the current five year plan period (2007-2012), annual public investments across the country amount to around £100 billion[i], and from which about £60 billion is managed by central government (through its wholly financed and sponsored schemes). As a result, some states like Kerala are allocated only around £1.1 billion[ii] annually towards public investment (this is a sizeable amount though given Kerala's annual budget of about £3 billion), which is about the same amount the central government allocates annually to all the states combined for funding its urban development and poverty alleviation scheme, the *Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission* (JNNURM)[iii].

Two key central government actors, the Planning Commission (under the Ministry of Planning), and the Ministry of Rural Development set out the broad framework through which poverty is measured in India. The Planning Commission provides estimates for the number of people (in both urban and rural areas) living below the poverty line at both the national as well as state level. The most recent poverty line (based on per capita monthly expenditure) drawing on the recommendations of the Tendulkar Committee (2010) is Rs.446.68 (£6 approx.) in rural areas and Rs.578.80 (£7.70 approx.) in urban areas in 2004−05 – in Kerala, the equivalent figures are Rs.537.31 and Rs.584.70 respectively (Planning Commission 2011). What this means is that persons whose monthly expenditure falls below the above mentioned figures, are considered as ‒poor‖ This estimate is based on a sample survey of Consumer Expenditure[iv] carried out by the National Sample Survey Organisation every five years. The Ministry of Rural Development on the other hand carries out a Census of all rural households in the country - the first census was carried out in 1992, followed by those in 1997 and 2002. Those identified as poor, referred to as ‒BPL‖ (below poverty line) households would benefit from a range of schemes funded by this Ministry such as the *Indira Awaz Yojna* (Rural Housing Scheme)

The measures of poverty provided by the Planning Commission and the Ministry of Rural Development can also be used by other central, state and local government departments as well. For instance, under the Public Distribution System Control Order 2001, central government directs state governments to formulate guidelines to identify BPL households so that essential commodities (such as rice, sugar, kerosene) can be targeted at subsidised prices to the poor. With regard to preparing a list of BPL households for entitlements to the PDS, the state government firstly uses the estimates provided by the Planning Commission of the number of person and percentage of BPL population at state level.

Then the detailed identification of BPL households take place which rely on the following (although the overall number of BPL households identified by the state government should be within the estimates provided by the Planning Commission) (Wadhwa 2010):

- BPL Census carried out by the Ministry of Rural Development
- Eligible families can be identified by the *Grama Sabhas* (ward assemblies in a local government), *Grama Panchayats* (rural local governments) and urban local governments
- In an urban area, slum dwellers and people earning their livelihood on a daily basis in the informal sector such as porters, rickshaw pullers will qualify for BPL status
- Automatic exclusion of those households from the BPL list where at least one member is working in the formal economy either in the public or private sector, is an income-tax payee etc.

Once the list of BPL households is prepared by the state government, the *Grama Sabha* (ward assemblies) or councillors in the local government will need to finalise the list of BPL households. But state governments do not necessarily have to follow the above mentioned approaches in identifying BPL households except when it is a requirement as part of availing benefits from a central government funded or sponsored scheme.

Measuring Poverty in India

The Indian Planning Commission has been measuring absolute poverty in the consumption dimensioní the concept of poverty, absolute (private) consumption poverty line is taken to convey the inability of an individual or a household to afford a socially perceived normative minimal basket of basic human needs that is expected to be reflected in some normative minimal standard of living that should be assured to every individual/household (Planning Commission 2009: pp 3-4)

The National Planning Committee (1946) in pre-independent India sets out one of the earliest definitions of poverty, i.e a non-poor family is that which has access to õnutrition (involving a balanced diet of 2400 to 2800 calories per adult worker), clothing (30 yards per capita per annum) and housing (100 sq. ft per capita)ö (Nehru 1946; Suryanarayana 2009). In the initial decades after India became independent in 1947 and until the late 1960s, definition of poverty was one-dimensional and based on income. The Committee on Distribution of Income and Levels of Living (1962) defined a national minimum of Rupees 20 per capita per month (Rupees 25 for urban areas) as essential income needed to support expenses towards a healthy diet, clothing and housing (Suryanarayana 2009). According to this definition of poverty that was used until the fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79), the poverty rate in India was between 38 and 57% (Alkire and Seth 2009)

