Poverty and structural disparity go hand in hand in India. The country like India with a huge economy and an impressive growth rate has not been able to scuttle poverty at an equally matching speed. No doubt there have been policies and programmes to counter poverty, there has been less visible effect. This paper argues that although the poverty is at a decline in India, the pace of the decline is not impressive compared to other countries. Hence, this paper suggests that there have to be efforts on a war scale to eliminate poverty and transform the humongous population of poor from a liability to a worthwhile and a contributing lot.

[Keywords: Poverty, Structural disparity, Policy perspective, Poverty alleviation programmes]

I. Introduction

Poverty is not a uniquely Indian phenomenon. Every state, developed and developing alike, is grappling with the issues of poverty with a difference of degrees. In a state like India that has been a subject of colonialism and with a history of profound drain of wealth the issue is not a surprising one. The reduction of poverty has been a major goal of the governments since independence. The
governments have strived to achieve a minimum standard of living for all through the initiation of five-year plans. Many policies and programmes like food-for-work, land reforms etc sought to curb the proportion of poor. However, till 1970s there was little decline in poverty with more than fifty per cent of people living below the poverty line. Thereafter, the poverty started to show a declining trend and continues to be so with some minor yearly fluctuations.

This paper is divided into five broad sections - in the first section we have tried to situate the concepts of poverty and structural inequality in the broad theoretical debates in the scholarly literature. In the second section we discuss the poverty in the Indian context and try to evolve an understanding of the reasons behind the perpetual problem of poverty in India. The next section discusses the efforts to alleviate poverty in India. The pre-reform as well as the post-reform period programmes and policies have been analysed. The next section critically evaluates the poverty alleviation programmes and policies by the successive governments. Lastly, the section that follows concludes and succinctly provides the findings of the paper.

2. **Poverty: A Conceptual Analysis**

Poverty is a multifaceted concept having socio-economic and political dimensions. Gender, literacy, land ownership, employment status and caste are closely related with poverty. Thus, an illiterate rural woman, a member of schedule tribe or caste, a person who lives in a landless household or is dependent on wage earnings all face a significantly higher than average risk of poverty.¹

Gupta (1984) argues that the term poverty and its adjective ‘poor’ represent an ancient concept which expresses social difference between man and man. It was coined long before the social science came up with the notion of social stratification. According to him poverty is a vague and value-loaded term which differs in denotation in accordance with culture and economic development.²

The state of being poor is different in India compared to United Kingdom or USA. The condition of Poverty is not what it was at the eve of independence. It is a matter of debate whether poverty is absolute or relative, whether poverty is subjective or objective; Gupta talks about two approaches for the conceptualization of poverty. One is absolute approach comprising two versions: bourgeois theory which defines poverty in relation to human physiology and in terms of subsistence level of nutrition and other is Marxist theory which includes both natural and necessary wants. The other approach is relative approach according to which poverty is a relative phenomenon. It defines poverty as position of the individual vis-à-vis his society primarily in terms of distance between the poor and average or medium standard of living in the society concerned. Thus, making poverty one aspect of inequality.³

Poverty makes people incapable to realize human right in a full manner. Pogge (2008) holds poverty responsible for the massive under-fulfilment of human
rights. The connection is direct in the case of social and economic human rights such as right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of oneself and one’s family including food, clothing, housing and medical care. In case of civil and political human rights, the condition is more indirect. Poor people are often illiterate and perpetually finding for subsistence, which makes them incapable to resist their rulers who rule them oppressively.  

Spicker (1999) analyses poverty from three dimensions. Firstly, poverty as a material concept: people are poor because of lack of resources to fulfil the need. Not every need can be said to be equivalent to poverty therefore there are several interpretations of what makes up poverty. Secondly, poverty as economic circumstances which can be understood in economic perspective in terms of income, standard of living etc. Thirdly, poverty as social circumstances which means that social exclusion due to income, health, access to services, housing and debt affects individual, group of people or geographical area.

Poverty in Indian context is a controversial issue especially after the creation of first poverty line by the erstwhile planning commission in mid 1970s which was based on minimum daily requirement of 2,400 calories for an adult for rural areas and 2,100 calories for an adult in urban areas. Later, some modifications were made adding other basic requirements such as housing, clothing, health, education, sanitation etc. Thus, the estimation of poverty line has been very controversial.