In preparation for the sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), the Task Force on Projection of Minimum Needs and Effective Consumption Demand defined the poor as "those whose per capita consumption expenditure lies below the midpoint of the monthly per capita expenditure class having a daily calorie intake of 2,400 in rural areas and 2,100 in urban areas" (Government of India 1981, p. 81; Suryanarayana 2009). As a result in the 1980s, there was a shift from an ─income-based approach─ to a ─basic needs approach─ (Foster and Sen 1997; Alkire and Seth 2009), whereby based on a minimum calorie intake, the poverty line was defined based on a per capital consumption expenditure. Consequently, minimum dietary intake for subsistence in rural and urban areas was recommended as 2400 and 2100 calories respectively (Planning Commission 1979) and the poverty lines corresponding to these norms were around Rupees 49 per capita per month at 1973-74 prices for rural areas (Suryanarayana 2009).

Since the 1990s, the Indian government has been focussed on including indices of deprivation other than income poverty and in this regard, carried out ─below poverty line─ census since 1992 (then in 1997 and in 2002). The 1992 BPL Census used the national income poverty line of Rupees 11000 per household to identify BPL households. The focus of this Census was to identify poor households and not poor individuals. A door-to-door enumeration collecting self-reported income data of the household was carried out by the Ministry of Rural Development of all the rural households in the country. Detailed guidelines were provided to enumerators to assess the annual income of the rural households. The 1992 BPL Census reported that around 52.5% of the rural population was estimated to be living in poverty. The 1997 BPL Census however, was different from the 1992 BPL Census in two ways: firstly, it excluded the visibly non-poor (by excluding e.g., households which possessed certain consumer durables such as television, refrigerator, whether households owned more than 2 hectares of land) and secondly, in addition to income data, it used a range of criteria to determine the total consumption expenditure from the remaining, visibly poor households. Then based on the poverty line set by the Planning Commission on the basis of per capita consumption expenditure, households were identified as BPL or not (Alkire and Seth 2009; Saxena 2009)

In 2002 BPL Census, unlike the previous BPL Census, the methodology of ─Score Based Ranking─ was used. A household questionnaire consisted of two parts: Part A consisted of non-scoring parameters and included questions on basic characteristics of the household; Part B consisted of parameters (including those on land ownership, housing, clothing, food security, sanitation, ownership of consumer durables, literacy, labour force, means of livelihood, status of children, type of indebtedness, migration and nature of assistance preferred for assessing the poverty level of each rural household) that would be scored (0,1,2,3 or 4) (Bhatnagar 2003; Ramachandran, Usami and Sarkar 2010). For each parameter, a household is given a score and an aggregate score is given to the household based on the responses to all the parameters. A particular aggregate score is

identified as the poverty line at the state level, and those households whose score fall below this cut-off score are classified as poor. The 2011 BPL Census is currently underway and unlike previous Censuses, it extends to urban areas as well. This Census is jointly conducted by various central government ministries such as Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation and the Registrar General of India. The Census will also record the caste and religious backgrounds of the Indian population. BPL households in urban areas will be identified on the basis of three criteria: place of residence (e.g. those in vulnerable shelters), social vulnerability (e.g. those in homes headed by women or children) and occupational vulnerability (those in low-paid jobs or individuals on daily wages in the informal sector). The rural households owning certain consumer durables and over a particular credit threshold limit will be excluded from being counted as poor (BBC 2011).

Having discussed the different approaches to measuring poverty, the following table provides the most recent estimates of poverty in India as well as in Kerala (Planning Commission 2009).