Structural Inequality: Structural inequality generally implies the condition where one category of people is attributed an unequal status in relation to other categories of people. However, in this paper structural inequality refers to the disparity among states or within states, disparity among people in terms of income, growth rate, literacy, employment, living standard in Indian context. Here, the term structural inequality is used to show the difference between periphery and core. Some states stand at core and are moving towards development and others in periphery suffer from underdevelopment, backwardness and so on. Government policies and programmes are not symmetrically implemented in every state. As a result, in some states people live in extreme poverty condition. The table below shows us the percentage of poverty in some states.

Table-1 : Percentage of rural population living extreme poverty condition, 2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Percentage of Poverty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>15.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>15.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>11.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>10.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>9.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. **Poverty: The Scenario in Indian Context**

India is a country which is still in the path of development. Since independence, policy-makers of India continuously have been trying to eradicate poverty but a large number of people still striving for basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter remains a constant question requiring scholarly attention that why India has not been able to eradicate poverty even after seven decades of Independence. In 1951, 47% of people in rural India were below poverty line. In the year 1954-55, the percentage rose up to 64% and came down to 45% during the year 1960-61. However, in the year 1977-78, the poverty arose to 51% and declined significantly during mid 1970s and 1980s. The reduction is more noticeable between 1977-78 and 1986-87 declining from 51 to 39%. By 1989-90 the ratio interestingly went down to 34%. In regards of urban poverty which went down from 41 to 34% from 1971-78 to 1986-87. And further 33% in 1989-90. However, the post economic reforms periods have seen both ups and downs. Rural economy went up from 34 to 43% from 1989-90 to 1992 and came down to 37% in 1993-94. In 1989-1990 the urban poverty was 33.4 to 33.7 from 1989-90 to 1992 and declined to 31% in 1993-94.

As per Suresh Tendulkar Committee report the poverty ratio in India was 29.6% (2009-2010) and in 2011-12 this went down to 21.9%. In 2014, as per Rangarajan Committee Report, the estimate of poverty was 38.2% for the year 2009-10 and for 2011-12 the estimate stands at 29.5%. In 2015 this went further down to 12.4%.

4. **Poverty Alleviation Programmes in India**

According to World Bank’s Global Economic Prospects Report 2018, India is the fourth fastest growing economy in the world with a projected growth rate of 7.3% in 2018-19. However, poverty is still a significant issue in India. Poverty alleviation programmes in India can be categorised into two parts - pre-reform period and post-reform period.

4.1 **Pre-reform Period**


These were some poverty alleviation programmes funded by central government but actual responsibility for implementation was laid on State...
governments. But all those programmes failed to cover the whole country comprehensively.

4.2 Post-reform Period

In 1991, after the economic reform in India some more poverty alleviation programmes were taken by the government to eradicate poverty and with this old programme reviewed, new schemes implemented and more innovative initiatives are being taken by the government. Some major initiatives in the path of poverty eradication are as follows:

**Employment Assurance Schemes**: In 1993, the employment assurance scheme was introduced in rural areas which covers 1778 blocks, 261 districts to operate public distribution system with a new zeal. The blocks selected under this scheme were drought prone areas, desert areas, tribal areas and hill areas. And in 1994-95 this scheme was extended to 409 blocks under DPAP and Modified Area Development Approach (MADA) blocks having larger concentration of tribal. In 1995 the scheme was extended to 256 blocks and out of which 233 blocks were flood prone area. Later in 1996 Jawahar Rozgar Yojana was merged with Employment assurance scheme.

**Prime Minister Rozgar Yojana**: In 1993 the PMRY was launched to assist poor and less educated youth to operate micro level self-employment ventures. This scheme was introduced only in urban areas but later in 1994 and 1995, this was introduced both in rural and urban areas of India.

**Swarnajanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana**: This scheme was launched in 1999 to provide sustainable income to poorest of the poor people living in rural & urban areas of the country.

**Pradhan Mantri Gramodaya Yojana**: In the year 2000 the Government of India launched the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana to provide good all-weather road connectivity to unconnected villages.

**Antodaya Anna Yojana**: The Government of India launched this scheme in the year 2000 to provide highly subsidised food to Millions of the poorest families. This scheme was first implemented in the State of Rajasthan.

**Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana**: the objective of Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana is to provide shelter and upgrade the existing shelter for people living below poverty line in urban slums. The aim of this scheme is ‘shelter for all’. This was launched in 2001 by the central government.

**Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana**: In 1999 the Government of India launched the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana with the objective to achieve the objective of providing gainful employment for the rural poor.

Besides these, there are many programmes taken by the Government. These programmes are taken to address the issue of poverty. But even after seven decades of independence poverty in India remains a burning issue, and a constant
reminder that these policies have been a partial success. With this the paper proceeds with the pitfalls of poverty alleviation programmes.

5. **Poverty Alleviation Programmes: A Critical Review**

The poverty alleviation programmes undermine the importance of increased flow of social inputs through family-welfare, social security, nutrition and minimum needs programmes in alleviating poverty. Moreover, disabled, sick and socially handicapped individuals who cannot participate in normal economic activities are ignored by these programmes. The National Social Assistance Programme has been in place but its execution and the number of beneficiaries is not satisfactory. Income and employment-oriented poverty alleviation programmes put additional income in the hands of the poor which they can use for buying food, but as Kunwar (1993) highlights, “these programmes do not ensure that the poor can really manage to get adequate food all the year round for the family with the increased income.”

Besides, poor people usually depend on natural resources for their livelihood. But the practices of using these resources are no longer viable and as a result they are fast deteriorating. The government should have taken into consideration the implication of this environmental decay which unfortunately was not taken care of in the past. The government has failed to make necessary changes in anti-poor laws and policies. These laws and policies harm particularly the tribes who depend on non-timber forest products for their subsistence and cash income. The poverty alleviation programmes often underrate the repercussions of the earning activities of the poor in terms of occupational health hazards and adverse ecological consequences.

Although poverty is declining but it is declining at a slow pace and its consequences are asymmetrical state-wise. Some states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Bangalore, and Calcutta are well furnished and much developed in comparison to Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and Bihar. Especially in some States like Assam, Bihar, Manipur etc poor people suffer and go through difficult life during the time of heavy rainfall. Poverty alleviation programmes and policies are not sufficient for those people who lose everything in floods to overcome economic stability. A Report endorsed by the Ministry of Rural Development states that nearly 7% of country’s rural population still lives in ‘extreme poverty’.

Any programme can be said to be successful when majority of people can access the benefits but people can access the benefits only when they are aware. To create awareness among people is another shortcoming of these programmes. People in rural areas are mostly less educated, they are not aware about the surroundings nor they are interested to know. Therefore, red tape, corruption etc. make these programmes to remain in paper only. Education can be a powerful instrument to reduce poverty but two third of all women and two fifth of all men remain illiterate. Moreover, in India half of all girls aged 5-14 years do not attend school; this gets worse in case of poor sections. For example, according to **World Poverty and Structural Inequality in India**
Bank Report (1997) in Bihar only 20% of girls in the age group of 5-9 go to school. In the year 1973-74 the incidence of poverty in Kerala was 59.74% which was reduced to 11.3% in 2011-12. Rate of poverty in Kerala is low compared to other Indian States and the all India figures. Thus, poverty and structural inequality go hand in hand in India.

6. Findings and Conclusion

There are numbers of provisions and programmes taken by the Central as well as State government but the fact is that some states in India are still not capable to overcome from poverty such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and so on. Moreover, flood and natural calamities hamper the agriculture to a great extent which affects their household income. Besides, literacy rate is also very low among tribal people inhabiting these areas and they are unaware about the programmes and policies. India is the largest growing economy in the world but ranks 100 out of 119 countries on the global hunger index. India ranks 125 out of 187 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, according to the United Nations Human Development Report 2015. As per the report, only 35.3% of women get it to the secondary level of education compared to the 61.4% of men. In the US, 95.4% of women were educated to the secondary level as compared to 95.1% men. The report also revealed country’s labor force participation, which showed only 26.8% women are part of the labor force as compared to 79.1% men. Any programme is bound be meaningless unless the masses for whom these are made are made aware about these. The corruption that eats into the vitals of the nation is another stumbling block in the way of the success of the government policies. Thus, programmes and policies should be complimented with a mechanism to make sure that these are in-fact working in a right spirit, and there is no corruption at bureaucratic and clerical levels in implementing these policies. Yearly appraisals of the programmes can be a right step in this regard. This can certainly herald into a poverty-free and shining India in the future.

Footnotes

3. Ibid.


9. India Spend Team. (2015, October 10). India’s Poverty Rate Falls To 12.4%, Electricity Plays Big Role. Retrieved from India Spend: http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/ indias-poverty-rate-falls-to-12-4-electricity-plays-big-role-20364