	RURAL				URBAN				TOTAL			
	Poverty line (per capita monthly expenditure in Rupees)	% below poverty line	Rural poor (in million)	Total rural population (in million)	Poverty line (in Rupees)	% below poverty line	Urban poor (in million)	Total urban population (in million)	Poverty line (in Rupees)	% below poverty line	Total number of poor (in million)	Total population (in million)
Kerala	537.31	20.2%	4.9	24.4	584.70	18.4%	1.5	8.5	446.68	19.7%	6.5	32.9
India	446.88	41.8 %	326.6	781.4	578.80	25.7 %	80.7	314.23	578.80	37.2%	407.3	1095.63

Table 1: Poverty estimates in India and in Kerala (Planning Commission 2009)

Measurement of poverty in Kerala

It is interesting that there is some level of flexibility for state governments to try and measure poverty using their own set of criteria unless the conditions of a particular central government funded scheme require state governments to do otherwise. Having discussed measures of poverty at the national level, the following will briefly outline some of the attempts at defining and measuring poverty in Kerala. The incidence of poverty in Kerala was quite high compared to the rest of India until 1973-73 with around 60% of the population living below the poverty line compared to 54% of the population at the national level. In this regard, many including Ravallion and Dutt (2002) have argued that higher funding for social services by the state government and increased employment in the tertiary sector are key factors in reducing the levels of poverty. In Kerala, particularly the state government viewed poverty õas a cause and effect of human insecurityö and put in place

a range of social security measures (including public distribution system with universal coverage, free basic education, and welfare funds for unorganised sector workers (with a range of benefits including provident fund, monthly pension, disability and accident cover) and free mid-day meals for children upto Class VII (Centre for Development Studies 2006).

However, it was only towards the late 1980s, that there emerged a need to define the different dimensions of poverty. While implementing centrally sponsored poverty alleviation programmes, the Urban Basic Services for the Poor (co-funded by UNICEF and the Government of Kerala), and the Community Based Nutrition Programme (co-funded by UNICEF) in 1987-88, the Kerala Government had to conduct surveys in selected towns and villages so that the benefits of this project could be directed to the poorer households. On the basis of this survey, a set of nine criteria were identified with which the poor could be identified: (1) substandard house or hut; (2) no access to sanitary latrines; (3) no access to safe drinking water; (4) family having at least one child below five years of age; (5) family having at least one illiterate adult member; (6) family getting barely two meals a day or less; (7) family having alcoholics or drug addict; (8) family having one or no earning member; (9) socially disadvantaged groups such as SC/ST (Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes). In 1992, this 9-point criterion was used to identify the poor in Alappuzha Municipality and later in 1994, was used as criteria for all urban areas in the state. According to this approach, a household was considered to be in ÷riskø if their responses satisfied 4 out of the 9 criteria. Concurrently, in rural Kerala, particularly in the economically backward district of Malappuram, the concept of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) was being experimented. As part of a community based nutrition and poverty alleviation programme funded by UNICEF, poor women were encouraged to save and lend by forming NHGs (John 2009).

The importance of ÷defining and targeting the poorø along with developing ÷community-based structuresø to reduce the levels of ÷human insecurityø thus became the twin pillars of poverty alleviation strategies of the government of Kerala. Consequently, eradication of poverty through community or family based structures became the overall aim of Kerala state, and to achieve this goal, a new agency of the state government was created in 1998, ÷Kudumbashreeø (translated as ÷prosperity of the familyø). Headed by the Minister of the state government department, Ministry of Local Self-Government, *Kudumbashree* would act as a principal agency of the state government: (1) to oversee the implementation of centrally funded and centrally sponsored schemes such as the *Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana* (and its components, the Urban Wage Employment Programme and the Urban Self Employment Programme); (2) to coordinate with local governments in conducting household surveys. In developing community based structures for engaging with poverty, three levels of bodies are formed: (1) Neighbourhood Group (translated as ÷Ayalkootamø) which consist of around 30 women from poor families). Every week at the group meeting, members bring their thrift

(savings) and the total amount is reallocated toward new loans or set aside as savings; (2) Area Development Societies are formed at every ward in urban and rural local governments by bringing together 10-15 Neighbourhood Groups. The ward councillor chairs the Area Development Societies, so that effective links can be made with the respective local government officials; (3) Community Development Society is formed at the city level by bringing together the various Area Development Societies ó in some larger cities, more than one Community Development Societies may be formed (John 2009)

This in some senses marks the emergence of tension within policy discourse between providing ‑social security to allø to providing targeted support to people living ‑Below the Poverty Lineø (BPL). In this regard, Williams et al (2011) rightly point out that the ownership of a BPL card has now become central in receiving benefits from government sponsored schemes. For instance, in Kerala with regard to the identification of BPL for the targeted Public Distribution System, the survey of BPL families is carried out by the state government department, Department of Local Self-Government while in urban areas, the survey is carried out by Corporation Directorates. Two forms are used to identify BPL families, *Form A* and *Form B*. Nine criteria for exclusion are listed in *Form A* (e.g if member of HH is a government employee, if owning and living in a concrete house above 1000 square feet, if member of HH is a non-resident Indian, if HH owns land of area over 1 acre). *Form B* sets out the criteria for inclusion (e.g. if a wage employed family, if the HH receives social security pension, HH members over 65or below 18 years, if member in family has chronic ailment, if HH member is a widow etc.). *Form A* would cover all families in the state and after the exclusion criteria have been applied, *Form B* would be used for the remaining households (Wadhwa 2010). But it remains to be seen if the opportunity for state governments in defining and measuring poverty will be affected with the rolling out of national BPL (below poverty line) surveys in June 2011.

Poverty alleviation strategies

õA household is poor if the sum total of income earning assets which it commands, including land, capital and labour cannot provide an income above the poverty lineí inadequate ownership of income earning assets is not however the whole story. The poorest households also suffer from a problem of ‑lack of accessø which compounds problems arising from insufficient ownership of physical and human assetsö (Ahluwalia 1990:2)

Broadly poverty alleviation strategies in India can be categorised into ‑directø and ‑indirectø strategies (Bhagvati 1988; Ahluwalia 1990); the former referring to government strategies that seek to directly address what the poor lack in terms ownership of land and capital, access to credit and employment opportunities etc, whereas the latter is a mix of growth-centred policies that would ensure ‑flow of benefits to the poorø Some of

the ‑directø strategies are universal programmes, i.e not exclusively for pre-determined target groups. Wage employment and self-employment programmes for the poor are examples of direct strategies that are universal in nature.

Adopted in other south Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, wage employment programme was initiated in India in the 1960s with the formulation of the *Rural Manpower Programme*. Later, the *Food for Work programme* was rolled out in 1977 (this was later renamed as National Rural Employment Programme in 1980), and then the *Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme* (RLEGP) was introduced in 1983. The *National Rural Employment Programme* (NREP) and the *Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme* (RLEGP) were combined in 1989 to form the *Jawahar Rozgar Yojna* (JRY) with the central government sharing 80% of the cost and the remaining by the states. It is estimated that these employment programmes (that either focus on short term employment, or aim to create and transfer productive assets such as houses to the poor) provide employment for around 10% of the unemployed in rural areas. This wage employment programme is universal in that õany rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled marginal workö qualifies. Although much recently, preference is now being given to members from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and free bonded labour (Planning Commission 1992)

Similarly, the focus of self-employment programmes is to support the development of small-scale self-employment ventures (such as cattle rearing, production of sewing machines etc.), combining labour inputs mostly from the poor household, and easy access to specialised credit (i.e. without collateral security) to set up their venture. One of the key programmes in India is the *Integrated Rural Development Programme* (IRDP), its counterparts in other parts of South Asia include the Grameen Bank (Bangladesh), and the National Youth Service Council (Sri Lanka). From an estimate of around 55 million households living below poverty line in rural India, the IRDP benefits around 3 million households every year. The *Training for Rural Youth for Self-Employment* (TRYSEM) and *Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas* (DWCRA) form important components of the IRDP (Chelliah and Sudarshan 1999)

Direct strategies that are targeted in nature include the *'Public Distribution System'*, whereby essential commodities are supplied to the public at subsidised prices, is jointly managed by Central and State Governments, where the former through the Food Corporation of India has the responsibility for the procurement, storage and allocation of food grains to state governments, and the latter is responsible for the identification of families below the poverty line, issue of ration cards etc. Four commodities, wheat, rice, kerosene and sugar are allocated by the central government to the states. In addition, the states can also distribute additional items such as cloth, pulses, salt, tea etc. Earlier, the *Public Distribution System* had

universal coverage and since 1997 has been renamed as *Targeted PDS* and specifically for the poor. The TPDS was further extended in December 2000 to include the *Antyodaya Anna Scheme*, which consists of the lowest 10% of the BPL households ó they are provided with 25 kg of food grains per family per month at the price of Rs 2 per kg of wheat and Rs 3 per kg of rice. For instance, in Kerala, in response to this centrally sponsored scheme, 238,200 households were identified to be beneficiaries of this scheme. The beneficiary families can buy upto 35 kilo of rice at a subsidised rate of Rupees 3 per kilo. Also, in response to another centrally sponsored scheme, *Anapurna*, senior citizens above the age of 65 are entitled to 10 kilo of rice free of cost (Wadhwa 2010).

Some of the direct strategies are targeted particularly for urban areas. The *Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana (*SJSRY) was initiated in 1997 with the aim of providing opportunities to the urban poor. It had two components: (1) the *Urban Self-Employment Programme*, where assistance was given to the urban poor to set up self-employment ventures along with easy access to specialised credit (i.e. without collateral security) to set up their venture.; (2) the *Urban Wage Employment Programme* whereby the urban poor within the jurisdiction of the urban local government would be given opportunities to work on the creation of public assets such as roads, housing developments etc. (Planning Commission 2001). Much more recently, the *Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission* (JNNURM) was introduced in 2005 with an estimated budget of Rupees 50,000 crore (approx. £1.1 billion annual budget) as the component of financial assistance from central government to urban local governments in India. The JNNURM funding aims to improve infrastructure provision in cities and also to provide better services for the urban poor.

‑Indirectø approaches on the other hand, are much broad and include strategies for instance, to ensure that land as an income earning asset is available for the poor, two strategies are adopted. Firstly, to redistribute land notably through land reforms and secondly, to improve the productivity of land (e.g. to increase the yield per hectare or to reduce the labour input per hectare) available to the poor through technological innovations (i.e. better drainage, application of higher yielding crops, fertilisers etc.). In other cases, employment generation in agriculture is seen as an important approach. In India, only 25 percent of cultivable land is within the small farm sector that is agricultural landholdings of area of less than 2.5 hectares. Therefore with rapid rise in population leading to further division of small farm lands (and possibly leading to landlessness), the rural poor are more likely to depend on wage employment on the larger, non-small farm sector. But the use of technology in agricultural production while increasing the yield per hectare could also have the detrimental effect of reducing the labour input per hectare. All of these challenges need to be addressed in the wider agricultural strategy.

Conclusion

This brief discussion was intended as an introduction to some of the broad approaches to poverty alleviation in the Indian context. By summarising some of the shifts in how poverty is defined and measured in India and how this has implications for identifying and targeting the poor, this working paper points to some of the emerging challenges in India especially with the rolling out of national surveys to measure poverty amidst general consensus that there exists considerable diversity in the needs of vulnerable groups across the country.

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[i] Based on figures in Planning Commission (2006), provided as Rupees 3644718 crores over a five year period

[ii] Based on figures in Planning Commission (2006), provided as Rupees 41940 crores over a five year period

[iii] Based on figures in Planning Commission (2006), provided as Rupees 41490 crores over a five year period

[iv] Consumption expenditure in India is estimated by two central government actors; the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) and the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). The CSO provides annual estimates in the form of a Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PCFE) while the NSSO estimates are based on Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys (HCES) that are based on larger samples and carried out once in five years. The NSSO estimates the total household consumption expenditure of the country as well, by multiplying the estimates of annual per capita consumption expenditure and the projected figures of the population from the Census (John 2007)